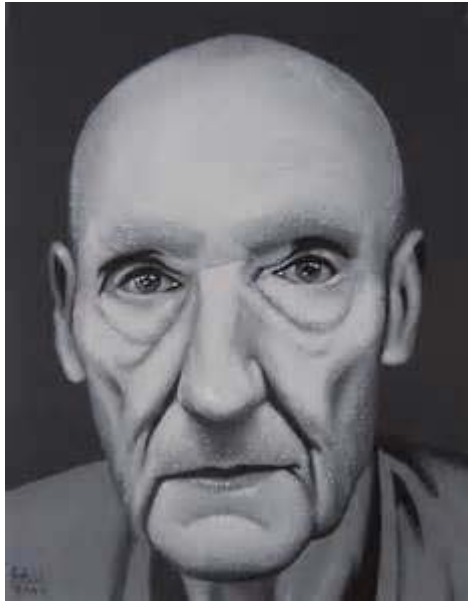


REVIEW

Naked Lunch (1959)



William Burroughs

(1914-1997)

“Naked Lunch belongs to that very large category of books, from Macpherson’s *Ossian* to *Peyton Place*, whose interest lies not in their own qualities but in the reception given to them in their own time. In itself, *Naked Lunch* is of very small significance. It consists of a prolonged scream of hatred and disgust, an effort to keep the reader’s nose down in the mud for 250 pages. Before reading it I had heard it described as pornography, but this is not the case. The objects of pornographic writing is to flood the reader’s mind with lust, and lust is at any rate a positive thing to the extent that none of us would exist without it. A pornographic novel is, in however backhanded a way, on the side of something describable as life. *Naked Lunch*, by contrast, is unreservedly on the side of death. It seeks to flood the reader’s mind not with images of sexual desire but with images of pain, illness, cruelty and corruption.

This is not in fact a very difficult thing to do, since all that is necessary is to brood on everything capable of arousing disgust and revulsion, let the images well up, and dash them down onto the paper. A book like *Naked Lunch* requires far less talent in the writer, and for that matter less intelligence in the reader than the humblest magazine story or circulating-library novel. From the literary point of view, it is the merest trash, not worth a second glance.

What is worth a glance, however, is the respectful attitude that some well-known writers and critics have shown towards it. Some of the tributes on the wrapper are entirely routine and unsurprising; to find Norman Mailer, for instance, solemnly declaring that this is ‘a book of beauty, great difficulty, and maniacally exquisite insight,’ will startle no one, since Mailer has in recent years worked himself round to a position which makes it impossible for him to apply normal values to literature. Kerouac’s confident invoking of Swift, Rabelais and Sterne will also pass without comment, since he has given no indication that he knows these writers except as names to be bandied about. E. S. Seldon, on the other hand, a name not previously known to me but evidently well-known enough to be quoted in a blurb, seems to write like a literate man, and his verdict that ‘Burroughs is a superb writer, and *Naked Lunch* a novel of revolt in the

best late-modern sense,' pulls one up. It sounds, on the surface at any rate, as if it ought to mean something....

What in fact do we understand by a 'novel of revolt' in 'the best late-modern sense'? To begin with, such a book would have to belong to the anti-art movement. Secondly, it would have to deal with characters whose lives are largely devoted to escaping from normal day-to-day living, with its pleasures and responsibilities, and achieving, with the aid of drugs and other stimuli, a more or less permanent state of abnormality, where the monstrous becomes the habitual. Thirdly, it would have to be written out of a mood of disgust and hostility. Fourthly, it would have to be urban in atmosphere, saturated with the details of megalopolis. All these tendencies can be found in writers who were well under way by 1910—in Alfred Jarry, for example. After 1918 the method was very quickly brought to full development, and the only way of carrying it any further was to increase the element of nausea.

The impulse behind anti-art, from Dada manifestos to Action Painting, has always been two-fold. Part of the thrust was towards truthfulness and a closer grip on reality. Conventional art, which always admitted a degree of stylization, tended to put reality at a distance, whereas (it was claimed) anti-art had the immediacy of something actually happening; it was not 'culture.' Naturally this was closely allied with the second objective, which was to shock and startle, to insult, to open people's eyes by affronting them. What Mr. Seldon would call 'late-modern' is characterized by nothing new except that it digs deeper for its mud, and crushes out more ruthlessly any spark of lyricism or positiveness. Where genuine imaginative writing increases the sensitiveness of the minds exposed to it, leading them on to a wider and deeper range of feelings, writing of this kind makes the mind blunt and callow. Anyone who really accepted its values, as opposed to pretending to accept them as part of some modish parade, would be the enemy not only of art but of the human race....

The only writer of any talent of whom Burroughs occasionally manages to remind one is the Marquis de Sade; but if one turns to the pages of de Sade after *Naked Lunch* the resemblance soon fades, since Sade, however degenerate he can be at times, has always some saving wit and irony. Burroughs takes himself with a complete, owlish seriousness; indeed, in his opening section he seems, as far as one can make out through the pea-soup fog of his prose, to be offering the book as some kind of tract against drug addiction. 'The junk virus is public health problem number one of the world to-day. Since *Naked Lunch* treats this health problem, it is necessarily brutal, obscene and disgusting. Sickness is often repulsive details not for weak stomachs.' The claim is, of course, balderdash, since the only effect of the flood of writing which takes the junkie or hipster as its central theme is to romanticize those unfortunates, as Byron and the 'Byronists' romanticized a certain kind of romantic self-pity and caused it to spread throughout the world.

Altogether, *Naked Lunch* offers a very interesting field for speculation, both pathological and sociological. No lover of medical text-books on deformity should miss it. The rest of us, however, can afford to spend our six dollars on something else."

John Wain
Review of *Naked Lunch*
The Critic as Artist: Essays on Books 1920-1970
ed. Gilbert A. Harrison
(1962; Liveright 1972) 351-53, 356-57