

## Kerouac Meets Burroughs *On the Road*

by Arthur S. Nusbaum © 1994

In the very middle of his novel *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac recounts a visit with William S. Burroughs. While perhaps somewhat inconsequential to the casual Kerouac reader, this episode is significant because it provides vital insight into the derivation of Burroughs' particular style and substance as will unfold in future works. It is a quintessential example of the inception, through literature, of legend and myth from the personal experiences of a small group of people outside the mainstream of American society.

In creating a composite account of the meeting, it becomes clear that at this point, Burroughs is very much a mentor to Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and other authors in the core group that will spawn the Beat Movement. An average ten years older than the others in this coterie (and about to turn 35), he is ahead of them in his reading, experiences, and iconoclasm. He is already a legend within the circle, as Kerouac attests to in the novel.<sup>1</sup>

The portentous meeting with Burroughs is a stop in one of the journeys across the United States chronicled in *On the Road*. A friend of Kerouac's, Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarty),<sup>2</sup> forms the basis for the novel's central character. In December 1948, he is 22 years old, living in San Francisco with his new wife Carolyn (Camille) and their newborn daughter. But at the sight of a new-model Hudson, he is jolted out of his stable routine and compelled to go back on the road and continue his "search for what he called IT. ... IT was about damming up time or turning its flow to torrent, about dislocating oneself into meaning. IT was about recapturing ... a state of exhilaration."<sup>3</sup> He convinces his friend Al Hinkle (Ed Dunkel), "a tall, calm unthinking fellow,"<sup>4</sup> to marry his girlfriend Helen (Galatea) because they think she has enough money to bankroll the trip. Cassady spends his struggling family's entire savings on the down payment for the car and makes preparations with the newlyweds to begin the journey, offering lame assurances to his shocked wife.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *On the Road* (New York: Viking Press, 1957; reprint, Signet, 1982), 119-20. Kerouac's frantically run-on, condensed review of his life up to this time is richly supported by facts set forth in the most complete biography of Burroughs to date, Ted Morgan, *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), 56-171, and in the documentary film of Burroughs' life, Howard Bruckner and Alan Yentob (producers), *Burroughs* (New York: Giorno Poetry Systems Institute, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> The names of characters appearing in *On the Road* will be included in parentheses following the actual names of the individuals.

<sup>3</sup> William Plummer, *The Holy Goof: A Biography of Neal Cassady* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981; reprint, New York: Paragon House, 1990), 54.

<sup>4</sup> *On the Road*, 93.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac and Ginsberg* (New York: William Morrow, 1990) 72-7.

Shortly after their departure, Helen realizes she cannot bear the relentless pace. Motivated also by the fact that she does not have much money after all, Cassady decides that she will be sent ahead to New Orleans, where she is to contact Burroughs and wait for them at his home.<sup>6</sup> Cassady and Hinkle move on to Denver, where Cassady rekindles a relationship with his first wife, Luanne Henderson (Marylou) and impulsively has her join the journey.<sup>7</sup> The group then heads toward Kinston, NC. There they spend the Christmas holidays with 26-year-old Kerouac (Sal Paradise) and his mother at the home of his sister Nin.<sup>8</sup> This is followed by a brief stay in New York with Ginsberg (Carlo Marx). Finally, on January 19, 1949, Kerouac, Cassady, Hinkle, and Henderson depart for Burroughs' home in Algiers, LA, just outside New Orleans.<sup>9</sup>

As the party nears its destination, they hear a local DJ on the car radio shout a statement that expresses the attitude they are living out. "Don't worry 'bout *nothing!*"<sup>10</sup> But a certain pensive quality penetrates Kerouac's thoughtless spontaneity. While on the ferry bringing them across the Mississippi River from New Orleans to Algiers, he muses, "On rails we leaned and looked at the great brown father of waters rolling down from mid-America like the torrent of broken souls."<sup>11</sup> This intense image may have prompted the observation that *On the Road* is more a romance or poem than a novel, "a sequence of radiant images."<sup>12</sup> A very similar poignancy is later to be found in Burroughs' work. In *Naked Lunch*, which Kerouac will help to compile and edit from Burroughs' delirium-inspired notes, Burroughs laments, "Motel ... Motel ... Motel ... broken neon arabesque ... loneliness moans across the continent like foghorns over still oily water of tidal rivers."<sup>13</sup>

The group finally arrives at "a dilapidated old heap with sagging porches running around and weeping willows in the yard,"<sup>14</sup> its occupants "a parody of the American family" destined to

---

<sup>6</sup> Helen's misadventures and observations at the Burroughs household during her abandonment over the next month are chronicled in several sources: Morgan, 155-7; Cassady, 109-13.

<sup>7</sup> *On the Road*, 93. See also Plummer, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation and America* (New York: Random House, 1979; reprint, New York: Dell, 1990), 111. In the novel, Kerouac is with his aunt at his brother's house in Testament, VA; *On the Road*, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan, 158.

<sup>10</sup> *On the Road*, 116.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>12</sup> Plummer, 55.

<sup>13</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, Black Cat ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 225-6.

<sup>14</sup> *On the Road*, 118.

be “part of a legend and a prophecy of things to come.”<sup>15</sup> As they pile out of the car, the first to greet them is Joan Vollmer Adams (Jane Lee), Burroughs’ common-law wife. She behaves as if the group had been there all along – a hipster’s welcome. Kerouac and others present at this time describe Joan, already Benzedrine-ravaged at age 25, as a former beauty now drab and unadorned, limping from a bout of polio, worn out, and with “something kind of naked about her.”<sup>16</sup> Helen Hinkle confronts her errant husband, giving Cassady “a dirty look, she knew the score.”<sup>17</sup> The Burroughs’ “two wonderful children” run freely in the background: eight-year-old Julie Vollmer Adams (Dodie), Joan’s child from a previous marriage, and one-year-old William S. Burroughs, Jr. (Ray), described as “a little blond child of the rainbow.”<sup>18</sup>

Burroughs (Old Bull Lee) arrives home to find it “invaded by maniacs.”<sup>19</sup> According to Kerouac: “Bull came driving into the yard and unrolled himself from the car bone by bone, and came over wearily, wearing glasses, felt hat, shabby suit, long, lean, strange, and laconic. ... It would take all night to tell about Old Bull Lee; let’s just say now, he was a teacher.”<sup>20</sup> In the celebrated film biography *Burroughs*, Burroughs complains to the interviewer of Kerouac’s tendency to categorize his friends and appoint them with capacities: “O.K., you’re going to be the teacher.”<sup>21</sup> But while he modestly downplays his influence, Burroughs is a magnet for the nascent counterculture now gathering at his home.

Kerouac comes to the conclusion that “now the final study was the drug habit. He was now in New Orleans, slipping along the streets with shady characters and haunting connection bars.”<sup>22</sup> Burroughs’ own references to his New Orleans period in *Junky*, his first published work, confirm Kerouac’s impression. “So I drifted along, scoring ... and fell into a routine schedule: A cap of junk three times a day, and the time in between to be filled somehow.”<sup>23</sup> Although it crosses paths with the time and place of the meeting Kerouac relates, *Junky* contains few details

---

15 Jennie Skerl, *William S. Burroughs* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985; paperback ed., 1986), 11.

16 Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack’s Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (St. Martin’s Press, 1978; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 134. See also Morgan, 155-6; *On the Road*, 118.

17 *On the Road*, 118.

18 *Ibid.*, 119.

19 *Ibid.*, 118.

20 *Ibid.*, 119.

21 Bruckner and Yentob, *Burroughs*.

22 *On the Road*, 119.

23 William S. Burroughs [William Lee, pseud.], *Junkie* (New York: Ace Books, 1953; reprint [as *Junky*], New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 75. Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, Burroughs used the pen name “Lee.” Burroughs’ character name Old Bull Lee in *On the Road* was thus a deliberate choice by Kerouac.

regarding participants and events. Everything and everyone, including narrator-subject Burroughs, is incidental to the overwhelming need for drugs.

Burroughs is now five years into a 15-year period of addiction, a way of life where “the physical rhythms of his existence [are] governed by the addiction-withdrawal syndrome, and his movements [are] determined by legal difficulties and the availability of drugs.”<sup>24</sup> Drug addiction is also “the final study” for Burroughs, in that he sees life “measured out in eyedroppers of morphine solution ... [experiencing] the agonizing deprivation of junk sickness, and the pleasure of relief when junk thirsty cells [drink] from the needle.”<sup>25</sup> The narrative of *Junky*, like Burroughs’ existence, boils down to the pursuit of a need that evicts the soul and replaces it with the instinctive direction of an insect. The theme of addiction is a metaphor for controlling society, and as a “final study” of life stripped down to the basics, it will be carried forward through all of Burroughs’ major works.

Another recurring theme is Burroughs’ “sentimental streak about the old days in America ... [when] the country was wild and brawling and free, with abundance and any kind of freedom for everyone.”<sup>26</sup> This wistful nostalgia for the Wild West, saloons, and over-the-counter morphine will come to artistic fruition in *The Place of Dead Roads*, where he creates a surreal Old West milieu. It is more a longing for an ideal state of freedom than a throwback to a particular era. Indeed, for Burroughs, Cassady, and Kerouac, freedom is elusive. Cassady and Kerouac are grasping for IT in the very act of moving like a pendulum from one end of the country to the other.<sup>27</sup> Burroughs’ attempts to settle into stationary freedom are thwarted by a society that will not let him mind his own business. Very shortly after the *On the Road* meeting, he will furtively move to Mexico with the law at his heels.<sup>28</sup>

As the episode continues, the group gathers around their “teacher,” who sits with Mayan codices on his lap and shoots an airgun at empty Benzedrine tubes discarded by Joan.<sup>29</sup> But Burroughs’ interest in firearms goes far beyond the harmless airgun. “Man ain’t safe going around this country anymore without a gun,” he says, and then shows them the revolver he is carrying under his coat and the rest of his “arsenal.”<sup>30</sup> His lifelong gun fetish is acted out in numerous Western, hard-boiled detective, and other scenarios in almost all his works. Joan overhears his description of an exotic weapon and says, “I hope I’m not around when you try

---

24 Skerl, 11.

25 Burroughs, *Junky*, xvi.

26 *On the Road*, 120.

27 Plummer, 57.

28 Morgan, 170-1.

29 *On the Road*, 120-1.

30 *Ibid.*, 121.

it.”<sup>31</sup> This is prophetically ironic: Less than three years later, Burroughs will accidentally shoot and kill Joan in a drunken “William Tell” act.<sup>32</sup>

Kerouac and the others are puzzled by Burroughs’ relationship with his wife. “There was never any mooching and mincing around, just talk and a very deep companionship that none of us would ever be able to fathom.”<sup>33</sup> But although Burroughs allows the adoring Joan to share her life with him, he is essentially homosexual, and he does not take responsibility for the relationship or attempt to reconcile its conflicts.<sup>34</sup> His indifference extends as well to family life. The small children are allowed to roam without supervision, relieving themselves in pots and pans, while Joan scrubs and cleans the house after them continuously, full of Benzedrine-fueled energy.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to Cassady, who prefers to initiate trouble actively, Burroughs drifts idly into dangerous situations or lets them envelop him.

Cassady and Kerouac want Burroughs to show them a good time in New Orleans. Grudgingly agreeing to go, he insists that “the ideal bar doesn’t exist in America.” He contrasts the vulgar modern bars with the simple, straightforward taverns of 1910,<sup>36</sup> another instance of his “sentimental streak.” As if to prove his point, Burroughs deliberately takes Cassady and Kerouac to the dullest bars in the French Quarter.<sup>37</sup> During the evening, he warns Kerouac about moving on with the “madman” Cassady and tries to persuade him to stay behind and keep him company.<sup>38</sup> But the stability that Burroughs invites Kerouac to join him in is illusory. The total permissiveness and impulsive behavior of his household make such an offer no less reckless and uncertain than letting Cassady lead a road trip.

---

31 Ibid.

32 Morgan, 194-6.

33 *On the Road*, 122.

34 Morgan, 161.

35 Gifford and Lee, 134. Another activity with which the sleepless Joan occupies herself is described by Helen:

There was this dead, ghastly tree. It was just covered with lizards, and [Joan] used to rake lizards off the tree at night. I don’t think she killed them. Of course, they went back. That was their home. It just gave her something to do at four o’clock in the morning in the moonlight.

36 *On the Road*, 122.

37 Ibid., 122-3.

38 Ibid., 122.

The dreamy ferry ride into New Orleans evokes another of Kerouac's "radiant images:"

There was a mystic wraith of fog over the brown waters that night, together with dark driftwoods; and across the way New Orleans glowed orange-bright, with a few dark ships at her hem, ghostly fogbound Cereno ships with Spanish balconies and ornamental poops, till you got up close and saw they were just old freighters.<sup>39</sup>

Later, after their return home, Kerouac walks down to "dig the Mississippi River," but a fence prevents him from reaching it. "When you start separating the people from their rivers, what have you got," he asks.<sup>40</sup> He and, in their various ways, the others yearn to break through barriers that separate them from the stream of perception and experience. The non-conformity of their pursuit consigns them to a spiritual state of exile, and it is this awareness of difference that ushers in the Beat phenomenon.<sup>41</sup> They find meaning in their inner and outer travels. As Kerouac expresses it, "And as the river poured down from mid-America by starlight I knew, I knew like mad that everything I had ever known and would ever know was One."<sup>42</sup>

Alienation runs like a red thread through the visit. One morning, Kerouac encounters Burroughs and Cassady in the backyard of the house as they are removing "millions" of nails embedded in a thick old piece of wood. Burroughs exclaims, "I'm going to build me a shelf that'll last a *thousand years!*" He goes on to decry the mass production of flimsy, intentionally disposable products, where society is a consumer treadmill and "everybody'll have to go on working and punching timeclocks and organizing themselves in sullen unions and floundering around while the big grab goes on in Washington and Moscow."<sup>43</sup>

Burroughs regales his guests with stories. At once humorous and macabre, he fancifully extends ostensibly factual incidents into stranger-than-fiction narratives.<sup>44</sup> In coming decades,

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 122-3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 123. Ironically, Burroughs is at this time building a fence of his own around his property to separate him from obnoxious neighbors. Ibid., 126.

<sup>41</sup> Arthur Knight and Kit Knight, eds., *Kerouac and the Beats: A Primary Sourcebook* (New York: Paragon House, 1988), 161 (interview of John Clellon Holmes by John Tytell).

<sup>42</sup> *On the Road*, 123.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 124. In the coming decades, the disaffected youth of America will catch up with Burroughs. Denouncement of modern life will recur throughout his works as he encourages his readers to escape the stifling grind of a destructively repressed society.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 124-5. Burroughs describes fingers being cut off several times, perhaps unconsciously referring to his Van Gogh-style amputation of his left little finger in 1939. See Morgan, 74-6. The story he mentions writing with his friend Kells Elvins (Dale) at Harvard is *Twilight's Last Gleaming*, rejected for publication by Esquire in 1938. See Morgan, 67-8.

the “Routine,” as Burroughs calls this “frantic, attention-getting format,”<sup>45</sup> will flower into acclaimed, fixating literature.<sup>46</sup>

The Burroughs household also includes seven cats. “I love cats. I especially like the ones that squeal when I hold ‘em over the bathtub,” he tells Kerouac.<sup>47</sup> Cats will continue to fascinate Burroughs in his later life and art. His sentiments toward them will mature from this early demented and even cruel treatment<sup>48</sup> into deep empathy. His very latest published work, *The Cat Inside*, is devoted to reflections on the many cats that he has taken into his current home.

Yet another of Burroughs’ interests that will echo through the coming years is noted by Kerouac as the visitors scour the backyard for activities. Burroughs introduces them to his orgone accumulator, “a mystical outhouse” covered with organic material in which a person can absorb orgones, “vibratory atmospheric atoms of the life-principle.”<sup>49</sup> Convinced of the contrivance’s alleged recuperative and cancer-preventing powers, Burroughs will build various models throughout his life.<sup>50</sup>

For distraction, Burroughs and Kerouac drive to a “bookie joint” to bet on horses. Kerouac is intrigued during the excursion how cars are extensions of their owners’ personalities. He contrasts Cassady’s “sleek Hudson” with Burroughs’ “high and rattly” old truck, which is “just like 1910.”<sup>51</sup> Upon arriving at the betting parlor, Kerouac is sent into a “temporary trance” when the name of a horse reminds him of his late father, with whom he used to “play the horses.”<sup>52</sup> He mentions this to Burroughs, who bets on a different horse and loses. The horse Kerouac is drawn to wins.

---

<sup>45</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Queer* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), xv.

<sup>46</sup> Some of the most well-known Routines may be found in *Naked Lunch*, including the scurrilous “Talking Asshole” Routine. See Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 131-3.

<sup>47</sup> *On the Road*, 126.

<sup>48</sup> Burroughs’ biography contains a passage he deleted from the manuscript of *Junky* in which he describes his mistreatment of cats around this time, including holding them underwater. See Morgan, 157.

<sup>49</sup> *On the Road*, 126. The orgone accumulator was invented and promoted by Wilhelm Reich, a controversial and ill-fated one-time student of Sigmund Freud. See William S. Burroughs, “My Experiences with Wilhelm Reich’s Orgone Box,” in *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays* (New York: Seaver Books, 1986), 164-6. Some three decades after the encounter with Kerouac, a scene from his film biography shows Burroughs coaxing the author Terry Southern into joining him in his orgone box at his New York City residence. Bruckner and Yentob, *Burroughs*.

<sup>50</sup> Morgan, 142.

<sup>51</sup> *On the Road*, 127.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

This incident rouses Burroughs to an emphatic affirmation of the existence of supernatural forces and visions. “How do you know your father, who was an old horseplayer, just didn’t momentarily communicate to you that [the horse] was going to win the race,” he asks Kerouac.<sup>53</sup> He insists that “mankind will someday realize that we are actually in contact with the dead and with the other world, whatever it is.”<sup>54</sup> Connecting with or being overtaken by transcendental elements will prove to be an incessant exploration throughout Burroughs’ life and a central topic in his works.<sup>55</sup> Burroughs, Kerouac, and the other seeds of the Beat Movement strain to reach beyond temporal limits, to achieve at least “momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh.”<sup>56</sup>

Overtaken by the need to get on the road again, Cassady and Kerouac attempt to overcome their restlessness by engaging in “feats of athletic prowess.” In Cassady’s frantic running and jumping, Kerouac sees the essence of his life and of their search for IT: “As we ran I had a mad vision of Dean running through all of life just like that. ... Outthrust to life ... yelling, ‘Yes! Yes, man, you sure can go!’”<sup>57</sup> Burroughs trades methods for disarming adversaries with Kerouac.<sup>58</sup> This activity exemplifies their perceived need to look over their shoulders while pursuing freedom in a hostile society. Young Julie reacts to the antics, exclaiming, “Look at the silly men.”<sup>59</sup> To a certain extent, they have in fact taken on childlike qualities to elude the distractions of modern life and close in on ultimate meaning and fulfillment.

---

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., 128

55 Burroughs is certain that he was possessed by an “Ugly Spirit” at the time he killed Joan. See Bruckner and Yentob, *Burroughs*. In his introduction to *Queer*, xxii, he writes:

I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out.

Burroughs’ attempt to enter an otherworldly dimension through use of the drug Yage is described in *The Yage Letters*. Much of his novel *The Western Lands* explores ancient Egyptian concepts of the afterlife

56 Burroughs, *Junky*, 152.

57 *On the Road*, 128.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.



When Cassady demonstrates freight-train-hopping with Kerouac and Al Hinkle, a return to the road is clearly imminent.<sup>60</sup> Kerouac remembers Burroughs' original intention to invite only him, especially in light of the increasing mess the group is making of the house.<sup>61</sup> Cassady and Kerouac speed off with Luanne to continue the journey that will be immortalized nearly a decade later when *On the Road* is finally published.

The now legendary ideas and activities that Kerouac describes in this episode disclose the DNA of Burroughs' future life and artistry. They mark the juncture from which the Beat Movement will gain momentum and influence. But at this stage, Burroughs is a discontented outsider in his own country. Like Kerouac, he too must struggle to get past the fence and reach the river of life, death, and beyond, although his journeys will be markedly different. Nevertheless, as with Kerouac, it is movement itself – escape, change, metamorphosis – that is central to his experiences, and the writings these journeys produce will prove to have a significant impact on the world around him. His life will become a modern-day mythology in our collective consciousness.

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 128-9. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, summarizing the allegory of movement in modern American literature, comments that only a decade separated Thomas Wolfe's vision of America as viewed from a moving train in the 1930s from Kerouac's image as seen from a speeding car in the 1940s. See Richard Lerner (producer), *What Happened to Kerouac?*, independent production, 1986. Cassady, a laid-off railroad brakeman who spent part of his childhood as a train-hopping vagabond, forms the transitional link between the two eras.

<sup>61</sup> *On the Road*, 129.