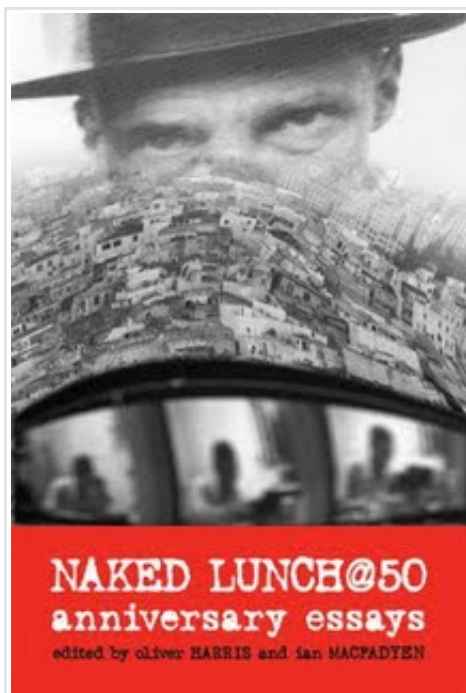


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Saturday, September 19, 2009

### Review: NAKED LUNCH @ 50 Anniversary Essays



NAKED LUNCH @ 50  
edited by Oliver Harris & Ian  
MacFadyen

Published by **Southern Illinois  
University Press**

Reviewed by Richard Livermore

Ever since Rimbaud, poetry and letters in general has been split in two - the bourgeois and the anti-bourgeois, by which I do not mean the anti-capitalist, but rather the militantly 'perverse' and 'disreputable' - or, if you like, the transgressive. The bourgeois sensibility, which promotes the ethical at the expense of freedom, turning an

essentially transrational phenomenon into a category of the rational, includes the politically-correct. Edmund White's recent biography of Rimbaud, for example, in which, on behalf of politically-correct values, he questions Enid Starkie's Freudian assertion that Rimbaud might have enjoyed being raped by some soldiers he encountered during one of his teenage sojourns falls, I believe, into the category of the politically-correct. The politically-correct is an attempt to hold the line, to stop discourse spilling over into the anarchic and finding in freedom values to live by. What Rimbaud sought in poetry and life was a complete disordering of the senses, an opening up of himself to all the possibilities and permutations within himself. Why should that not include enjoying being raped?! Whether or not he did enjoy it is another question entirely, of course. What we are talking about here are possibilities not actualities, which anyway cannot be known. The point is that the transgressive transgresses the politically-

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### About Me

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Chroma is a literary and arts journal. We come out twice a year, and publish the work of lesbian, gay, bi and trans writers and artists. The team includes: Shaun Levin (editor), Saradha Soobrayen (poetry editor), Deepna Sethi (publicity and marketing), Raffaele Teo (designer), Eric Karl Anderson (book reviews editor). We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of Arts Council England.

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correct, no less than it did bourgeois morality in Rimbaud's time. I once wrote an essay called "Rimbaud, Our Contemporary", in which I tried to show Rimbaud's relevance to our own times and if there is a post-Second World War writer who embodies the kind of values which Rimbaud the poet would have believed in, it is, I believe, William Burroughs. No writer seems to have gone further than Burroughs in the Rimbaudian quest to disorder the senses and this is what makes *The Naked Lunch* such a seminal work and one worthy of a book of the nature of *Naked Lunch @ 50*.

What is it that is so good about this book? Well to begin with, except here and there, it completely eschews an academic approach to its subject. What we have instead are personal documents registering the impact *Naked Lunch* has had on its contributors - many of whom are creative figures in their own right. And there is such a wide variety of these that it in fact becomes a pleasure to turn the pages of this book and go from one writer to the next, knowing that what you'll get is something different from what you've just had. What I would expect from a book of this nature is that it tells me things about its subject that I did not know before and therefore illuminates the complex, fragmentary text which is *The Naked Lunch* - not to mention the enigma of William Burroughs himself - and this expectation *Naked Lunch @ 50* fulfils in abundance. Nearly all the contributions are memorable encounters of some kind or other, whether they are discussing aspects of the novel's background - for example the racist South of the USA in which the lynching of 'niggas' was treated as an enjoyable family occasion, or Tangiers during a time of upheaval against French domination - or the impact the book has had on various cultural milieux from Germany to (gay) Apartheid South Africa, or simply the impact it had on individuals poets, writers and musicians, such as Barry Miles Jürgen Ploog and R.B. Morris, it is a fascinating compendium. There is no attempt to whitewash its subject or gloss over some of Burroughs more 'dubious' political positions, especially in connection with the pre-occupations of certain post-Colonial critics, but you are very much left to come to your own conclusions. After all, no-one can have the last word in such matters. Works of literature (& I do not use the upper-case L here), have a life of their own which invariably escapes any attempt to consign them to political boxes.

Those sections of the book which deal with Burroughs's heroin addiction, his impact on other creative figures, on certain cultural milieux of the early 60s, his implicit anarchist critique of contemporary society and its methods of bureaucratic and technological control, his relationship with the Beats and Brion Gyson, his position vis a vis "Queer Culture", the anti-colonial struggle, the racist South, or the War on Drugs, even the difference between the novel and the Cronenberg's heterosexualised (Why, oh why?) film based on it, make for fascinating reading. As do Ian MacFadyen's connecting "dossiers" which explain some of the more obscure references in the essays and place them in their wider contexts. Then, of course, there is Jeremy Reed's vivid poem at the very end of the book, Avedon's Burroughs Portrait, which adds a nice finishing touch to the book as a whole.





William S. Burroughs

Less satisfying - for me anyway - are the essays which attempt to place Burroughs in the critical context of the academic ghetto, arguing over whether Burroughs is a modernist or a post-modernist or even an amodernist, using jargon-terms such as paratext and intertextuality in attempts to define his precise literary or canonical status. Frankly, I couldn't care a less about such discussions; they mean nothing to me and the only purpose they serve is to reinforce my belief that academics need to get a life or go out rather more than they do. Such discussions have very little 'street-cred' in my opinion, and they are certainly not going to inspire anyone to erect barricades or mount any ramparts. Auden said that poetry makes nothing happen. That wasn't Burroughs's philosophy. He obviously wanted to make things happen by drawing our attention to the kind of world and society we live in. He was nothing less than an anarchist who believed: "Democracy is cancerous, and bureaus are its cancer. A bureau takes root in the state, turns malignant like the Narcotics Bureau, and grows and grows, always reproducing more of its own kind, until it chokes the host, if not controlled or excised. Bureaus cannot live without a host, being true parasitic organisms. (A cooperative on the other hand can live without the state. That is the road to follow. The building up of independent units who participate in the functioning of the unit. A bureau operates on opposite principle of inventing needs to justify its existence.)" His radical stance is very well stated by Theophile Aries in his own contribution: "His many arrests, searches at airports, the many routines enacted by cops, the many bureaucratic procedures he had to undergo— all these experiences he went through were intelligently used in *Naked Lunch* but applied to everyone, not only addicts. He extended police encroachments to all citizens, foreseeing that some day everyone might be considered a criminal under obscure, ever-changing laws." In 2009, we can see how prescient Burroughs was. Given all this, how anyone can make such a writer conform to their specialist concerns is beyond me. The *Naked Lunch* is not, and was never intended to be, a football to be kicked around from one academic to another. Burroughs was offering a radical critique of society as he saw it evolving in front of his eyes.

Another issue about Burroughs which is raised primarily by academics and touched upon here is the extent to which his 'resistance' has been co-opted and even to what extent he might have collaborated in this by setting up his own corporation to market his books. Well, to answer the second

question first, all I can say is that writers have to operate within the limitations of the society that they are thrown into. This is very distinct from their written work which expresses a certain imaginative vision that transcends these limitations. As I have said, a writer's work has a life of its own. Such criticisms of Burroughs remind me of those critics of Chomsky who call Chomsky a hypocrite because he owns shares in companies while calling himself an anarchist and writing against Corporate America and its wars. We all need to get by in this world. Engels, after all, was a businessman who supported Marx and, as Marx himself said, we make history, but not in circumstances of our choosing. This issue regarding the moral consistency between a writer's life and his or her work is a real red herring in literary biography. Writers write in part to transcend the limitations of their day to day lives, and their work should not be held to account because of the way those limitations impinge on the way they live. As for the criticism that his work has been co-opted by corporate capitalism, well, that point is arguable. Has the spirit of his work been so co-opted? I very much doubt it. But post-modernist academics seem to want to convince us of the idea that we cannot transcend this society we live in, that the imagination has no function but to reinforce the social, cultural and spiritual norms generated by this society. Well, that is a point of view which is far from being settled at the time I am writing.

As I have said, only a very small minority of contributors approach Burroughs from an academic perspective and the book takes them in its stride very well. They do not intrude or alter the general tone of the book, which is very definitely a non-academic one. It is on the whole a true celebration of Burroughs's book that really does live up to Michael Hrebeniak's 'blurb' on the back cover, which talks of "a dynamic assembly of writing forms." and describes it "as a whole new critical form." It is one of those rare occasions when I agree with the blurb, and the editors, Oliver Harris and Ian MacFadyen, are to be congratulated for having the vision to produce such a book.

Richard Livermore was born in 1944. 6 weeks later, his father was killed in a bombing-raid over London and, not long after that, his mother was sectioned. He grew up in homes and boarding-schools, which he left at 15 to join the army. 6 months later, he was discharged and over the next few years went from job to job or was unemployed until in 1974 he went to Newbattle Abbey College and from there to Edinburgh University to study English Literature and Philosophy. On leaving university, he was largely unemployed until in 1985 he went to teach English in Spain. He returned in 1990 and did various cleaning jobs until his recent retirement.

He has had many poems published in magazines - both on-line and off - and numerous collections in book-form by various publishers (Lothlorien, Diehard, Chanticleer). His most recent collection is his "Selected Poems" published by Chanticleer.

At the moment Richard Livermore is a gentleman of leisure at the expense of the state and Her Majesty's Government.

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