Nova Express Short Guide

Nova Express by William S. Burroughs

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Contents

Characters

A s the term is generally understood, there are no "characters" in Nova Express, although many named personages are given extensive quoted material as part of a discussion, dispute, or declaration. These nebulous creatures, often resemble human beings, but in a mutant or deviant form appropriate for the constantly shifting sense of reality that informs the novel. The question of what is human — what constitutes the Self — is at the center of Burroughs's projection of a "space" (inner and outer) age, and since the location of Nova Express, like Naked Lunch (1962), is ostensibly the mind of the author, all of the "characters" are, to some extent, aspects of his imaginative assemblage of tendencies drawn on his experiences and his constant reflective investigations of his own mind.

Familiar figures from Burroughs's world reappear here: the narrative consciousness with some version of Burroughs's name — William, Lee, Bill, and other variants — as well as his surrogate ego-projections, Dr. Benway and Hassan i Sabbah among others. In the narrator's travels in the Nova universe, he is accompanied by capable confederates like The Intolerable Kid or the notorious Uranian Willy The Heavy Metal Kid. The Nova Mob is described by its colorfully named members, including "Sammy the Butcher," "Iron Claws," "The Brown Artist," "Jacky Blue Note," "Limestone John," "Izzy the Push," "Hamburger Mary" (a typically rare appearance of a woman), and the notorious "Mr. & Mrs. D," who are also known as "Mr. Bradly Mr. Martin" and seem to be the leaders of the gang.

The amusingly evocative use of exotic, suggestive names is one of Burroughs's favorite devices, but it is not a substitute for a developed characterization and the criminals are flat figures, or shadowy, wraithlike entities, although touted as menacing. There are also mouthpieces called The District Supervisor or Mr. Winkhorst who spout versions of an official government line and engage in quasiphilosophical debates with the narrator. They have no discernible personality beyond the tone of their pronouncements. The Subliminal Kid (and possibly "young Southerland") is casually based on Ian Sommerville, who is credited in a Foreword Note as a contributor to the "technical notes in the section called 'Chinese Laundry,'" and who made an appearance earlier as "Technical Tilly" (an example of Burroughs's wry humor) in The Ticket That Exploded (1962).

If one considers the personal nature of the material that was used as the basis for Nova Express, one might accept the notion that the only "character" in this novel is the authorial consciousness that is allowed to emerge in a constant act of revelation. The dominant tone of the narrative is clearly Burroughs's own mood as expressed in his singular style, and if the novel is seen as a kind of journal/memoir, then its central character and his fantastic adventures are the autobiographical creation of the man who wrote it.

Social Concerns

Among the three novels that were formed from the material remaining in William Burroughs's "Word Hoard" after the completion of Naked Lunch, Nova Express is the most didactic, emphasizing an explanatory mode instead of a dramatic one. The three books constitute a trilogy of sorts (the French critic Philippe Mikriammos calls them "a false trilogy") which Burroughs said he wanted to be the ground work for "a new mythology for the space age."

Explaining what he meant, Burroughs defined freedom from past conditioning is "to be in space," and the thrust of the book is toward achieving this freedom. Set against this quest are the "powerful instruments of control" which Burroughs has always regarded as the principle enemy of human society. In Nova Express, he has taken the struggle against the forces of control to the edge of the contemporary world and beyond into an extension of the technology of the present toward a foreseeable future, or at least one that he imagines in the book. He feels that the "old-style power" of suppression which operated throughout human history is a minor problem compared with the "manifestation of control madness" he saw in the early 1960s — a "disappearing wart" compared with "an exploding cancer" and contends that "the present controllers are bent on annihilation."

Specifically, he calls the controllers "the Nova Mob," which is a version of the military-industrial complex swollen beyond global perimeters into space itself. Arrayed against the Nova Mob are the Nova police, but while this organization seems to be supporting social values in opposition to the controllers, Burroughs is ambivalent about their function. He has often expressed his reservations about the "police mentality," and while acknowledging the necessity of a powerful agency to resist a mega-corporate menace, his essential faith in Nova Express is placed in an individual who can reach free "space" through heightened awareness of everything that is happening. Toward this end, artistic perception is promoted as the only satisfactory antidote to the mind-fog spread by "modern priests," and Burroughs's basic position in the entire trilogy is that social change is just another distraction; that without a fundamental shift in consciousness the planet and the species are probably doomed. Accordingly, the means of altering perception available to the artist, and to the postmodern technical expert, are crucial to survival of the individual.

Since the forces of control are so obviously a manifestation of Evil, the essential social conflict in the narrative is between the Nova Police ("Once the law starts asking questions, there's no end to it") who are required in the vast arena of social commerce, and the spirit of the individual. Burroughs has observed, "For 'nova police' read 'technology' if you wish," but he is insistent on the tremendous potential for technical advance — indeed, in its inevitable occurrence. His concern is that "a superstitious reverence for the word" — that is, an anchor in conventional methods, is like a paralyzing fear of change. In Nova Express he is interested in exploring the manner in which an artist of the space age can use technology "to expand one's range of vision" so that the crucial question for him is not whether one should resist technology in the

name of traditional humanism but in how the space age artist can appropriately handle technology to achieve human freedom.

Techniques

Although Burroughs himself had reservations about the success of the Space Age trilogy, mentioning a number of times that he did not feel that its technical experiments were fully effective, he was initially very excited about the possibilities of what he called the "cut-up" or "fold-in" method of composition. When he became friends with the Swiss artist Brion Gysin in Tangier, he was struck by Gysin's cutting and rearranging of newspaper clippings and other printed matter to form collages. Burroughs saw this as a way to fracture familiar patterns of responding to words and called it, with his wry wit, "a project for disastrous success."

Always an avid reader, Burroughs realized that such modernist works as T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land (1922) and John Dos Passos's U.S.A (1938) were employing this technique, and that the visual artists who interested him, especially the Dada master Tristan Tzara, had been working on similar lines of exploration. Burroughs observed that "cut-ups established connections between images, and one's range of vision consequently expands." In the trilogy, Burroughs juxtaposed his own words from the "Word Hoard" with a great deal of material from all kinds of sources. As Robin Lydenberg, a literary theorist, explains it, for Burroughs "any literary text is an intersecting network of many texts spliced, crossed and merged," and in the trilogy, Burroughs is working to make "the word an object detached from its context . . .

a substance that could actually be handled, or more accurately manhandled."

In Nova Express, the shift from the cutup sections to a more literal narrative is generally clear, but the intersection of styles tends to make any version of reality somewhat tenuous.

Burroughs also argued that the cutup "makes explicit a psycho-sensory process that is going on all the time," referring to the way the eye roves beyond the text immediately in front of the reader, and that the linear habit of reading limited perception. Contending that the cut-up "will involve much more of the total capacity of the observer," Burroughs included Joyce, Shakespeare, Artur Rimbaud, Keroac, Jean Genet, Franz Kafka, and many lesser known writers, especially from stock science fiction. In using these previously published fragments in new and often nearly unrecognizable forms, Burroughs both draws on the associations of moderately familiar sentences and the energizing possibilities of juxtaposing something from a known cultural context with something entirely unexpected.

The three primary narrative modes of Nova Express — the more traditional storytelling style of the skilled raconteur; the delivery of theoretical scien tific (and pseudoscientific) material as if in a lecture, complete with references to obscure, often totally fictitious sources; and the flow of consciousness in a series of short phrases separated by dashes which function as verbal image-clusters moving across the screen of the mind

— occur in what appear to be random alteration. Each is effective on its own terms to some extent, but the narrative streams do not coalesce into a larger structural pattern. The eight sections of the book, with numerous subdivisions in each section, still retain the form of a notebook preceding a novel. Still, for the reader interested in nontraditional modes of writing, Nova Express is an original, frequently fascinating suggestion about some courses for the evolution of writing in the late twentieth century.

Themes

The thematic concerns which Burroughs introduced in Junkie (1953) and Naked Lunch, and then continued to pursue in the trilogy consisting of The Soft Machine (1961), The Ticket That Exploded (1962), and Nova Express are the product of the years he spent as a kind of drop-out from American society before his break-through to his singular writing style in Naked Lunch.

They include esoteric theories of addiction, unconventional and often medically suspect solutions to addictive impulses, an obsession with conspiracies of social control, a fascination with the technical means of communication, and a desire to probe the areas of his own psyche which generate the "characters" he places in his novels. All of these are present in Nova Express but what makes the novel distinctive is the manner in which Burroughs addresses the question of language itself. His examination of nontraditional methods of organization, character presentation, and syntactical construction was largely instinctive in Naked Lunch. In the trilogy, he has introduced the theory of the "cut-up" as a specific instrument to employ in assembling passages which test some of his presumptions about the manner in which linguistic arrangements influence perception.

In other books, drugs have been thoroughly investigated (even embraced) as agents of transformation. In Nova Express, chemical substances take a distinctly secondary role as Burroughs suggests that the alteration in consciousness necessary to achieve freedom can be a product of a kind of education into the mind-set of what might be called the hipster's reality.

Nova Express is both a demonstration of the effects of this education, a sample (albeit very unconventional and erratic) syllabus for a course of instruction, and an application of the artistic enlightenment Burroughs feels is crucial to break the chains of control. For instance, one section of Nova Express suggests that silence is a desirable state. Burroughs maintains that "a special use of words and pictures can conduce silence," but for him, silence is not merely an absence of sound but a condition conducive to an increased awareness since "most people don't see what's going on around them."

The character known as the Subliminal Kid, an electronics genius, periodically interferes with what seems to be the "reality" of a situation by relocating the angle of perception through mechanical devices. In the context of the space/time continuum which is the setting for much of the novel — a fitting track for a book that is allied with the science fiction genre — this seems like an action consistent with travels on the Nova Express. However, Burroughs goes beyond surreal descriptions of images metamorphosing into new images to imply that the artist's transformative or shaping power is the strongest weapon in the battle with the "all-powerful boards and syndicates of the earth." Somewhat oblique references to a magician-figure resembling Prospero in Shakespeare's The Tempest (c.1611) suggest that an artist can reach further into the psyche through the use of language than the electronics master; that like Prospero's,

this magic is a potent force in the planetary configurations of the Nova universe just as Prospero's was on an isolated island in a spacelike ocean.

Key Questions

The Space Age trilogy is more difficult for most readers than much of Burroughs's other work, and should be approached from a more theoretical perspective. A willingness to consider an experiment that is far from conclusive is necessary to avoid dismissing the books as too unconventional.

1. How does Burroughs use basic themes and ideas from scientific fiction in Nova Express?

2. How plausible is Burroughs's version/prediction of life on Earth in the late twentieth century, especially since the book was composed in the mid to late 1950s?

3. Are there any "characters" in Nova Express who can be analyzed in terms of basic psychological traits? If not, does Burroughs do enough with characterization to establish any memorable or identifiable figures?

4. Burroughs continues to use graphic descriptions of sex and violence in Nova Express. Consider their effectiveness beyond shock value.

5. Discuss the "cut-up" or "fold-in" method as a means of shaping reality.

6. Are there are concise narrative sections within Nova Express? Can a subsection be approached as a more traditional piece of short fiction?

7. Consider the poetic qualities of the flow-of-consciousness passages in Nova Express. What types of moods are developed?

8. Burroughs regards himself as a man who has a comic vision of existence. How does he use humor to achieve his goals in Nova Express ?

Literary Precedents

The originality of Burroughs's work reduces the field of resemblance considerably, but the use of the "cut-up" or "fold-in" has some affinities with T. S. Eliot's poetry, John Dos Passos's trilogy U.S.A. (1930-1936), Ezra Pound's Cantos (1970), and some of the experiments in surrealism by French writers like Paul Valery. In a more conventional manner, Burroughs drew on the science fiction-adventure genre of the mid-twentieth century, and anticipated the cyber-punk mode of writers such as William Gibson.

Related Titles

Nova Express is part of the Space Age trilogy including The Soft Machine (1961) and The Ticket That Exploded 3002 (1962). The three books overlap in various ways, and were rewritten between editions so that the British edition of The Soft Machine (1968) is more like an extension of The Ticket That Exploded, which had separate endings in the British and American editions.

The French critic Philippe Mikriammos who described the three books as a "false trilogy" suggests that the entire grouping should be seen as a single entity in three versions. In Nova Express, however, although material from The Ticket That Exploded is recapitulated and extended, the conflict between the Nova Mob and the Nova Police is presented much more clearly and directly, as if Burroughs had a more definite sense of how he wanted to present his ideas.

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