

Measures of Hanging

Cities of the Red Night is a book of limited but, for its own happy few, intense appeal. Opium addicts who are sexually aroused by witnessing and/or enacting garroting and hangings will find *Cities* a veritable gallows of delight. Admittedly, female-hanging buffs and those of the heterosexual persuasion may feel cheated of their due, for the Muse of Strangulation—"Ix Tab" William S. Burroughs calls her in his invocation—seems not to extend her patronage to the fair sex. Guided by Ix Tab, a jealous goddess, Mr. Burroughs has eliminated from his book everything incidental to the central task of spinning and respinning the same yarn—characterization, wit, stylistic graces, anything that might detract from the erotic fascination of death by hanging. Even the romance of heroin addiction, which offered an alternative Universal Metaphor to interpreters of *Naked Lunch*, has dwindled to a few rather pro forma evocations of his new drug of preference, opium. In this book drugs are merely a means to an end, and that end is the gallows.

Impatient readers or those whose attention span cannot encompass the demands of Mr. Burroughs's prose (in the earlier chapters there are sometimes eight or nine pages of continuous, linear narrative!) will want to know where to turn for immediate gratification. Worshippers of Ix Tab should dogear the following pages: 18, 27, 47, 77, 108, 142, 154, 162, 173, 179–83, and about everything thereafter.

Mr. Burroughs's eternal tale is told in varying modes. Sometimes it is a fantasy of life aboard a pirate ship. Sometimes it is the story of a private eye investigating the hanging and decapitation of various attractive young victims. Sometimes his decor derives from sci-fi of the more brain-damaged variety, as in the following account of the transmigration of souls in a utopia of strangulation:

These hardy Transmigrants, in the full vigor of maturity, after rigorous training in concentration and astral projection, would select two death guides to kill them in front of the copulating parents. The methods of death most commonly employed were hanging and strangula-

Review of *Cities of the Red Night*, by William S. Burroughs.

tion, the Transmigrant dying in orgasm, which was considered the most reliable method of ensuring a successful transfer. Drugs were also developed, large doses of which occasioned death in erotic convulsions, smaller doses being used to enhance sexual pleasure. . . . In time, death by natural causes became a rare and rather discreditable occurrence. . . .

Readers who would like to add the thrill of hypocrisy to the other pleasures of the text can take their cue from the jacket copy of *Naked Lunch*, published in 1959, where Mr. Burroughs's achievements as a moralist, satirist, and all-around genius were saluted by John Ciardi, Robert Lowell, and Norman Mailer. Mr. Burroughs himself, however, out-Herods them all in the arts of whitewash: "Certain passages in the book that have been called pornographic were written as a tract against Capital Punishment in the manner of Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal.' These sections are intended to reveal capital punishment as the obscene, barbaric and disgusting anachronism that it is."

Oh yes, and one might add that Pasolini's movie *Salo* is an indictment of Italian Fascism, Swinburne's obsessive doggerel on the subject of flogging an attack on corporal punishment in schools, and de Sade's *Justine* a Christian allegory after the manner of John Bunyan.

Forget morality! Forget art! What Mr. Burroughs offered the rubes back in 1959 and what he offers them today, in somewhat wearier condition, is entrance to a sideshow where they can view his curious id capering and making faces and confessing to bizarre inclinations. The backdrops are changed every few minutes by lazy stagehands, but the capering id delivers an identical performance before each one. It's grotesque, it's disgusting, but gosh—it's real!

Readers who have never caught Mr. Burroughs's act would do better to read *Naked Lunch* than this rather anemic clone. The twenty-two intervening years have impinged little on Mr. Burroughs's consciousness. He's read, or at least heard of, such books as *Future Shock* and *The Biological Time Bomb*, but even such (one might suppose) congenial events as the Manson murders or the Jonestown massacre cannot divert his imagination from its own perfected self-absorption.