

– Synchronicity –

On October 5 1982, whilst I was preparing for an interview for the most senior position of my career, William Seward Burroughs entered a Liverpool that was still tense after the Toxteth riots. A small promotion tucked away in the *Echo* was the only public announcement:

A MAN OF INFLUENCE

Waiting for the man? William Burroughs, divine mentor, legend etc., whose books have influenced people like Lou Reed, Patti Smith, David Bowie and many others comes to Liverpool tonight for a rare reading of his works. Time 7-30pm. Be there early or the cult following will get all the seats.

Geoff Ward, a young university lecturer in English Literature, was there to welcome his hero at Lime Street Station with a gift of a bottle of vodka. Burroughs was polite but there was no small talk. Ensnared in the Adelphi Hotel, Burroughs idly turned the television on and sat immersed in a documentary on lemurs. His penumbral presence sucked the oxygen from the room and created an echo chamber. He had fallen out of the world into himself and was almost

invisible, dematerialised but for the cold-blooded glow of his eyes. As the afternoon dragged on, an aromatic whiff of weed floated down the long, empty second-floor corridor. His large entourage including one man making kerpow noises with an imitation gun, ignored the insistent knocking on the door by a chambermaid dressed in full burlesque attire.

That evening Burroughs did a signing at the Atticus bookshop on Hardman Street. He was courteous and eager to socialise. A scally handed him a Tarzan comic, which he autographed without blinking an eye. He complimented the management on a terrific display that included issue 4/5 of *Re/Search* magazine in which he featured on the front cover. Inside was an article in which he talked about his advanced ideas about the social control process. He then walked over to the Conference Hotel accompanied by James Grauerholz, John Giorno of Dial-a-Poem fame, ex-Warhol disciple Victor Bockris and Roger Ely, one of the organisers with Genesis P-Orridge of the Final Academy, a series of events featuring Burroughs that had taken place at the Ritzy Cinema in Brixton and the Hacienda Club in Manchester.

The deliberately chosen cheap and neutral venue situated on Mount Pleasant had recently hosted the Liverpool finals of the Miss Caribbean contest. About a hundred and fifty arty punks sat in silent anticipation. Ward, who had described the events of the day to me, plucked up courage to ask Burroughs what he felt

about dying, to which the tortured response had come: ‘Well it’s a step in the right direction’.

The ‘happening’ began with poetry readings by Adrian Henri of the Liverpool Scene, Geoff Ward and Jeff Nuttall, one of the first Englishmen to champion Burroughs in *My Own Mag* in the sixties. These understated, low-key British performances were followed by a full-on bellowing rendition of ‘Just Say No to Family Values’ by the American performance poet John Giorno.

Then Burroughs got up. ‘Can you all hear me?’ he drawled in his funereal voice. He began by reading extracts from his new book, *The Place of Dead Roads*. He explained that a ‘Johnson’ was a harmless person who kept his word and honoured his obligations, minded his own business and would not stand by to watch innocent people die. He was the polar opposite of a ‘Shit’ – a sanctimonious hypocrite who craved power and tried to enforce his harmful viewpoint on others. Shits comprised about one fifth of the American population and were responsible for all that was wrong in the world. He next introduced his protagonist, the gunslinging gay junky Kim Carsons whose mission was to organise the Johnson family into a worldwide space programme. Carsons was a morbid, slimy youth of unwholesome proclivities with an insatiable appetite for the extreme and the sensational who adored ectoplasm and crystal balls. He stank like a polecat and wallowed in abomination.

Burroughs next launched into a folkloric text related to his experiences in the Lexington Narcotics Hospital. The ‘do rights’ were sycophantic inmates who had acquired good bedside manners and who pretended they had made their peace with Jesus and the star-spangled banner in a cynical attempt to squeeze more dope from their gullible doctors.

He concluded the reading with an extract from ‘Twilights Last Gleamings’, a story he had written together with his childhood friend Kells Elvins, in which the first mention of Doctor Benway appears:

Dr. Benway, ships doctor, drunkenly added two inches to a four-inch incision with one stroke of his scalpel.

‘Perhaps the appendix is already out doctor?’ The nurse said. Appearing dubiously over his shoulder, ‘I saw a little scar.’

‘The appendix already out!’

‘I’m taking the appendix out!’

‘What do you think I’m doing here?!’

‘Perhaps the appendix is on the left side doctor that happens sometimes you know!’

‘Stop breathing down my neck I’m coming to that.’

‘Don’t you think I know where an appendix is?’

‘I studied appendectomy in 1904 at Harvard.’

Burroughs’ performance was animated, polished and wickedly humorous despite the fact he had been smoking dope all day and drinking red wine and vodka since late afternoon. He had travelled sideways

into myth and backwards into history to reveal contemporary phantoms. He released an atom-deep sensation of otherworldliness on a Liverpool scene.

On the same day Burroughs arrived in Liverpool for the first and only time, I was successfully appointed to the post of Consultant Neurologist to the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases, Queen Square and University College Hospital in London. I had toed the line, avoided making powerful enemies and had endeavoured to develop a dignified uniformity with my fellow man. Despite my retiring and solitary nature, a flair for clinical research had carried me home. I also had a wife and two small children that helped to falsely reassure the interview panel that I was unlikely to be a deviant or subversive. I was relieved not to have lost out to opponents that I considered less deserving, yet the burden of responsibility that came with this new office filled me with fear. I had now joined the Establishment and would find it much harder to challenge authority.

William Burroughs had been my dark angel and cultural guru since our intersection at medical school and Liverpool was the eternal city of my childhood that I could never leave behind. The events of October 5, 1982, were a concatenation and became an expression of a deeper intuitive order.

As I had gone through my training I had learned to treat the person not the disease. William Osler's words 'Ask not what disease the person has but rather

what person the disease has' had become my *modus operandi*. I had come to understand the importance of the nuanced explanation, the calm gesture and the reassuring smile. I had observed my patients' varied responses to their treatment and grasped the mystery of the therapeutic process.

I tried as best I could to enter into my patients' mode of thought. I avoided at all costs saying to them, 'I understand how you feel'. Many of my decisions were now based on informed guesses, hunches and imaginings; exploratory acts motivated by a passion to do good and quite independent of scientific knowledge. Unconscious wisdom, know-how and rules of thumb all played a part in my doctoring. I looked at the wider picture and when I felt it appropriate I self-experimented to obtain answers. I did my best to relieve suffering and preserve health but most of all I wanted to find new cures.

From now on, William Burroughs would be my guiding lamp. He was Dr Henry Jekyll warning me about hubris, the power of imagery and the dangers of regulation. I needed to verify, refute and establish the validity of everything I did in relation to the sour smell of nervous disease. Every effect had its cause and there was no such thing as a coincidence. There was no turning back. I was hooked on unreality.