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## Public Library Buys a Trove of Burroughs Papers

By [EDWARD WYATT](#)

In Folio 110 of a meticulously constructed, voluminous personal archive, William S. Burroughs offers a fanciful autobiographical sketch that is part "Junky," part "Naked Lunch."

"As a young child I wanted to be a writer because writers were rich and famous," he wrote in an unpublished essay that serves as a sort of cornerstone for the archive. "They lounged around Singapore and Rangoon smoking opium in a yellow ponge silk suit. They sniffed cocaine in Mayfair and they penetrated forbidden swamps with a faithful native boy and lived in the native quarter of Tangier smoking hasiesh and languidly caressing a pet gazelle. ..."

It is a comic, facile portrait of one of the triumvirate of Beat Generation greats who, with [Jack Kerouac](#) and [Allen Ginsberg](#), defined writing and critiqued contemporary culture beginning in the 1950's. Burroughs has long been the least known of the three. But that is soon likely to change.

The New York Public Library is expected to announce today that it has purchased the Burroughs archive for its Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature. The acquisition will make the Berg Collection, which also includes Kerouac's literary and personal archive, perhaps the premier institution for the study of the Beats.

Burroughs is best known as the author of the hallucinogenic, drug-addled novel "Naked Lunch," which was banned in Boston on obscenity charges in 1962 and then, in a reversal, won a landmark censorship ruling by the Massachusetts courts in 1966. His other books include, among others, "The Soft Machine" and "The Ticket That Exploded."

The Burroughs archive contains 11,000 pages of manuscript and typescript material, including draft versions and notes for virtually all of Burroughs's works through 1972, said Isaac Gewirtz, curator of the Berg Collection. Most of the material in the archive from the 1960's and 70's has never been seen, except by Burroughs and his contemporaries.

In addition, the archive includes typescripts and manuscripts for numerous unpublished works, which Burroughs organized by date or subject matter or whim into numbered folios, or folders; some 3,000 pages of highly personal literary and artistic correspondence, collages, dream calendars, diaries, notebooks, more than 50 hours of unreleased tape recordings and hundreds of photographs by and of Burroughs, who died in 1997.

"This archive has really achieved legendary status among people who follow the Beat writers," Mr. Gewirtz said in an interview in the stately reading room that serves as home to the Berg Collection at the library's landmark building on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan.

"Of the tens of thousands of pages, only literally a handful have ever been seen, and only a very few quoted from," he said.

The archive has had two previous owners besides the author: Roberto Altmann, a collector from Liechtenstein who bought it from Burroughs and who apparently never opened most of the cartons of material, and Robert H. Jackson of Shaker Heights, Ohio, who with his wife, Donna L. Jackson, is a noted book and art collector but who has allowed only limited access to the archive. The library purchased the collection from Mr. Jackson for an undisclosed amount. The contents will most likely be available to researchers beginning early next year.

Though scholars have never seen most of the material, they were made tantalizingly aware of its existence by Burroughs himself, who published a descriptive catalog of the archive in 1973. Oliver C. G. Harris, a professor of American literature at Keele University in Staffordshire, England, who edited a collection of Burroughs's letters published by Viking in 1993, said the material was the Holy Grail of scholars of the Beat generation.

"My sense is that it will really change the picture of Burroughs that scholars have known," Mr. Harris said, because that picture has been based almost exclusively on Burroughs's work in the 1950's. Much of his more avant-garde experiments, including most of his cut-ups — works created by slicing typewritten text into fragments and rearranging it to create a new narrative — came later, in the 1960's and 1970's.

"No one has really done a scholarly job on those periods because it was not possible," Mr. Harris said.

Much of the archive sheds light on the relationship between Burroughs and the others of the Beat generation, including Timothy Leary, Paul Bowles, Gregory Corso, Terry Southern, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and, of course, Kerouac and Ginsberg.

Some of the material, particularly portions of Burroughs's correspondence with Ginsberg, has been published elsewhere, but there could well be undiscovered gems in the new material — like the 1959 letter from Ginsberg in which he refers to his work on a new poem about his mother, "which is better than 'Howl.'" That new work became "Kaddish."

"The archive is particularly interesting because Burroughs clearly intended it to be read and absorbed as a work of art," Mr. Gewirtz said. Handwritten notes by Burroughs adorn many of the folios of written material, explaining the contents, and the author often added collages of photographs, newspaper clippings or other media to the folders.

The front of Folio 110, for example, contains a collage of photographs of places relevant to the different periods of Burroughs's writing, including Tangier; St. Louis, where Burroughs was born in 1914; and Lower Manhattan, where he lived in the 1970's.

But while the organization of the material and brief descriptions of the contents have been known since the publication of the descriptive catalog in 1973, scholars could find new relevance in Burroughs's choices.

"There are things from two different works sometimes jammed together in a folio, either because they were produced that way or because Burroughs wanted to show thematic similarities," Mr. Gewirtz said. For example, Folio 5 includes a typescript of "The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead," published by Grove in 1971. But other fragments of "The Wild Boys" are found, Mr. Gewirtz said, throughout the archive.

The third great collection of Beat materials, the Ginsberg archive, resides not in New York but at Stanford University, which bought the collection in 1994. In an interview that year with The New York Times about the Stanford purchase, Ginsberg, who died in 1997, said he would have been happier if his collection had ended up in New York, specifically at the Berg, which he said passed on the purchase.

Mr. Gewirtz said that, of course, the library would have liked to purchase the Ginsberg archive. But he said that Ginsberg wanted to complete the sale quickly and that the library was unable to arrange financing for a deal in time.

"It's one of the things that happens sometimes," he said, noting that the Berg Collection includes a fair number of letters written by Ginsberg. For now, the library is content with the Kerouac and Burroughs archives, he said, adding, "This will be the place in the world to come to study the Beats."