

William Burroughs 1914-1997

In an increasingly materialistic society where 'Icon' has become the first person singular of the verb 'to profit to the detriment of one's fellow man', William Burroughs became and remained one of the cultural cornerstones of another America, a dark stirring vibrant culture that would assail and reinvent the twentieth century in its own image.

Along with Kerouac and the recently departed Ginsberg (once Burroughs' lover), he formed the 'holy trinity' of the 1950s Beat Generation. But unlike them, his influence extended well beyond the 'beatniks', so that even today, the literature of the counter-culture still bears his hallmark. Unlike them, he also chose not just to live on the edge, but to throw himself bodily over it.

As a drug user – first arrested for possession nearly fifty years ago – his advice to his readers was unsurpassable. It is a repository of 'forbidden pleasures' and his first book, *Junky* (1953), is a photographic recreation of life on the needle. Anyone who reads it comes away more than aware of the terrors of addiction. Burroughs hid nothing from his readers:

'A junky runs on junk time. When his junk is cut off the clock runs down and stops. All he can do is hang on and wait for the non-junk time to start . . . Junk sickness is the reverse side of the junk kick. You cannot escape from junk sickness any more than you can escape from junk kick after a shot.'

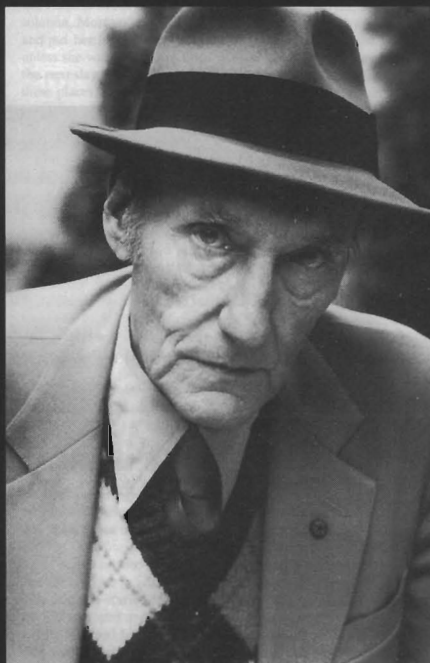
Or again:

'When you quit junk, everything seems flat, but you remember the shot schedule, the static horror of junk, your life draining into your arm three times a day'.

In many ways, *Junky* is akin to Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, a document so burdened with the terrible truth of the human condition that it is both uplifting and depressing. It is a small piece of perfection, totally devoid of affectation or pretension. It, and all Burroughs' finest work – *The Naked Lunch* (1959), *Queer* (one of his earliest works, though first published in 1985), *The Soft Machine* (1961) and *Cities of the Red Night* (1981) – go straight for the jugular (by way of the femoral).

Burroughs' own experiences reappear again and again in his fiction. His characters are one dimensional, with no explanation or justification for their actions. His doctors are junk-hungry Franksteins. His judges hand down sentences with comforting aphorisms such as "If you can't be just, be arbitrary". His policemen are gangsters (and sometimes junkies), desperate for convictions and confessions. And he had a particular contempt for psychiatrists, who were portrayed as parasites sucking rebellion and individuality out of those deemed fit for their particular services. The great irony, of course, is that Burroughs' various addictions made him dependent upon the very power structures which he despised.

It's true to say that his own sense of 'otherness' allowed him to back a few losers. Wilhelm Reich, a student of Freud, held that the root of all human neuroses lay in repressed sexual energy. He attempted to harness this 'life force' in a box of metal and wood, and Burroughs believed in its efficacy for years. Apomorphine detox was



another of these discredited gambles, and much of Burroughs' later literary work also falls into this losing camp. But his performance as the defrocked cleric in the film *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), struggling with a methadone programme and divine retribution, revealed that the old dog still had a few tricks left for those who had written him off.

His private life must also be thrown into the scales. By any measure, it was a disaster. The family fortune from the adding machine that bears his name fared badly during the Great Depression. On the plus side, his first 'green card' marriage allowed a German Jew to escape pre-war Europe. But his second marriage ended abruptly in Mexico City in 1951, when – in a botched William Tell exhibition for a group of friends – Burroughs put a hole in his wife Joan's forehead. Jumping bail, he then began a long nomadic existence for nearly a quarter of a century, beginning in a male brothel in Tangiers, and drifting between Paris, London and America until he finally settled in New York in 1974.

His son Billy, an author in his own right, resented and envied his father in equal measure, and drunk and drugged himself into an early grave, dying of liver failure, aged 33, in 1981. The following year, Burroughs upped sticks for the last time, fleeing his spiritual home of New York, for the relative tranquillity of Lawrence, Kansas, where he lived out his life in retirement with his guns and his cats.

His place in twentieth century literature is uncertain, and that need not concern us overly here. But a word to the wise – be you counsellor, clinician or consultant, the body of work which made Burroughs' reputation was undertaken while under the influence of heroin, opium, cannabis and alcohol. Ideally, Burroughs would have chosen sobriety, but his work constantly tells us that it's not so much the drugs which screw you up, as the people who patronise, coerce and imprison you back to conformity.

Gary Sutton

□ The downward trend in deaths attributable to solvent use has stalled for the first time in five years.¹ In 1995, the most recent year for which figures are available, 68 people died, still less than half the number which died in 1990, but 10 up on 1994's recent record low.

A further discouraging sign is that the trend towards an older average age at death also appears to have stopped. In 1994, under half the deaths – 26 out of 58 – were in the 11–18 age range. However, 1995 saw this rise to 56 per cent (38 of the 68 deaths). Eleven of these deaths were of 15 year olds.

Dying from solvent use is almost exclusively a male danger – only 12 women died in 1995, 18 per cent of the total (though even this low level was more than double the 1994 proportion).

1. Taylor J. et al. *Trends in Deaths Associated with Abuse of Volatile Substances*. St George's Hospital Medical School, June 1997.

□ NTORS follow-up: the results have just been published from the five year National Treatment Outcome Research Study's first six month follow-up.¹ Over 1000 new clients were originally recruited in 1995 from inpatient units, residential rehabs and community-based methadone reduction and maintenance programmes. Nearly nine in ten (87 per cent) were then using heroin regularly and 35 per cent crack-cocaine.

Six months after entering treatment, 809 clients were re-contacted. Regular heroin use was found to have fallen in all four treatment modalities, though it had fallen furthest – by nearly two-thirds – in the residential rehabs (from 60 to 23 per cent). For the other treatments, there was around a 40 per cent fall-off in heroin use. Residential rehabs were also 'better' at curtailing regular cocaine use, again dropping by two-thirds (from 33 to 11 per cent).

Turning to risk behaviour, injecting fell for all four treatments, but again, rehabs were the most successful, with yet another fall of two-thirds (from 62 to 23 per cent). Inpatient and methadone reduction programmes saw injecting fall by around 40 per cent, though methadone maintenance only saw it fall by 19 per cent. As for more 'indirect' outcome indicators, the proportion of clients who had suicidal thoughts nearly halved during the six months from 29 per cent to 16 per cent, while the high rates of criminal activity reported prior to treatment were significantly reduced by the time of follow-up.

1. NTORS. *Improvements in Substance Use Problems at Six Months Follow-up*. Department of Health, 1997.