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From Dr Mabuse to Doc Benway: The Myths and Manuscripts of *Naked Lunch*

Keynote Address given by Oliver Harris during *Naked Lunch* @ 50

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Ladies and gentlemen, boys, girls, and fence-straddlers.... I'd like to start with a series of thanks: to Gerald Cloud, Librarian for Reference and Research, for organising today's talks here at Columbia, and for curating, together with colleagues at the Butler Library, the excellent exhibition up there; to Michael Ryan, Director of the Rare Books and Manuscript department, for so warmly embracing the idea of putting Columbia centre-stage in these anniversary events, which we first discussed some two years ago; and to the organisers of the [other special events in the city](#) this week — to Keith Seward for arranging and hosting the terrific evening of readings at the St. Marks Poetry Project on Wednesday; to Marvin Taylor for arranging the panel discussion at the Fayles Library yesterday; and, looking ahead to the finale tomorrow, Regina Weinreich, of the School of Visual Arts, for a day of film-screenings and live performances. To all of them I tip my hat.

We're here to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the first publication of William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. We all know the danger of 50th birthday parties — everyone pretending to be younger than they are — but the great thing about Burroughs' book, one of the signs of what makes it so special, is that it has not aged, that it is still every bit as ferocious and as funny, as ugly, beautiful, offensive and original as it was half a century ago. It is certainly no coincidence that its year of publication, 1959, was itself a special year — indeed, according to the title of Fred Kaplan's recent book, it was [The Year Everything Changed](#). Kaplan runs through the scientific, political, and artistic milestones and landmarks that made 1959 a turning point in modern history: from Castro's revolution in Cuba, to the development of the birth control pill and the microchip; from the opening of the Guggenheim Museum or the release of Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*, to the publication by Grove Press of the uncut *Lady Chatterly's Lover* and (although not strictly a "landmark" and so not in Kaplan's book) my own personal favourite, the release just a couple of weeks after *Naked Lunch* came out of Alfred Hitchcock's wonderful *North by Northwest*.

What I especially like about Hitchcock's film is the way it identifies, with a light but biting comic touch, Modern Man as a Mad Avenue Man, a cipher all at sea and on the run in a world of images of his own making. Saul Bass's great opening title sequence, perfectly scored by Bernard Hermann, show us a frenetic world of constant motion, a mass of geometric lines all crisscrossing into which we are chaotically plunged. And this is a reminder that *Naked Lunch* begins in similar fashion — plunging us into a fast-moving world with William Lee making a rube out of the "advertising exec type fruit" who holds the door for him as he boards an uptown A train from Washington Square Station. And of course *Naked Lunch* doesn't only begin in New York City; it ends here, too, with the shoot-out of detectives Hauser and O'Brien in a hotel located at 103rd Street and Broadway, only a dozen blocks away from where we are right now.

But in the case of *Naked Lunch* we shouldn't be too literal in how we think about its location in space and time, because this is a book we have to take on at an angle, obliquely. So, rather than going back 50 years, I want to start by going back more like 500, and travelling almost 5000 miles — to 1533 and Holbein's famous painting, *The Ambassadors*.

Warning Warning Warning

What do we see? The two ambassadors to the court of Henry VIII, and around them a scene of realistically painted objects, symbolising wealth and power, artistic, spiritual, and scientific progress, global exploration, and so on. This would be a fully coherent picture — a confident world confidently represented — if only we could ignore that... that *thing* ... the disgusting, dirty stain, the unpleasant brown smear that cuts across the lower part of the picture, weirdly floating in a space of its own near their feet. This ugly slash is like an act of vandalism, gleefully mocking and violating the sober, confidently ordered realism of the scene. And what is this unwelcome and unsettling thing? The riddle remains until we turn away and look back with a sideways glance. Now, now that the figures and their setting are a blurry mess, all of a sudden we recognise the blot is ... William Burroughs.

Of course, Holbein actually painted an anamorphic skull, but my point is we could say this is Burroughs; that he is the death's head spoiling the group portrait of American literature, and *Naked Lunch* is a blot on the literary landscape, a stain on the canon of not only mainstream realist fiction but of postmodern fiction, too. *Naked Lunch* just doesn't fit, is neither properly in nor out of the picture, neither comfortably inside the canon nor comfortably absent from it.

And if we take the skull analogy literally, we might say that Burroughs functions as a *memento mori* for literature as well as for life, and this is certainly how he has often been represented: think of his famous pose in Paris, around the time of *Naked Lunch*'s publication, beside the word DANGER, or his appearance in Gregory Corso's *The American Express* (1961) as "Mr D," who stands for "danger, disaster, death!"

This is the urgent, polemical Burroughs, at its most emphatic in the title of a piece in *My Own Mag* from 1964: "Warning Warning Warning Warning Warning Warning Warning Warning Warning Warning." That same year, on the American publication of *Naked Lunch*, [Marshall McLuhan](#) saw Burroughs' key role as admonitory, arguing that to criticise his books as books is "a little like trying to criticize the sartorial and verbal manifestations of a man who is knocking on the door to explain that flames are leaping from the roof of our home. Burroughs is not asking merit marks as a writer; he is trying to point to the shut-on button of an active and lethal environmental process."

But as well as taking it politically — and seeing *Naked Lunch* as a didactic wake-up call — we can also take the death's head image poetically, or formally, in terms of the anamorphic distortion itself. In other words, on the one hand it's a black joke against interpretation: when we do make sense of the stain, it turns out to spell (our) D-E-A-T-H. On the other hand, working out the meaning of the stain misses the point, for what the ugly mess in Holbein's picture does is to call into question our ability to see, by forcing us to face the limitations of our comfortable, seemingly natural, standard point of view — a perspective that must rule out some essential truth (i.e., death) in order to remain an orderly, coherent picture.

So we might see this blot as a kind of hallucinatory vision in the tradition of Rimbaud, with his poetics of obscurity and his project to disorder all the senses. And while this blot may at first appear formless, the ugly opposite to form, if we change our point of view we come to recognise a different order of form. In the case of *Naked Lunch*, we can surely say that this is one of its functions: to wrench us out of a previously comfortable and innocent viewpoint to reveal what we couldn't, or didn't want, to see. "If man can see..."

Paradoxically, we now face the opposite but equal danger — for when we can see Burroughs clearly, when we have begun to make sense out of *Naked Lunch* while everything else seems stupid-looking, what we've lost is that very challenge to comprehension, the very physical disturbance and offence that defines the stain's unsettling relation to the rest of the picture.

Naked Lunch is not just a stain, but to forget that it *is* a stain — an offensive spoiling of the

official picture and of standard codes of representation — is as big a mistake as being unable to see that there is more to it. That is to say, we must not lose sight of the materiality of the text, a materiality that indelibly stains our senses. And this is where Dame Edith Sitwell comes in.

Genetic Myths

Sitwell joined in the famous TLS correspondence that followed publication of *Naked Lunch* by John Calder in Great Britain in 1963, at a time when *Naked Lunch* was dismissed as “literary sewage,” “merest trash not worth a second glance”: “Glug... glug. It tastes disgusting.” Such responses may have been entirely negative, but they were still properly *visceral* reactions to Burroughs’ visceral writing. In Sitwell’s put down: “I do not wish to spend the rest of my life with my nose nailed to other people’s lavatories.”

Sitwell’s nose, however, sniffs the junky as much as the junk, the dirty writer as well as his dirty book. That the two are effectively one is a reminder that, for the great majority, *Naked Lunch* is inseparable from William Burroughs. As with Kerouac and *On the Road*, the Biographical Fallacy reigns supreme — with all the obvious dangers of judging the book not in terms of the text in hand, but in terms of the man behind it. The book is seen as just a by-product of the writer’s life — or, for Edith Sitwell, his *lavatory*.

This takes us deep into Myth territory — into the endlessly circulated legends of how Burroughs wrote *Naked Lunch*, which have over fifty years become as much a part of the novel as the text “itself.” In this area of mythmaking and mystification, Burroughs himself played a crucial part, most obviously in the “Deposition: Testimony Concerning A Sickness” that has been an introduction to almost every edition of *Naked Lunch*, except the very first — the [Olympia edition of 1959](#), which lacked this text — and the most recent — the restored edition of Miles and Grauerholz in 2003, which moved the “Deposition” to the back of the book.

The image of Burroughs as zonked out on junk, taking his “notes on sickness and delirium,” has either mediated readings of *Naked Lunch* or completely replaced it for the many who only know of the book, or who started it only to give up once past the “Deposition.”

The image of the stoned writer is, in its apparent repudiation of conscious authorship, a paradoxical assertion of the biographical author. But it is at one with the other key genetic accounts — the oft-repeated stories of Burroughs’ collaborations with Kerouac and Ginsberg in Tangier and of how *Naked Lunch* was assembled in a rush in Paris, the order of its parts resulting arbitrarily from how the printers at Olympia Press returned the galley sections to Burroughs.

What should we do about these genetic myths? One response would be to ignore them — to focus instead on the actual text of the book, and to stop looking beyond it to the man behind. In the “Deposition,” Burroughs therefore perversely reveals himself only to then insist, like the exposed wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*: “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!”

The other answer would be to replace the myths with more accurate and detailed scholarly accounts, so that less people see *Naked Lunch* as the ravings of a junky or a random mess. But the situation is not so simple.

First, because the small print won’t take back what the big print giveth: the “Deposition” may have been moved, but the stable door has been bolted long after the horse ran away. And second, because the *story* of how *Naked Lunch* was written *is* a part of the story, and has been there from the very start, for a reason. Both the myths and a more scholarly material approach matter because they each answer to a genuine need. And that’s because it’s impossible to read *Naked Lunch* without *some* sort of genetic hypothesis, which is needed to hold together a book that seems constantly to spill off the page in all directions — as it redundantly tells us. Burroughs’ “Deposition” answers that question even before it has arisen, and, although his claim that the text consists of the author’s notes on junk sickness actually answers *very little* — if

anything, makes the book that follows even *more* perplexing — it's been good enough for most readers as a way to carry on.

The third reason why we should not just wish the myths away in favour of the "real" story is that the very notion of a definitive account is really a promise to explain *away* the text, to get rid of the stain by cleaning everything up, straightening everything out. We always insist on wanting answers, even though *Naked Lunch* ends by insisting that we'll never get them, or at least not from Burroughs' text: "*No glot ... C'lom Fliday...*"

And the final reason is that we shouldn't throw away any part of *Naked Lunch*, even ones parasitic upon it — which would include Burroughs' own "Deposition" — without looking closely at it first. For this is the irony: although the genetic myths have promoted lazy readings of *Naked Lunch*, they themselves have been very lazily read — repeated a lot, but never closely examined. And so, before looking into *Naked Lunch*'s manuscript history, let's consider the mythic version of *Naked Lunch*'s writing as told by that most potent mythmaker of them all: Jack Kerouac.

We begin with sausages — or to be more precise, "bolognas" — which feature in Kerouac's account of helping Burroughs in Tangier, during spring 1957, turn his mess of writing into a manuscript. This is how Kerouac famously describes his collaboration with "Bull Hubbard" on "*Nude Supper*" in *Desolation Angels* (1965):

When I undertook to start typing it neatly double-space for his publishers ... I had horrible nightmares ... like of pulling out endless bolognas from my mouth, from my very entrails, feet of it, pulling and pulling out all the horror of what Bull saw, and wrote...

There are two things here. Firstly, Kerouac's notorious nightmares arise not just from reading the text of *Naked Lunch* but from typing it — and not just from typing it, but from trying to do so "neatly double-space for his publishers." That is to say, making it into a *clean* copy — which inevitably recalls all those legends of the manuscript's disgusting physical condition: blood-stained, the ends of the pages eaten away by rats, etc. This is the context for Kerouac's nightmares, the paradox of trying to accommodate Burroughs' toxic writing to the needs of general cultural production, to make *Naked Lunch* fit for public consumption.

The second thing would be the bolognas themselves. Sausages are, of course, made of the very cheapest cuts, those parts of the animal that are better left unnamed — the otherwise unspeakable and unsalable body parts that make me glad to be a vegetarian. Kerouac's point, in short, is that *Naked Lunch* comprises all that is impossible to swallow if you actually see what is on the end of your fork. No mere load of baloney, Kerouac's sausages make a precise reading of the book's title.

In fact, if we go back to the handwritten draft of this passage in Kerouac's original diary — written from Tangier in spring 1957 — rather than take the (summer 1961) text of *Desolation Angels* — we see more. Calling Burroughs a "Nausea genius," Kerouac originally dreamed he was "pulling out of my throat long great globs of undigested food wrapt in cold jellied fat." This is even less appetising, truly nauseous, but again very precise at the verbal level. I don't know how often Kerouac ever used the term *glob*, but the word appears several times in *Naked Lunch*, twice in the Talking Asshole routine — to which I'll return — and again confirms Kerouac's description as a direct and detailed response to Burroughs' work-in-progress.

Kerouac's vision of *Naked Lunch* as "undigested food" is also consistent with the speech he attributes to Burroughs just a few lines later in *Desolation Angels*, where Hubbard says: "I'm shitting out my educated Middlewest background." This might be read as a kind of response to Edith Sitwell, in the sense that Burroughs' shit is to be understood as not just his own but that of his culture.

This leads to — the Waring Blender. During the 1950s, increasingly sophisticated kitchen gadgets

appeared in more and more American homes, and they also offered symbolic figures for cultural analysis. The blender appears significantly in a letter written to Kerouac, some eight months after his diary notes in *Tangier*, by James Laughlin of New Directions. Laughlin was writing to Kerouac regarding the problems of publishing *Visions of Cody* (the closest, for Kerouac, to those posed by *Naked Lunch*):

It is all part of the mania for pre-digestion which reaches its worst form in the Reader's Digest. The publisher is supposed to become a kind of Waring Blender so that even adults won't have to chew anything that is tough. It is all rather sickening.

Burroughs understood, and much of what makes *Naked Lunch* sickening is its refusal to chew the food for us... Equally, Burroughs' work would need publishers who didn't want to clean up what was necessarily dirty, blend to a paste what was hard to stomach — and he would find them in Maurice Girodias at Olympia Press and Barney Rosset at Grove Press, aided and abetted by, among others, Irving Rosenthal, Richard Seaver, and, of course, Allen Ginsberg.

Naked Lunch literally includes this technology for making things easy to swallow, with a specific reference to a (Sunbeam) Mixmaster — American Housewife: "...and the Garbage Disposal Unit snapping at me, and the nasty old Mixmaster keep trying to get under my dress..." More generally, *Naked Lunch* opposes the world of consumer commodities by being made of everything hard to stomach, and resists consumption formally by being all mixed up by that "Mixmaster" Burroughs, here conjoining and confusing technologies of waste disposal and food preparation in a typical gesture designed to disorient the reader.

Taking this theme one step further, in the same month *Naked Lunch* was published, in Moscow there took place the famous Kitchen Debate, when Vice President Nixon thought he had won the Cold War by trumpeting the American Dream as a triumph of domestic appliances. Significantly, Khrushchev had Nixon's number, lampooning him by asking; "Don't you have a machine that puts food into the mouth and pushes it down?" Such a brilliantly Burroughsian retort suggests Khrushchev had just read *Naked Lunch*, echoing Burroughs' line that "Americans have a special horror of giving up control": "They would like to jump down into their stomachs and digest the food and shovel the shit out."

This is also to fix on the central issue of Control, and takes us back to Kerouac in *Tangier* for the second part of his mythic account of how *Naked Lunch* was written — this time focusing not on his own typing up of the manuscript, but on Burroughs' original writing of it.

From Dr. Mabuse To Doc Benway

... sometimes he'd whip out his pen and start scribbling on typewriter pages which he threw over his shoulder when he was through with them, like Doctor Mabuse, till the floor was littered with the strange Etruscan script of his handwriting.

This account of Burroughs writing *Naked Lunch* is well known, but it was not the first time Kerouac had described the writer at work, and, whether consciously or not, the earlier scene is echoed here. In May 1952, Burroughs was midway through writing *Queer* when Kerouac walked in on him in his Mexico City apartment, telling Ginsberg: "Bill was like a mad genius in littered rooms. He was writing." It wasn't only the litter that Kerouac carried over from the writing of *Queer* in Mexico to the writing of *Naked Lunch* in Morocco, but in more complex ways also the vision of Burroughs as "mad genius." More immediately, we should note that "Etruscan" is, like "glob," another specific term that turns up in *Naked Lunch* several times — twice in the repeated and resonant phrase, "doodling in Etruscan." Again, we observe just how precisely and insightfully Kerouac echoed Burroughs' manuscript in his account of its writing. But clearly the standout phrase is the name, Doctor Mabuse.

Easily missed, indeed always overlooked, the reference to Mabuse has a depth and breadth of significance quite alien to Kerouac's often-parodied and apparently cartoonish picture of Burroughs the mad writer of *Naked Lunch*, littering the floor with scattered pages of his disarranged manuscript.

Fritz Lang's two great Mabuse films are richly complex, but in this context I want to highlight two or three points of intersection with Burroughs.

At the end of *Dr Mabuse, The Gambler* (1922) Mabuse, the criminal genius, hypnotist and master of disguises, man of a thousand faces, goes insane, and the second film, *The Testament of Dr Mabuse* (1933), shows us what happened to him after a decade in the mental asylum under the care of Dr. Baum. Baum explains that after a long period of paralysis, Mabuse begins to make motions with his hand, gestures that imitate the act of writing — so they give him pen and paper and Mabuse begins writing, and doesn't stop writing. At first, what he writes is "meaningless and confused"; then words appear among the scribbles, and finally text — thirty pages a day — until the floor of his asylum room is covered with pages of the stuff.

Clearly, this is the scene hinted at by Kerouac, the precise visual match connecting Mabuse and Burroughs in terms of *automatic writing* — which is how Burroughs himself regularly described his writing in his letters during the Tangier years, especially immediately before and after the 1957 visit of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and co.

Now, according to Burroughs' "Deposition," the notes apparently taken without memory were reports of "sickness and delirium." Leaving aside the evident mismatch here — the "sickness" in *Naked Lunch* is less of the body and more of the body politic — what about the content of Mabuse's delirious writing? Dr. Baum explains that the master criminal is still plotting crimes — but these are not crimes for profit, but seemingly senseless acts designed to produce total chaos, panic, crisis. Mabuse's notes add up to a manual of terrorist activities. Among the subversive strikes are attacks against banks and the currency system, the poisoning of water supplies, the spreading of epidemics.

The parallels here with *Naked Lunch* are surprisingly precise, with echoes in the project of Islam Inc., led by AJ, using Clem and Jody as double agents, and the whole idea of an ambiguous organisation, one whose goals are obscure other than to bring down the system by stirring conflict and spreading confusion.

However, this is only one half of it — no less fascinating than the content of Mabuse's plans are the form they take. For what makes all this especially relevant is the way his acts are described in his writing and then carried out in the world: by a gang who never meet Mabuse face to face, but get their orders in a room with nothing in it but a curtain, behind which they hear the commands of "the man behind the curtain," as he is always referred to.

There's also a general parallel between Mabuse, the shadowy mastermind, and Burroughs, routinely mythologised — above all by Kerouac — as an enigmatic and shadowy figure, never really there, as strange as anything in his fictional world and so seemingly, in a reversal of cause and effect, himself a product of it.

Even more curiously, in *Mabuse*, when a disaffected member of the gang and his girlfriend go to the room to find and challenge the Man Behind the Curtain, they discover that there *is* no man behind curtain: just a cardboard cut-out and the technical apparatus for broadcasting text.

In *Mabuse*, the writer's voice is always mediated, and instead of physical presence, direct expression, the film emphasizes transcription and transmission. Mabuse is kept alive through recordings that give voice to his writing, that transmit his message without revealing his identity — a process which carries on even after his death.

As the figure of a writer, Mabuse the man disappears into a writing machine, becomes a medium

for the compulsive act of writing, while his words are doubly dictated: seemingly dictated to him as automatic writing, and in turn dictating to others what they must do. Again, there's an echo in one of the most memorable lines in *Desolation Angels*, where Kerouac has the Burroughs character declare: "I'm apparently some kind of agent from another planet but I haven't got my orders clearly decoded yet."

Like Burroughs' "Deposition: *Testimony Concerning a Sickness*," the "Testament of Dr. Mabuse" questions the presence of the author and the agency of authorship, and sees the legacy of His Master's Voice as curiously independent of the man himself. In short *Mabuse* is a film about authorship, about our quest to find the Man Behind It All, and about how writing *escapes* the hand of the man who wrote it, to take on a life of its own.

I am reminded of a telephone interview from the late 1980s when Burroughs was asked how he saw the relationship between his public image, his body of work, and himself, the actual man — and Burroughs replied: "There *is* no actual man..."

Contrary to the standard reading of Kerouac's mythmaking — as lazy, sensationalizing, mystifying accounts — it's clear that his reference to Mabuse in *Desolation Angels* is informed by a complex understanding of both *Naked Lunch* and its authorship — but what of Burroughs himself? Although there's no record of his ever referring to Lang's films, the fact that Ginsberg as well as Kerouac cast him in a relation with Mabuse — Ginsberg in 1954 imagining a film to be made about Burroughs in the Mabuse style — makes it very likely Burroughs did know them. Then again, the point here is not source-hunting.

If we turn from Dr. Mabuse to *Naked Lunch*'s most famous doctor, Doc Benway, the parallels are quite obvious — Benway, the master "manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems" and expert on "brainwashing and control" who terrorizes the population of Annexia and unleashes total chaos in Freeland.

However, it's not the obvious parallels that interest me here, but the connections that go back to Kerouac's invocation of Mabuse; that's to say, links to authorship and the act of writing.

To begin with, what's most interesting about Benway is that when we look for him in *Naked Lunch*, we find he is never really, never fully, there: his face "flickers like a picture moving in and out of focus" while his voice is "a disembodied voice that is sometimes loud and clear, sometimes barely audible like music down a windy street." Benway the doctor is, like Burroughs the writer, as absent as he is present: "*I am never here... Never that is fully in possession...*"

The most revealing point in *Naked Lunch* when Benway is absent when presumed present is when he speaks the text's most famous routine: the Talking Asshole. Because on close inspection this routine *about ventriloquism itself ventriloquises Benway* — the multiple styles of speech, ranging from German maxims to Shakespeare quotations and antiquated Anglicisms, from hip talk to technical terms, are put in his mouth rather than expressing his "character."

And if we look at the original letter from 1955 in which Burroughs wrote the routine, we can see there's a material reason for this: originally, it had nothing to do with Benway — who was only added as its speaker when the routine was fitted into a new frame a year, possibly two years, later. As the original epistolary context makes clear, the routine had instead to do with Burroughs' control over his own writing. In his letter of February 7 1955 (curiously, Burroughs misdated it 1954), the routine is framed first by Burroughs' description of how he "smokes some tea" and sits down "and out it comes all in one piece like a glob of spit" — note the echoes of Kerouac's account in *Desolation Angels* — and afterwards by the commentary: "It's almost like automatic writing produced by a hostile, independent entity."

Burroughs couldn't be clearer that his routine is a parable of the act of writing. By giving this routine to Doc Benway, Burroughs makes a parallel between the political and creative paradoxes of control, and so invites the comparison to Mabuse.

Now of course, we might say that calling on Burroughs' letters blurs the distinction between fiction and biography, published text and autobiographical context. However, that is not at all the case — and not just because of how important Burroughs' letters were to the writing of *Naked Lunch* (the epistolary medium being the machine that produced his routines), but because the *letter form* itself was at one point the central structuring device of the novel.

Indeed, in 1955, Burroughs made the Talking Asshole routine *as a letter* a part of his text, as we can see in this manuscript page, a verbatim copy of the original letter, retyped as the work of William Lee. So at one point, Burroughs intended the routine to appear framed by the original letter context, inviting it to be read in terms of automatic writing and the paradoxical absence / presence of the conscious author.

In the book published in 1959 very little of such material would remain — what there is appears mainly in the "Hospital" section — and in retrospect it's clear that Burroughs cut such material because, ironically, it looked fake, seemed self-conscious and indulgently literary, in the tradition of Andre Gide's *The Counterfeiters*.

The Composition of *Naked Lunch*

The letter format was a plan Burroughs abandoned, as he would all the various schema he sketched to hold his work together; but traces of each structure would survive, making *Naked Lunch* a palimpsest of materials and methods over a six-year period — and it's this unlikely and unplanned mixing of schemas and sections that makes *Naked Lunch* more than the sum of its parts. That history of composition and restructuring has yet to be written, but my hope is that the next 50 years of interest in *Naked Lunch* will be able to build on an increasingly detailed manuscript history. Certainly, we now have one great advantage — far better archival access, thanks especially to the acquisition of the [Burroughs Papers by the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library](#).

The present task is to build from the ground up, starting with a chronology of *Naked Lunch's* composition so that we can answer such elementary questions as: *which parts* date from *what periods* during the six years Burroughs worked on it between 1954 and 1959, and how were these parts revised and reorganised?

Piecing the compositional history together from a combination of sources, some primary and others circumstantial, we arrive at some basic overall statistics, given here as percentages by year, of how much of *Naked Lunch* was written when. Perhaps the main surprise is to see how little new material — barely 15% — was written during 1958 and 1959 when Burroughs lived at the Beat Hotel in Paris.

Looking at it another way — from the point of view of each individual section within the structure of the published text (based on the Olympia edition) — we see something even more striking. Whereas the first eight and the last eight sections are a mixture of materials dating from all periods of composition, from 1955 to 1959, the middle eight sections — almost a hundred straight pages running from "Hassan's Rumpus Room" to the "County Clerk" — all date from one single period, and were composed by Spring 1957.

Of course, these are crude models, and since the devil is always in the detail, no more than a point of departure. Now, within this history the single most important document is the one preserved here at Columbia University — the 200-page manuscript of "Interzone," the one Kerouac, together with Ginsberg and Alan Ansen, helped type up in Tangier between February and June 1957.

There's only time today to address the most elementary questions about how "Interzone" relates to the book published as *Naked Lunch*, but we should begin with one thing we know for certain: the sections did not belong in any particular linear sequence. That the running order changed

and kept changing is evident from this document, reproduced as endpapers in the Restored edition — although the original at Columbia reveals even more clearly, from the use of pencil, green ink, and two types of blue pen, its multiple histories of revision by revealing this as the work of three different hands and four different occasions.

But the simplest question we need answering about the manuscript of “Interzone” is: how much of it ended up in *Naked Lunch* — or to put it the other way round, how much of the published book came from this manuscript?

Burroughs once said in conversation with Maurice Girodias that the manuscript he saw and rejected in 1958 was “not even approximately similar” to the book *Olympia* published in 1959. But *precisely* how different were they, and in which parts? A basic comparison of manuscript and text looks like this:

What this confirms is not just the percentage of material — 75% of *Naked Lunch* came from “Interzone” — but its organisation: and the fact that the centre *all* came from “Interzone” suggests there’s something wrong or at the very least misleading about the claim that the order of the sections was random, determined by the order in which they came back from the printers as galleys. *Maybe so*, but *if so*, then clearly the sequence they had been sent to the printer in the first place must have been far from random.

As I say, these are preliminary attempts to explore in detail a complex history. They indicate just how much is left to do, how little progress has been made since the work of manuscript and textual analysis started.

That work began, in fact, with this document, drafted by Allen Ginsberg to compare the “Interzone” manuscript with the 1959 edition. Since this was probably drawn up in either late 1959 or 1960, it shows that the work of analysis is effectively as old as the book itself — further confirmation, were it needed, of the instability of the text, no sooner published than already preparing to find a new form, a new shape.

This is a good place to end, since Ginsberg’s role in the writing and assembling of *Naked Lunch* was so crucial, and because his table, from 50 years ago, inevitably reminds me of this one:

This list I myself made, when I first came across the manuscript of “Interzone,” here at Columbia, in the old Rare Book and Manuscript reading room (room 800 on the third floor, if my memory serves), way back in 1984. In fact, it was October 1984, and I was here having just that month started my doctoral work on Burroughs — which makes this, to the very month, my silver anniversary as a Burroughs scholar, and it is a great personal honour to be here, 25 years later, among such company to give this keynote.

So, if you will indulge me, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the three Burroughsians I first met 25 years ago and to whom I owe so much. Firstly, Barry Miles, whom I met here in New York in October ‘84, and whose scholarly and biographical research into Burroughs and the Beats provided wonderful work for myself and others to build on. Secondly, James Grauerholz, who did so much for Burroughs during the last twenty years of his life, and whom I first met out in Lawrence just before Thanksgiving 1984. James not only introduced me to William Burroughs and encouraged my research but has allowed me the extraordinary privilege of being able to edit Burroughs’ work. And finally, Ian MacFadyen, whom I met in London I think about a year later, and whose co-editing with me of [Naked Lunch@50: Anniversary Essays](#) is just the tip of a great iceberg of intensely shared Burroughsian passion. To Miles, James, Ian — a tip of my hat.

It seemed right to give Burroughs the last word, but I have to admit that I was looking in vain for a good punchline to tie it all up when, just before flying out here, a punchline found me... I only came across this a few days ago, on a French website: news that 2009 is not only the 50th anniversary of *Naked Lunch* but the golden jubilee of the [Institut Benway](#). Since the late 1950s

this thriving medical business has specialized in developing prosthetic organs, products truly worthy of the Benway name, and celebrated now in a series of international conferences.

The Institut Benway is, alas, a fictional company, founded in 2004, the brainchild of Mael Le Mée, a French plastic artist and writer. His Institut is, I would say, a true measure of Burroughs and his *Naked Lunch*. The book may never be in the "canon" or embraced by the academy, it may remain ambiguously on the margins of "serious" criticism, but it continues to inspire humour that cuts like a drunken doctor's scalpel. So, a tip of my hat to you, too, in the spirit of Doc Benway.

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