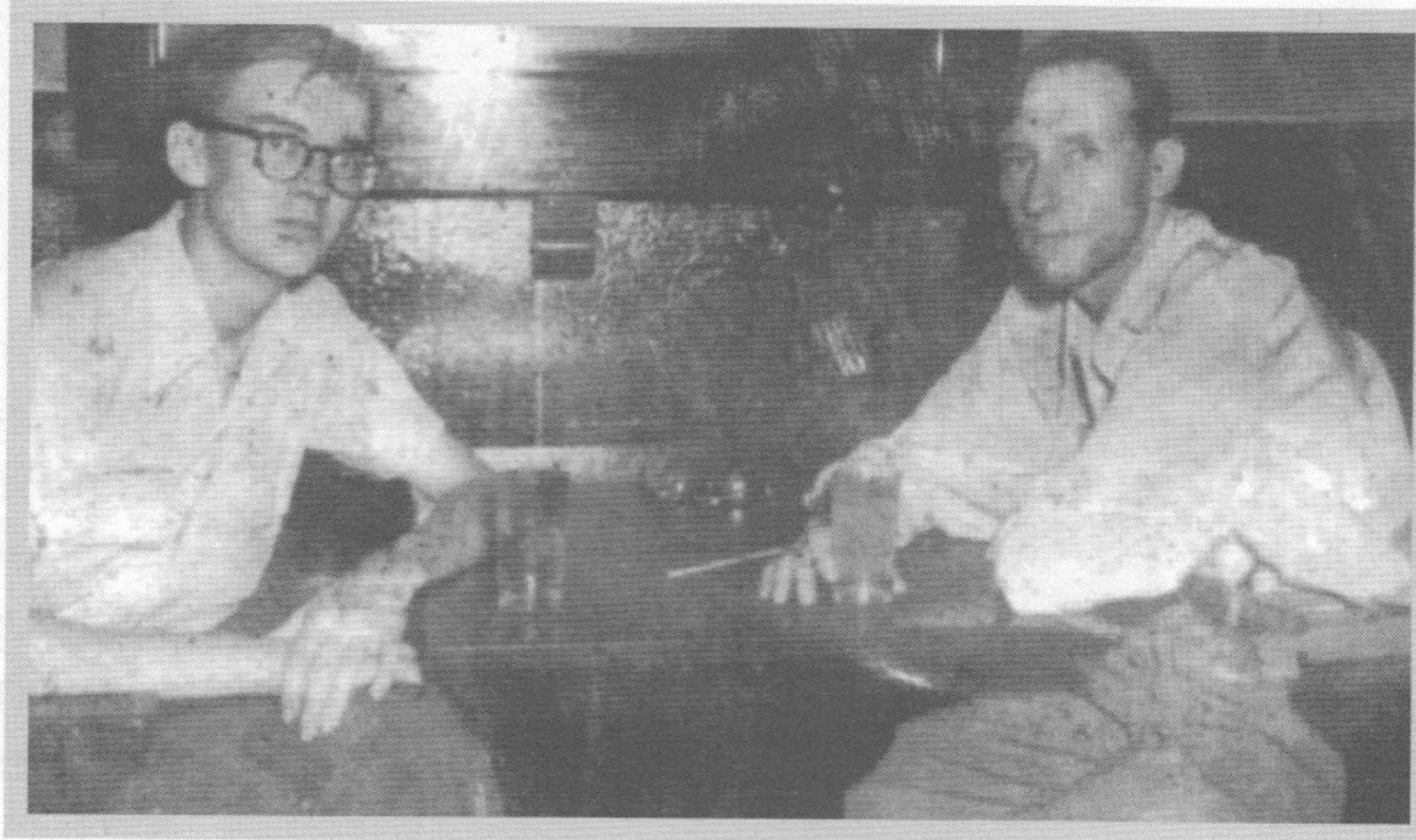


THE SHEER STRANGENESS OF BURROUGHS' WRITING

With this reissue of *QUEER* by Burroughs, Beat Scene took the opportunity to ask editor Oliver Harris some questions about the history of the book.

Kevin Ring: Oliver, The tangled knots of the publishing history of *Queer* must have been one heck of a challenge for you....?

Queer was published in 1985, right at the start of my "career" as a Burroughsian, just after I'd begun my PhD; but at that time I didn't really grasp what difference it made to Burroughs' literary history. However, once I'd started work on the letters (in 1990), I began to understand just how important were the overlooked writings that preceded *Naked Lunch*. I got the point that something extraordinary happened to Burroughs as a writer after *Junky* in 1953, and I've been incredibly fortunate to have been able to work on new editions of first *Junky*, then *The Yage Letters*, and now *Queer*. Approaching Burroughs as a reader or a critic is one thing; but as an editor, actually working on the original manuscripts and having to make decisions all the time, is quite another—it really forces you to confront what you do and do not understand. So I have seen my role as to expand understanding by going back to the materials and making visible what happened and when—which turns out to be a richly complicated and interesting story for each of these three early works—but at the same time I have had to acknowledge the limits to knowledge, which in turn respects the sheer strangeness of Burroughs' writing. That's especially true for *Queer*, which is simultaneously a botched job and a horribly haunting story, and which has kept changing for me over the past twenty years. As for the challenge of untangling the history of *Queer* as a manuscript and a published book, that has been fascinating, especially since it involved working with the editing James Grauerholz's did in 1985—people don't realise what a brilliant scholar James is. I think I have added something for the new 25th anniversary edition—new material, a detailed history of the



backstory, etc.—but I've respected the 1985 edition as well as the original 1952 manuscript.

Oliver, what do you think the state of research into Burroughs is now, is there a lot to uncover about him and his archives?

Also you talk about Kerouac being there with

Burroughs at this time, when Burroughs was trying to shape *Queer*, was Jack a help or a hinderance? You hinted that he was stoned all the time and didn't pay his way!

Kerouac's presence while Burroughs was writing *Queer* is very interesting; it's possible to show the material influence *Queer* had on the writing of *Dr Sax*, but it's only possible

to speculate about the influence the other way round. But my feeling is that he gave Burroughs far more than simply the title...

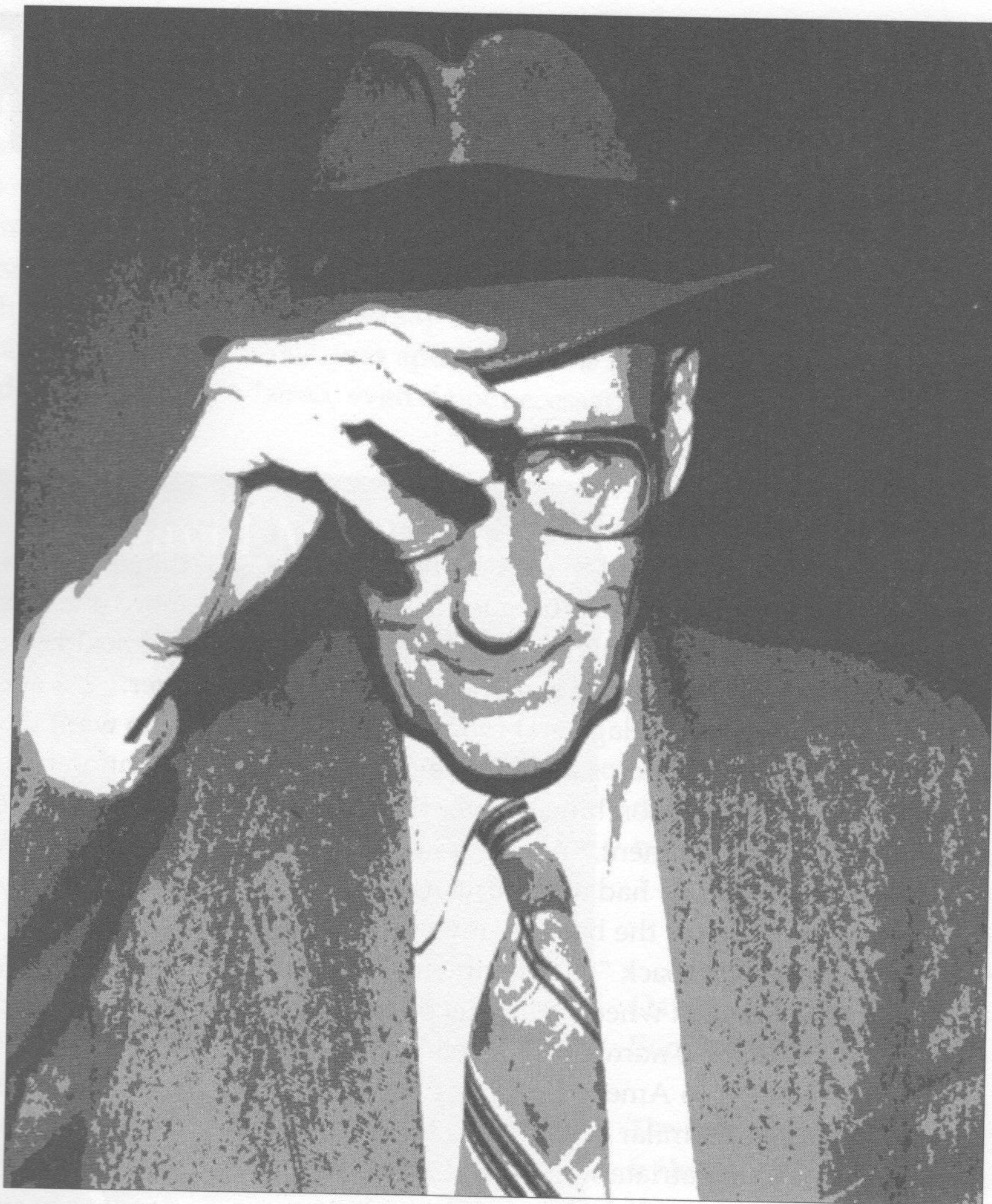
The archival work on Burroughs remains in its infancy, partly because there just haven't been the researchers doing scholarly work. That's one reason I have spent so much time on editing rather than writing more interpretive criticism, to try to build the material base and establish a richer, more accurate literary history. But there have been some very important developments recently, including the great work on little magazines done by Jed Birmingham, and of course the huge archive at the New York Public Library is now making more manuscript work possible and I'm already seeing the results of that in PhD studies, signs of a whole generation of new scholars who will help change the picture of Burroughs, which has lasted so long precisely because it has been so sensational. As for myself, I fantasise about the chance to do sustained work at the NYPL, rather than make brief visits. I also wish I had the time to make progress on "the making of *Naked Lunch*," which would really be the culmination of the research I've done so far.

Oliver, you say the picture of Burroughs so far has been sensational, do you think it will become more measured in time? & maybe we can discover more about the time and his writing whilst in London?

Whatever happened to Lewis Marker? Did he disappear into anonymity like Lucien Carr? Did he die?

It's interesting to compare Burroughs and Kerouac in terms of their reputations, since for both of them it has taken a long while to shift the critical approach. Recent Kerouac scholarship, by the likes of Tim Hunt, Matt Theado, Isaac Gewirtz, and Howard Cunnell (but above all, Tim Hunt), is giving a much better understanding of his writing practice, along with contextual work by critics such as Michael Hrebeniak. In both cases, because Burroughs and Kerouac have such a large non-academic readership, it's also vital to reach out to change the public perception, which inevitably lags behind. Again, that's one reason why I'm so grateful for the chance to re-edit Burroughs' early works, and in commercial editions rather than university press publications, putting the scholarship into everyone's hands. It will mean more to some than others, which is fine, but it should help focus attention more on the writing rather than the writer.

As for Marker, I don't have much to say - James Grauerholz has done far more original biographical spadework than I have, and he will undoubtedly add enormously to our knowledge beyond the existing work by Ted Morgan, Barry Miles, and Rob Johnson.



Amongst a number of William Burroughs titles he has been involved with, Oliver Harris co edited *Naked Lunch @50: Anniversary Essays*, published by Southern Illinois University Press in 2009

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