

# William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg

Interviewed by Daniel Ritkes



From On The Bus )  
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William S. Burroughs is a writer of experimental novels that evoke, in deliberately disordered prose, a nightmarish, sometimes humorous world. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1914, Burroughs graduated from Harvard in 1936 and continued to study there in archaeology and ethnology until, tiring of the academic world, he began a wide range of jobs — advertising writer, reporter, private detective, and pest exterminator. His most recent work includes *Cities of the Red Night* and *The Place of Dead Roads*.

When his novel *Naked Lunch* was published by Grove Press in 1959, *Newsweek* stated, "*Naked Lunch* comes off the presses carrying a heavier burden of literary laudations than any piece of fiction since *Ulysses*." Norman Mailer has said that Burroughs is "the only American novelist living today who may conceivably be possessed of genius." Mr. Burroughs divides his time between New York City and Lawrence, Kansas.

Allen Ginsberg was born in 1926 in Newark, New Jersey, a son of Naomi and lyric poet Louis Ginsberg.

In 1956 he published his poem, "Howl," which overcame censorship trials to become one of the most widely read poems of the century, translated into more than twenty-two languages.

Crowned Prague May King in 1965, then expelled by Czech police, and simultaneously placed on the FBI's Dangerous Security List, Ginsberg has in

recent years traveled to and taught in the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe, receiving Yugoslavia's Struga Poetry Festival "Golden Wreath" in 1986. His most recent books are *Collected Poems*, published in 1985 by Harper & Row, *White Shroud: Poems 1980-1985*, and *The Annotated Howl*, published in 1987 by Harper & Row.

Mr. Ginsberg lives on New York's Lower East Side.

On July 15, 1987, Daniel Ritkes, visited the two writers and had the following conversation, which focused primarily on the subject of writing.

Ritkes: You and Allen have had a long association over the years. What influences can you see as a result of your association with Allen upon your own writing?

Burroughs: He's made suggestions on my writing, but there is no direct influence because we do very different things. He's been very helpful in getting things published in the first place. It isn't a clear literary influence at all because we're not doing at all the same things.

Ritkes: How do you start your writing?

Burroughs: You can start from anywhere. Some of it comes from dreams, sometimes I get an idea from something I've read. All the actual themes are old anyway. How many times have we had "Romeo and Juliet" served up to us? Young lovers. We've

had *Camille* served up to us so many times.

Ritkes: *You mentioned dreams as one source of your material. Is it a source you can rely on for characters, etc.?*

Burroughs: You can't rely on it. It's not predictable, but it is a source. Dreams, newspapers, magazines, other writers, all kinds of things. I keep a dream journal in which I enter the date and the dream, and occasionally I get characters or situations from it.

Ritkes: *Do you try to recreate the dream?*

Burroughs: Well, no. A dream gives you an idea sometimes and then you just sit down and write it. Clear examples like in *Cities in the Red Night*. I had a dream about a cholera epidemic in Africa. And then when I sat down to

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— Burroughs

write, it just flowed right out. I had the section about the health officer which is very much in the style of Graham Greene, as an example.

Ritkes: *What do you think the role of the unconscious is in your writing?*

Burroughs: "Unconscious" is a meaningless word. To me, if something's totally unconscious you wouldn't be conscious of it at all, or partially conscious. Since dreams are unpredictable you can't predict what you're going to dream.

Ritkes: *What about the use of the unconscious while you're awake.*

Burroughs: As I say, I object to the use of the word "unconscious." It's exactly the same process. The dream process goes on all the time. Except when you're awake, you aren't aware of it, you can't be too aware of it because it would interfere with your practical, mundane

occupations... like crossing the street, things like that.

Ritkes: *Do you think there is a connection between consciousness and writing?*

Burroughs: Of course! What is writing but the expression of various conscious perceptions! Any writer should be conscious of his surroundings. He never knows where he's going to see a set or a character. Maybe something he passes on the street. You say, well, he'll do for this part, or a shop you pass, that will do for a set and so on.

Ritkes: *Are there things you do to develop your perception?*

Burroughs: I just explained it. Naturally, as you walk around, you keep your eyes open both as to what is in front of you and what's to the side, and what's

ahead and all that is part of the raw material of writing.

Ritkes: *One can fall into the habit of blocking things out, not seeing.*

Burroughs: That's all right, if you're not interested; but if you're a writer, it's your job to get interested in seeing things.

Ritkes: *The use of imagery in your novels is very much like sequences in many poems. I was just wondering why you don't write poetry, or if you do.*

Burroughs: As soon as you get away from strict metric conventions, there isn't any difference between prose and poetry. As I've said so often, poets are simply lazy prose writers. They just write a few little sentences and call it a poem instead of writing a novel or a short story.

Ritkes: *Naked Lunch is like a long poem.*

Burroughs: Well, yes, you could see it

that way, but it is prose. Conrad writes very poetic prose, but it is prose!

Ritkes: *Do you ever have the desire to write about social issues?*

Burroughs: No—politics and social issues just don't interest me. Opinion is one thing, I put it into essays and that's enough. There are certain things that you express in essays, there's no use putting them in novel form. At least not for me. Now some people, of course, some writers have done just that. They make novels out of social issues. Sinclair Lewis did a lot of that with *Aerosmith* and *Elmer Gantry*, and so on. A lot of writers do. But it's not been anything that has interested me.

Ritkes: *You don't feel any particular responsibility to doing that?*

Burroughs: No, I don't feel any responsibility of that nature at all. The only responsibility I feel is doing the best job of writing that I can on whatever I am writing.

Ritkes: *What about artists and writers, do you think generally that they have any duty to address social issues?*

Burroughs: None whatever. Some very great writers never address any social issues. Look at Becket. Genet didn't address many social issues, although he was sort of a liberal. Conrad is a very apolitical writer. Doesn't address social issues at all.

Ritkes: *Well, do you think that having a particular message to deliver can detrimentally affect one's work?*

Burroughs: It can very definitely. There is a line between propaganda and writing, and when it gets too far in the area of propaganda, it may be good propaganda but it is not good writing. The same way with painting. I mean, there's mural painting, and women rolling back their sleeves to attack the harvest, and all that kind of communist

murals, well, as far as painting goes, it's kitsch.

Ritkes: *It's what?*

Burroughs: K-i-t-s-c-h. Junk! It does its job because it's a social message. It has nothing to do with writing, with art. It's coming from a message point-of-view, and a novel with a message is almost always a bad novel.

Ritkes: *Do you read any poetry? Or do you strictly limit yourself to novels?*

Burroughs: Of course, I read poetry. Rimbaud, Tennyson, Keats, Shelley, all the classical poets. [There is a knock at the door. Allen Ginsberg enters.] Oh, it's you.

Ritkes: *I wanted to ask you [addressed to Ginsberg] if your writing has been influenced by Bill and vice versa.*

Ginsberg: Oh, yes, definitely.

Ritkes: *In what way?*

Ginsberg: Well, first, ideas. Bill seems to jump the gun on ideas and has a kind of intuitive and prophetic intelligence, as in the opening page of *Nova Express*, which is in a sense a parody of present Ollie North hearings: [reads from *Nova Express*]:

"Listen all you boards, syndicates and governments of the earth. And you powers behind what filth deals consummated in what lavatory to take what is not yours. To sell ground from unborn feet forever—

Ritkes: *I was asking Bill how a writer conveys ideas, as opposed to perceptions.*

Ginsberg: What is there to write from? Imperception means vague, abstract writing, generalizations, and basic comprehensibility... a smoke screen or smog over the whole scene. Whereas a writer writes clearly and says what he actually thinks, and he makes use of it as deeper thinking in terms of dreams and subliminal information. That figures into the sentence and so gives more of a

spectrum.

Ritkes: *What about the effort to deal with particular issues?*

Ginsberg: There's no way of dealing with it other than to say I read the paper, and this is what the paper says. What you were doing while you were reading the paper. What sounds you heard while you were reading the paper. And what you thought when you read the paper.

Burroughs: Well, no, I don't feel any obligation to deal necessarily with social issues.

Ginsberg: A writer can, like Ed Sanders, by doing investigation.

Burroughs: Well, as I was saying, it's a job for an investigative reporter. What exactly is going on, what [former CIA Chief William] Colby was doing, etc.

Ginsberg: Bill dealt directly with a social issue in which he had a direct, bodily experience, which is the junk problem and the corruption of the junk police. That's something he's had direct experience with, not something he saw on television or read in papers. Because the material you see on television in twenty or thirty years will be supplemented by the whole story so there is no point in writing a big novel with all the twists and turns of a book. So what you do is fictionally like Conrad with "Secret Agent." Or Dostoevsky with *The Possessed* deals with a Petroshevsky Circle, which was a revolutionary circle. But, then, he was in the middle of them, and he was sent to Siberia with them. So there is a possibility of dealing direct with first-hand experience.

Burroughs: Yes, yes....But I don't see where there is any obligation. Look at Becket. He is one of the greatest modern

writers and he never gets anywhere near politics. Neither did Joyce.

Ritkes: *To change the subject for a minute, I was asking Bill about the role of dreams in his writing. In some ways dream sequences run through his work.*

Ginsberg: Lately, particularly, I have a series of ten poems based on complete dreams, beginning, middle and end.

Ritkes: *Have you thought about arranging them in prose fashion?*

Ginsberg: No. But they form little short stories. What I've gotten, too, is a long line of about 16 syllables that runs from one margin, the left hand margin, to the right hand margin, and could be seen as blocks of prose, paragraphed by dropping in the middle half a line where there's a new subject coming up or a scene change. But I don't have that kind of consistent "sitzfleisch" that Bill has—to sit down and write consecutively hour upon hour upon hour consistently day after day.

Burroughs: A very useful, almost essential ability for a writer is to be able to sit in solitude for many hours in front of a typewriter.

Ritkes: *Do you agree with Bill that poets are lazy novelists?*

Ginsberg: Yup! [all laugh] Completely!

Burroughs: As soon as you get away from what we might call metric conventions, then what is the difference between prose and poetry? Just look at that "prose there....[points to Conrad's *The Nigger of Narcisus*].

Ginsberg: [reading page 47 of the Signet New American Library edition] "...to hasten the retreat of departing light by his very presence, the setting sun dipped sharply, as though fleeing before our nigger; a black mist emanating, a subtle

*Howl is just an imitation of Kerouac's prose style, actually.*  
— Ginsberg

and dismal influence; something cold and gloomy that floated out and settled on all the faces like a mourning veil. The circle broke up. The joy of laughter dying on stiffened lips. There was not a smile left among the whole ship's company. Not a word was spoken." In poetry there might be a slightly stronger rhythmic pulsation or cadence.

Burroughs: Yeah, but about the mists that emanates from him. When they go and see him, they always come away having left a little or their vitality behind them. He's sucking this in to try and hang on to Louie. He calls this the headwinds.

Ritkes: *Bill, you could come out with a whole series of books of poetry....*

Burroughs: No, there is no need for me to do that.

Ginsberg: The end of *Naked Lunch* has some of the layout of a prose-poem. A sort of disintegrated or discontinuous excerpt from previous sentences and key phrases that all together make a kind of mosaic of the entire book.

Ritkes: *To me, the feeling I got is just like an intense poem.*

Ginsberg: Bill's writing was similar to Rimbaud in intensity of imagery and thickness of imagery, and Kerouac always used to say that it was similar to poetry and intensity in thickness of the texture. Kerouac always used to say you guys call yourself poets, but I write long poems, novel-length poems, epics, and it's just that my verse line is a long paragraph, and you guys are proud about your five-word lines. But I'm really a poet, I just have a longer breath, and more patience and more gambling, more impulse, more cadence that goes on and on and on. And *Howl* is just an imitation of Kerouac's prose style, actually.

Burroughs: Allen, have you read *Lord Jim*?

Ginsberg: I did many years ago, about 30 years ago.

Burroughs: This is one of the most classical, old themes. Courage lost, courage regained. Theme of innumerable movies. It's one of the best on the theme, of course, as *Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*. Courage lost, courage regained. There is no exaltation equal to it, and it is almost always fatal.

Ritkes: *Are you always able to begin your writing with a specific theme and develop it and have a book?*

Burroughs: No, no, no, it just doesn't work that way. For one thing, I have a lot left over from any novel that I've written, and I look through there and look for the next one. There isn't any set procedure at all.

Ginsberg: There are general themes, though, motifs. Like at one point or another, deconditioning the language, with the corollary of language as a virus invading its human hose and is dominating its thoughts, feelings, and sensory perceptions. And that goes through *Nova Express*, *Ticket That Exploded*, and *Soft Machine*. Also, junk as a paradigm for any other addiction, including political power or financial power....and extending that to language as an addiction, and the detoxification from language, power, or money as similar in convulsive fury as detoxification from junk. Those have been constant themes all the way through, subsumed under the larger theme of escaping time through space.

Ritkes: *Do you feel there is any sort of school of performance or any sort of style emerging or should emerge?*

Burroughs: I would never use the word "should." No, I don't see any particularly, do you, Allen?

Ginsberg: Well, certain particulars. Enunciation. The enunciation has got to be clear. There is a tendency among very

intelligent writers to emphasize the consonants and bite the consequents, so that you actually hear the end of a word before the beginning of another word, so its' heard clearly over the large scale sound systems. And there is also a tendency among people who have some musical ear to appreciate the vowels, savor the vowels as they speak to make the vowels somewhat ominous or musical.

**Burroughs:** Many good writers don't have experience in reading and do not perform well, because they're simply not used to performing and carrying across to an audience. They don't seem to realize you simply don't just get up there and read and that's a performance. Only a small percentage of my work is suitable for reading.

**Ginsberg:** Different voices.

**Burroughs:** But I just can't pick up one of my books and start reading from it and expect anybody to be interested.

**Ginsberg:** As distinct from Christopher Ide, a poet, who is only twenty, who is a good poet but reads very poorly. The reason is he doesn't like to draw attention to himself, so he tends to read very fast. You can't actually hear the end of the word and sometimes can't understand what he's saying.

**Burroughs:** You have to read very slowly. Slowly, and make every word distinct.

Otherwise, it just doesn't come across. Someone can read a beautiful poem but no one will get it.

**Ginsberg:** If you hear Pound, if you hear Basil Bunting, if you hear H.D., what's really amazing in their enunciation is the clarity of their diction. A sort of old school of really clear pronunciation. It almost sounds half American, half

English. Like an old school marm on the porch. Very deliberate.

**Ritkes:** *Exra Pound was an incredible reader. The sound of his voice reminds me of W.C. Fields.*

**Ginsberg:** Very much so. Bill, I think, takes something of Fields in his performance style.

**Burroughs:** Oh yes. Something of Fields, something of Groucho Marx.

**Ritkes:** *Consciously done?*

**Burroughs:** Well, of course.

**Ginsberg:** Kerouac did that—many passages of Kerouac are parodies of Fieldsion evasiveness, the drunkard's evasiveness.

**Ritkes:** *Poetry can suffer if you can't perform it.*

**Ginsberg:** Your poetry doesn't suffer, your listeners—

**Burroughs:** Your listeners suffer! [laughs] You fail to get it across.

**Ritkes:** *Allen, what is the source of your material? Do you keep a journal?*

**Ginsberg:** I keep a journal and anything I think of that seems worth writing, I write down.

**Burroughs:** My experience also. I think of something and then I write it down.

**Ginsberg:** If you sit for several hours a day you'll be thinking of things while you're writing.

**Burroughs:**

That's true.

**Ritkes:** *Do you set aside a certain amount of time each day to do*

*this?*

**Ginsberg:** I never have enough time. I wish I could. But I don't. The only think I set time aside for is to brush and floss my teeth.

**Burroughs:** Get a water pick!

**Ginsberg:** I floss and use a water pick.

**Burroughs:** I wash my mouth out with hot salt water, which is the best

mouthwash. Forget Listerine, Lavioris and all that shit!

**Ritkes:** *I was asking Bill about the use of the unconscious, a term to which he objects....*

**Burroughs:** I object entirely, because if it's unconscious, how could you use it? [laughs] It isn't unconscious, it's a process that's really going on all the time. Like the dream process is going on all the time. You just tap into it to use it, that's all.

**Ritkes:** *Is there anything you do to help tap into it?*

**Burroughs:** No really. It happens or it doesn't.... Writers habitually watch what they're thinking. That's their job...

**Ginsberg:** ...a surveillance of what you're thinking.

**Ritkes:** *But if it doesn't happen ....*

**Ginsberg:** You're always thinking. It's just a question of do you wake up and watch what you're thinking. do you notice what you notice?

**Burroughs:** You're always doing it.

**Ginsberg:** People walk along thinking but they're not writers, say, or painters, so they see things but there's no function for them to retain it or remember it or note it down or put it into a notebook or make a special mental note to write it down. So it passes just like a dream will pass if you don't write it down; it will be forgotten. Whereas if you bend your effort to writing it down with a surveillance of your dreams in the morning and late at night, then you will write it down. So you could say if it passes it goes into your unconscious.

**Ritkes:** *But if your life is plagued with the mundane necessities....*

**Ginsberg:** You don't have time to do it. You loose your own attention to your mind.

**Burroughs:** The point is that that's a writer's job to do it! His mundane job to pay attention to that area. Well now, you can't always do it, you've got other

things to do. but there's no reason why a trip downtown, to the bank, or laundry can't be productive if you notice what's going on. But that's the writer's job. He develops that segment of observation.

**Ginsberg:** It's almost like a sixth sense. A roofer will notice roofs. Other people might not even notice the roof. It doesn't mean anything to them. People will notice their own thoughts but it doesn't mean anything to them. They have no use for them, so there's no function, so they just don't remember.

**Ritkes:** *So once you've made the observation....*

**Ginsberg:** ...write it down. Sometimes it turns out to be long coherent passages, sometimes they turn out to be connected to other pieces you've done.

**Burroughs:** Sometimes it will be productive and sometimes it won't.

**Ginsberg:** Then you piece it together over a period of time. If you're writing a novel or extended poem, you can piece it together, notes taken from one day's clash to another day's clash, and connecting them, isolating a few "thinks" and writing them down, three lines, ten lines. Like I wanted to write a poem about Trumpa's cremation, and I noticed one thing and I noticed another, so I sat down and wrote them chronologically as I remembered.

**Ritkes:** Without the idea that this was going to be a poem.

**Ginsberg:** Not exactly. When I started, I noticed this, I noticed that. About the third line I was isolating a poetry line. I got the idea, "Oh, this is a good gimmick. All I have to keep saying I noticed and what's the next thing I noticed. Then type it up. Sometimes it looks good, sometimes it doesn't look good. It's very simple. It's like rolling off a log! Why write things down, why notice them? As Bill was saying, that's your job.

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— Burroughs

it has an effect on their whole being and on their whole metabolism and what they write. That doesn't mean that the poem came from opium at all.

Ginsberg: It's probably his capacity for very sharp, dreamlike visual images: "All in a hot and copper sky" ["The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner"], the interior pictures that opium produces. At least at a certain stage in the beginning, but I don't think later on you get very much of that—

Ritkes: *I guess some drugs just wear your system out faster, but heroin won't.*

Ginsberg: Amphetamines will wear your system out. They burn up too much energy at one time. You can live to a ripe old age on opiates.

Ritkes: *Do you think that opiates and drugs in general enhance writing?*

Burroughs: No, not necessarily. Opiates are contraindicated since, at a certain point, they are making you less aware. I find that cannabis is very helpful for writing, very helpful indeed.

Ritkes: *Why is that?*

Burroughs: Because it stimulates the whole visual process, the whole associational and visual process. You can't set up a categorical proposition that opiates are contraindicated, but I object very much to the idea of saying that this was done "on drugs." That gives one the idea that someone can take a drug and suddenly write poetry. Well, this is nonsense.

Ritkes: *Grass can bring images to mind that wouldn't otherwise have been available.*

Burroughs: Well, obviously! That's why it's so useful to a writer.

Ginsberg: Kerouac wrote a few books using grass, not all, though. They

comprised a minority of his writing. For *Doctor Sax* he used grass.

Burroughs: I find it useful.

Ritkes: *What about alcohol?*

Burroughs: I find it's quite useless for writing. Very very few writers ever write when they're drinking. Very few. I've never known any. Now look, Hemingway, he was a heavy drinker; he got up in the morning to do his writing and only when he was through with his writing for the day did he drink. I've never known anyone who wrote when they were drunk. Although I understand that Hart Crane may have done so, but it's very rare. I've asked lots of people. Mary McCarthy, who said "No, I write afterwards, or before..." but not while they're drinking. At all.

Ritkes: [Edgar Allen] Poe supposedly wrote on opium. *Can you maintain controlled writing on opiates?*

Burroughs: There's no difficulty maintaining control under opiates. For God's sake, there's nothing contraindicative to control. For example, one of the great surgeons, Dr. Halstead, was a life-long opiate addict. He was operating under the influence of opium with great efficiency. I would much rather see a doctor operating under the influence of opium than under the influence of cannabis. there's nothing that prevents someone from performing the most precise operations under the influence of opiates.

Ritkes: *Was Naked Lunch written under the influence of heroin?*

Burroughs: Not at all. None of it. I was completely off [of heroin]. A lot of it was under the influence of cannabis, but none of it under heroin.

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home. For someone who's busy, as I am, you devise methods of making notations during the day on a regular basis.

Burroughs: Well, you're a full time writer so you're not busy with another profession as William Carlos Williams was busy being a doctor.

Ginsberg: Williams used to write notes down on his prescription pads. I saw some. He always had a little pad on his side where he'd note a random thought about a patient, or coming in from his garden, between getting his breakfast and going to the hospital where he worked.

Burroughs: Wordsworth's "a powerful emotion recollected in tranquility."

Ginsberg: So you take time to lay down on the couch and think things through and then get up and write. Meditation

relates to it. But I wouldn't depend on meditation for my poetry, because thoughts can come any time.

Burroughs: I just wonder about Wordsworth and Lucy. Wasn't he an old child

molester? "I'll give you a crown, deary, and don't tell nobody," [mimics voice, laughs]. Of course, Lucy was great. He wrote some absolute slop as well.

Ritkes: *Did [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge write any part of "[The Rhyme of the] Ancient Mariner" on opium?*

Burroughs: He probably was always addicted to opium.... It isn't writing something on opium, it's the fact that he was addicted to opium and was writing.

Ritkes: *Do you think opium had some effect on his writing?*

Burroughs: Obviously, it had an effect on everything. Someone's taking opium,

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— Burroughs

Burroughs: Gertrude Stein said the greatest misfortune anyone can have is not to have a trade, a profession. And that's what writers do professionally.

Ritkes: *Many poets have to work full-time jobs. T.S. Elliot said that [William] Blake was lucky to have a mundane job as a printer where he didn't have to think that much.*

Ginsberg: Henry the Eighth had time to take off and write lyrics. He wrote very good lyrics, and songs, too. Anybody can do it if you devise a method for not being too ambitious, but carrying a notebook and writing down your instant thoughts if you have thoughts vivid enough to interest you—even in the middle of a court trial.

Burroughs: I mentioned that George Crabb used to keep a dream diary. I've not seen it. He said I would miss many a good hit if I

didn't have my diary. He was an opium addict who became addicted at the age of forty. For shingles. It's a very painful variation of

herpes. He was addicted to the end of his life, and he lived to be ninety. For the next 50 years he was an opium addict. So much for this idea that addicts die miserably....misinformation by the narcotics department....always putting out that "dada" kills.

Ginsberg: In the case of a busy business man like Wallace Stevens, he would think and write on his way walking to and from work at Hartford Life Insurance Company. He'd write a few things down and when he got to the office he would have his secretary type it and maybe he'd look it over when he got

