

*William S. Burroughs*  
Phil Baker  
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When asked to write a biographical sketch for *Queer*, William S. Burroughs protested to Allen Ginsberg: “Now as to this biographical thing, I can’t write it. It is too general and I have no idea what they want (...) Please, Sweetheart, write the fucking thing will you?” (Harris, 119). Many writers have responded to this solicitation as biographies of Burroughs have proliferated in recent decades (Biographiq [2008]; Bokris [1981]; Caveny [1998]; Johnson [2006]; Miles [1992], Morgan [1988]). Burroughs’s insistence that we must move out of time and into space inspires speculation on how biography might actually express the innovation of his writing, his representation of psychic space, his work with text and images and his own emphasis on trajectory rather than destination. Burroughs’s remark, “The illusion of a separate inviolable identity limits your perceptions and confines you in time” (Burroughs 133) represents a challenge to biographers. Baker’s biography resists this innovation by emphasizing the melodrama of Burroughs’s life.

Entertaining and streamlined, Baker’s biography, at around 200 pages, is a lot less bulky than Ted Morgan’s 600+ page *Literary Outlaw*. It offers quotations from the many sources available on Burroughs, has great photos and claims to present new material. What could be more attractive for someone interested in Burroughs?

At first I thought Baker did a remarkable job synthesizing his many sources into a compact narrative. In the first paragraph, Baker announces the three themes of anxiety, unhappiness, and drugs that will shape this story. Contrary to Morgan’s biography, Baker claims that Burroughs thought of himself as a simple outsider rather than as a literary outlaw (21), and argues that during Burroughs’s trial for his wife Joan’s death, Morgan is wrong in claiming that the trial was corrupt (“In fact there is every indication that the Mexican court was highly sensitive to this reputation, and that Burroughs’s trial was a fair one, swallowing Juardo’s lie but nevertheless coming to the correct verdict that it was an accidental tragedy” [67]). Baker does not, however, offer any more proof than the phrase “every indication,” and as I kept reading, I soon realized that what I most enjoyed were Burroughs’s tantalizing observations, rather than Baker’s analysis. Of Burroughs’s work with time and memory, for instance, Baker simply announces, “Jerk the handle and the result is the same for given co-ordinates” (32). One of the challenges of biography is how to represent the interior subject, how to express what cannot be verified. Here is an attempt by Baker – “One of Burroughs’s central problems, which he probably talked about in analysis, was that he hated effeminacy” (28). With such a spare narrative, any material that makes the cut has a huge impact on our impressions of the subject, and while Baker is good on some of Burroughs’s major influences (Marcel Proust, 32; Paul Klee 76, Saint-John Perse, 77-79, Céline; 108), he doesn’t give us much of a sense of the omnivorous reading which also shaped Burroughs’s work (see Michael Stevens, *The Road to Interzone: Reading William S. Burroughs Reading*, for more on this).

Any reader interested in a scholarly perspective on Burroughs should forego this biography and turn instead to Burroughs's letters. For example, here is how Baker summarizes from the letters Burroughs' attitude toward Buddhism: "Kerouac was interested in Buddhism, as Burroughs had been: he had already told Kerouac how interesting Tibetan Buddhism was, advising him to 'dig it,' but Burroughs now disavowed it. He felt that for many people Buddhism could be a form of 'psychic junk', and said his present position was now the opposite: "We are here in *human form* to learn by the *human* hieroglyphs of love and suffering. There is no intensity of love or feeling that does not involve the risk of crippling hurt. It is a duty to take this risk, to love and feel without defense or reserve" (86) (italics added from the original source). The final quote is actually the first in the sequence that Baker draws on for this summary, a letter dated May 24, 1954 (Harris, 213). In a subsequent letter dated July 16, 1954, Burroughs wrote to Kerouac, "Tibetan Buddhism is extremely interesting. Dig it if you have not done so" and continues "My final decision was that Yoga is no solution for a Westerner and I disapprove of all practice of neo-Buddhism. (Spell it different every time and maybe it will spell itself right. I went to a progressive school where we never learned to spell)" (Harris, 222). Finally, on August 18, 1954, Burroughs wrote to Kerouac:

Remember, Jack, I studied and practiced Buddhism (in my usual sloppy way to be sure). The conclusion I arrived at, and I make no claims to speak from a state of enlightenment, but merely to have attempted the journey, as always with inadequate equipment and knowledge (like one of my South American expeditions) (. . .) So my conclusion was that Buddhism is only for the West to *study* as *history*, that is, it is a subject for *understanding* (. . .) But it is not, for the West, *An Answer*, not *A Solution*. We must learn by acting, experiencing, and living; that is, above all, by *Love* and by *Suffering*. A man who uses Buddhism or any other instrument to remove love from his being in order to avoid suffering, has committed, in my mind, a sacrilege comparable to castration. You were given the power to love in order to use it, no matter what pain it may cause you. Buddhism frequently amounts to a form of psychic junk. (226)

As we see, Burroughs's response is much more complex than Baker's analysis suggests.

Baker can be witty in his portrayal of the author: "Burroughs's cool and knowing stance was always hip rather than beat, and he was about as likely to drive across America for fun as he was to play the bongos" (55). But about half way through the biography, I started to wonder if he really liked Burroughs, especially the post *Naked Lunch* writer. Ironically for anyone writing on Burroughs, Baker only seems to respect normative and reductive expressions of subjectivity, with statements such as: "The work in progress seemed to be having an alarming effect on its author's personality, inasmuch as he still had one" (97). Burroughs thrived in creative ecologies, but Baker has his favorites among Burroughs's friends. He clearly does not like Bryon Gysin. Burroughs "fell under the influence" (110) of Gysin's "magical spiels" (113): "Gysin had a particularly enthralling spiel about Hassan I Sabbah, the old man of the mountains" (114). Baker explains Burroughs's theory of words as virus through Gysin's concept of the ugly Spirit – "you could hardly have a better instance of a word virus than the way this phrase – alive in one brain, communicated across the space between two people, then alive and controlling in another brain – took root in Burroughs's mind" (130). Gysin's corruption of Burroughs continues: "Now firmly

under Gysin's influence, Burroughs plunged relentlessly onwards with his psychic voyaging and cut-ups, seen by some as a descent into madness and unreadability" (132). There is no explanation of the identity of this omnipresent "some." The damage increases: "Burroughs was growing more receptive to this kind of thinking as he cleaved closer to Gysin (. . .) while getting more distant and difficult with the warmer and saner Ginsberg" (158) (see Morgan [372] for a more nuanced version of these relationships). Baker even implicitly blames Gysin for Ian Sommerville's death: Gysin tells Sommerville about a nasty article attacking Sommerville in an underground paper. This news hurts and distracts Sommerville, and he has a car accident. Baker goes back more than sixteen years to an old statement by Jane Bowles from Morgan's biography to imply blame: "back in Tangier, Jane Bowles had thought of Gysin as a sadistic alarmist who liked to pass on bad news" (172). However, Burroughs continued to collaborate with Gysin until Gysin's death and spoke of him as "the only man I have ever respected" (187).

Ironically, some of the "new material" in this biography consists of letters and comments by Gysin to Baker. For example, Burroughs met Anthony Balch through Gysin, and they formed a "*folie à trois*" (159). I would have liked to see a little more information about their visual experiments such as *Towers Open Fire* and a little less information about the computer on Venus named Control, although Baker probably included it because Gysin's comment to Baker about this escapade is part of the significant "new material" (159–160).

Baker also does not seem very interested in Burroughs's later writings. Instead of working directly with *The Ticket that Exploded*, he cites a passage from John Geiger's "superb short book" *Chapel of Extreme Experience* (134). Rather than discuss Burroughs's creative innovations, Baker comments on how Burroughs's writing invites parody, proceeds to provide us with a parody, and then comments on how "obscure obscenity is another Burroughs specialty" (146). Comments such as "Seen by some critics as self-indulgent, *The Wild Boys* and some of the material that followed it was a frank attempt by Burroughs to explore, reify and publish his own fantasies, military as well as sexual" (165) do not inspire confidence in the worth of Burroughs's prose. For a more nuanced reading of Burroughs's later work, readers should see Timothy Murphy's *Wising up the Marks* (146-150).

At times while reading I also wanted to query Baker's facts, such as his discussion of methadone, eukodol and dolphine. When Baker explains, "Burroughs found a maintenance programme (. . .) and for the rest of his life he was supported on methadone. Ironically, this was the same substance that had held him in such thrall in Tangier as Eukodol; methadone is another name for dolophine" (179), I began to wonder if eukodol, methadone, and dolophine are indeed the same substance. Eukodol was developed in 1916; methadone/dolophine in 1937.

By the end of Baker's *William S. Burroughs*, we are left with the sad image of an old man weeping and regretting his past (188), whose work is summed up with the condescending statement "[c]onsolidating a life-long belief in the irrational, Burroughs's later life ran almost entirely in pre-Enlightenment lines, communing with the dead, meeting spirits in dreams, sending curses, and being obsessed with weapons, including knives and even blowpipes; Harvard-educated, he had regressed himself into a postmodern primitivism" (193). Of course, there is another way to tell this story, but one would have to look at recent work on posthumanism for this approach. On the bright side, Baker continues, "Many of Burroughs's

beliefs are easily paraphrased in psychiatric terms, but this doesn't explain their cultural significance, or why varieties of paranoia were central to the work of several American writers in the same era (. . .) By the end of his life Burroughs was famous for the crankiness of his thinking, but his ideas on viruses and parasites, for example, make a certain sense" (193). Thanks for small favors. The final critic Baker cites in his evaluation of Burroughs's late work is Dennis Cooper, who Baker admits is one of the writer's harshest critics: "for Cooper, Burroughs was 'essentially an active relic who had exploited the mystique around his early work for so long that I suspect he didn't even know why he was famous anymore'" (196). Given all the possible options, this choice on Baker's part for his final overview of Burroughs's work is indeed telling.

In his biography of William Faulkner, Philip Weinstein raises a question relevant to all literary biography: "After all, the fundamental reason we write (and read) biography is that its subject produced work of great magnitude. We want to know in what generative soil that work was rooted. We want to know about the man's life – the sticks and branches that make it up – but mainly in the service of a large desire: how does such magnificent work come out of this particular life?" (10). Baker's biography of William S. Burroughs does not offer much of an answer to this question. On the other hand, Hermione Lee observes how the popularity of biography may be due to "a dumbing down of readers who prefer the accessibility of a life story to the hard work of poetry or literary fiction" (18). Baker's biography has greater affinities with this observation.

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