ARTICLES

William Burroughs and the Persian Connection

Disparate Elements

Far more people know the myths about *Naked Lunch* and the legends about the life of William Burroughs than have actually read his most famous book. Between them, the reductive images circulated in the media and the mythmaking of Burroughs himself have achieved the same result as David Cronenberg, who made a film out of *Naked Lunch* by keeping the title and throwing away almost all the text. Speaking of the film, Burroughs observed that Cronenberg's achievement was to have "crafted a masterful *thriller* from the disparate elements of the novel."[1] This was a backhanded compliment that points up the secret of the real *Naked Lunch*, which is not one book at all, but ten books, a hundred books, one on top of the other, one behind the other, cutting back and forth in a creative frenzy. This monstrous montage of parts is the result of the tortuous genesis of the text, written mainly in Tangier between 1954 and 1957, when Burroughs tried again and again to find a way to master the parts, to control the disparate elements. He failed to do what Cronenberg did, however, and that is the perverse, dazzling genius of its form.

This is also why for almost anything you can say about *Naked Lunch*, you can say the exact opposite: it's a visionary masterpiece, it's an ugly mess; it's the most literary of books and a mashup of pulp genres; it's a work of hard core racism, blasphemy and obscenity, and an exercise in search of redemption; it's a record of personal trauma, and a devastating critique of consumer capitalism; it's spiritually uplifting and physically nauseating. hilariously funny and absolutely horrifying—and so on and on... *Naked Lunch* is so rich and so confusing that it demands interpretation, requires analysis yet also resists it, and makes any single reading seem ridiculous. The raw psychopathology of a drug-addled author? Yes, if you throw away the parts that don't fit, which means most of the text. You can't explain *Naked Lunch* as a series of chemical hallucinations, any more than you can explain it as political satire, or if you do, you're only explaining it away. Interpretation becomes a means to protect ourselves from a text that we can neither grasp nor escape. Looking for answers to the text, and hunting for the facts behind the fiction, researching the material truth behind the mythology of its creation, is a work of endless fascination and inevitable failure—and I should know, having spent 40 years looking, hunting and researching. And still, we don't know the half of it...

One of the functions of *Naked Lunch* is to offend and alienate the reader, both in content and in form. Burroughs savages the power systems of colonialism and empire, ridicules the values of religion and capitalism, but only to engage the conflict, not to take sides: the book attacks the reader, whatever their sympathies, with equal ferocity. Likewise, formally the book is not just a montage of disparate elements but a violent disarray, a manic disorientation, an impossibly fast and furious remix. We may now be used to digital sampling and mashup, yet somehow this old analogue mixer still feels as startlingly new as it must have done when it first appeared in 1959.

RIEN N'EST VRAI

A book that alienates its reader is, in a sense, a work in need of translation—even for the Anglophone reader. Burroughs not only knew this, he built it into the structure of his text, which opens with a scene that baits the reader who thinks they understand what's being said. There are several dozen mock-editorial notes (in parentheses) throughout the text, but they come thick and fast in the opening few pages, offering the reader translations of arcane terms or underground idiom. The point, however, is not to be helpful but to spell out how little we know: we're to be driven about the extent of our ignorance, and what goes for buying fake drugs ("Note: Catnip smells like marijuana when it burns. Frequently passed on the incautious or uninstructed") also goes for fake news and false fronts globally. *Naked Lunch* is a hair of the dog that bit you.

The use of argot from esoteric subcultures, which would have baffled all but a handful of American readers in 1959, is one of the three key features of *Naked Lunch* that makes it a work that tests the limits of translation, above and beyond the natural polysemy of English, which forces a translator to choose only one level of meaning and to miss complex puns. There is also the extraordinary economy and rhythm of Burroughs' writing, which cuts up standard syntax and grammar (although not by using the scissors of cut-up methods, which Burroughs developed only after *Naked Lunch*). And last, there is his radical attention to the signifier over the signified, which appears in his unique exploitation of verbal repetition on a grand scale across the text.

And so the problem for the reader of *Naked Lunch* in Farsi is not only one of cultural reference—which, to take the example of the French translation, led its translator, Eric Kahane, to replace Woolworths with Monoprix—but how to catch the inner workings of a text that constantly recycles itself. Whether deliberately or not, Kahane missed the point, so that, for example, he translated the evocative phrase "music down a windy street," which recurs in three different sections of *Naked Lunch*, in three different ways: "*un air de musique au coin d'une rue balayée par le vent*"; then "*un orphéon à un carrefour balayé par le vent*" and finally "*des bribes d'orphéon au fond d'une rue balayée par le vent*"—three variations instead of the one single phrase whose return enacts formally the viral repetitions of memory.[2]

Burroughs' repetitions of the same phrases, both verbatim and with slight variation, are not about meaning but about affect, a physical and emotional experience, a feeling that is impossible to render semantically. Again, Burroughs knew this while working on *Naked Lunch*, and as he developed cut-up methods became increasingly aware of the problems his unique form of textuality posed for translators. It's well-known that *Naked Lunch* was first published in France, while Burroughs lived at the Beat Hotel in Paris, but it's overlooked just how thoroughly bilingual this context was. He had bilingual publishers—Maurice Girodias for *Naked Lunch*, followed by *The Soft Machine* and *The Ticket That Exploded*; and Jean Fanchette for *Minutes to Go*—and one of his earliest cut-up texts was, uniquely, actually printed in a French-English bilingual edition. This was "NOTHING IS TRUE; EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED" / "RIEN N'EST VRAI, TOUT EST PERMIS" in *Haute Société*, 1 (June 1960). The publisher of this text, Jacques Houbard, reported that Burroughs' attitude towards translation was like that of Fundamentalists for whom the Koran could not be translated;[3] Burroughs understood that an author's intended meaning is translatable, but the life of writing for him was in discovering the intersection points of language beyond our intention. In this bilingual text, he cut up bits of the Koran, which creates for us a point of intersection that is especially interesting in the context of not only translation, but also the connection between Burroughs and Persian history—since the title of the text repeats the famous (if apocryphal) "Last Words" of Hassan i Sabbah.

Trip to Persia

As biographer Barry Miles rightly observes, Burroughs became obsessively fascinated by the Nizari mystic, Master of the Assassins, born in Qom in 1050. This is not just the best-known connection between Burroughs and Persia, but the *only* known connection, and understandably so, since Hassan i Sabbah would become one of the *fils rouges* that connects up the entire Burroughs *oeuvre* after *Naked Lunch*: his name appearing in dozens of texts from 1960 to 1960 up to and including his final novel, *The Western lands* in 1987. There are two things that should surprise us about Burroughs' fascination, however.

First, since Burroughs learned of Hassan i Sabbah from Brion Gysin before *Naked Lunch* was published (possibly as much as 9 months before), it seems odd that he should haunt the pages of Burroughs' *oeuvre* only after *Naked Lunch*. There is a "Hassan" who appears prominently in *Naked Lunch*, but this is "Salvador Hassan," named after a room in Benchmol Hospital, Tangier, where Burroughs was treated for his addiction in late 1955. Sallie Salvador Hassan thence the otherwise obscure joke "Hassan, known as Sally to his friends"). And second, while Burroughs was well-travelled and widely-read, and had lived in Morocco for four years, it is still remarkable how quickly and how fully a WASP from the American Midwest identified with an obscure Islamic figure born nine centuries before his time in a culture he didn't know. The answer to this mystery is that Hassan i Sabbah is not Burroughs' one and only Persian connection: there was an earlier encounter that prepared the way for it.

Coincidentally (as if there are any coincidences in the Burroughs world of paranoia), references to Persia appear in Burroughs' letters for the first time just weeks before he entered Benchmol Hospital. The initial reference seems insignificant and vague. He tells his regular correspondent, Allen Ginsberg, that their mutual friend Bill Garver, a terminal heroin addict, should go "to the Far East or to Persia where they got like *opium shops*". "With his income and his one-track mind, I would like my way to Teheran or Hong Kong tomorrow."[4] Burroughs hazily conflates the Far East with Western Asia, the capital of Iran with Britain's Chinese colony. But one month later, in October 1955, now writing from inside the hospital, Burroughs makes a connection that is much more material, precise, and significantly personal, revealing to Ginsberg his plans to leave Morocco for adventures further afield: "may make overland trip to Persia with Charles Gallagher."

Although Burroughs never made the 4,000-mile journey from Tangier to Tehran, the desire was there, almost certainly thanks to Gallagher, a fellow-graduate of Harvard University, where he majored in Far Eastern languages and history, receiving a PhD in 1951. Burroughs met Gallagher in spring 1955, describing him as "Very charming, and a brilliant linguist."[5] More than that, Gallagher was the most informed of a circle of writer friends who had an interest in North African culture, whom Burroughs not only stayed in touch with after he left Tangier for Paris in 1958 but wrote into one of his mid-1960s texts ("Tangier Cut-Up," *Esquire*, 1964). Gallagher was uniquely important because his knowledge extended from Arab culture—authoring books and articles including *The United States and North Africa* (1963) and "North African Problems and Prospects: Language and Identity" (1966)—across the region with books like *Contemporary Islam* (1966) all the way to Persia, publishing articles on the power of the ulema in 1960s Iran as a report in the American Universities Field Staff series. Even more crucially, Gallagher, a man from the same haute bourgeois class as Burroughs who shared his sexual orientation, was ex-CIA. For Burroughs, who a decade earlier had tried but failed to join the OSS, the wartime forerunner of the CIA, that would surely have clinched not only their friendship but something else, too: the convergence of secret agents, intelligence operations and clandestine acts of political violence, including assassinations and political coups d'état, such as the overthrow of Mosaddeq in Iran just two years earlier. This was exactly the kind of intrigue and world of conspiracy that appealed to the fantasist in Burroughs as well as the radical writer and revolutionary thinker.

It Is Written

We don't know precisely what issues of religion, politics, language, and identity Burroughs discussed with Gallagher, or how much they talked about Persian history, but their conversations meant, as Miles argues, that as a result Burroughs "was far more cognizant about local affairs than most critics have believed."[6] Then again, Burroughs' position was complex and idiosyncratic, and when, in January 1957, he acknowledged his "great debt to Islam"—specifically the notion of predestination: "It is written"—he added: "I realize how much of Islam I have absorbed by osmosis without spitting a word of their appalling language."[7] The violent juxtaposition of admiration and contempt is as typical of Burroughs as is his mode of learning—osmosis being a spontaneous biological process, a motion that is physical rather than intellectual. Clearly, the apparent mockery of Islam inc. that features in *Naked Lunch* as part of his wider skepticism of authority and power, was only one half of the story.

Burroughs felt he found his destiny as a writer in the unlikely figure of Hassan i Sabbah because things had an uncanny habit of falling into place, like pieces of a secret jigsaw. His conversations about Persia with Gallagher, and quite possibly about CIA covert operations in the region, paved the way for the sudden fascination with the 11th-century Persian Master of the Assassins in Paris in 1959. And then the disparate pieces of *Naked Lunch* fell into place and Brion Gysin handed Burroughs not only Betty Bouthoul's biography of Hassan i Sabbah but a pair of scissors to weaponize writing. In retrospect, you might say it was written...

This is the secret logic of *Naked Lunch*, the source of its mysterious fascination beyond any intended political or philosophical message, and Burroughs knew that it could not be openly communicated, or fully translated. As the book insists in its last words, written in Chinese pidgin English, a linguistic creole of the Occident and the Orient, "No glot... Clom Fliday." I don't have the secret, come back and ask me again..

Oliver Harris, May 2021

[1] Burroughs, Introduction, *Everything Is Permitted: The Making of Naked Lunch*, edited by Ira Silverberg (London: Harper, 1992), 14.
[2] Burroughs, *Le festin nu*, Eric Kahane, trans. (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 51, 125, 219.
[3] Jacques Houbart, "Traduction ou décryptement?," *Un homme grand. Jack Kerouac a la confluence des cultures*. Pierre Anctil et al., eds. (Ottawa: Carleton U P, 1990), 109. For more on this text and other issues of translation, see "William Burroughs' Cut-Ups Lost and Found in Translation," *L'Esprit créateur* 58.4 (Winter 2018).
[4] *The Letters of William S. Burroughs, 1945-1959* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 280–81, 292.
[5] Burroughs, *Letters*, 274.
[6] Barry Miles, *William S. Burroughs, A Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014), 273.
[7] Burroughs, *Letters*, 349.
Please find Farid Ghadami's interview by Erik Mortenson here.

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