

WOMEN: A BIOLOGICAL MISTAKE?

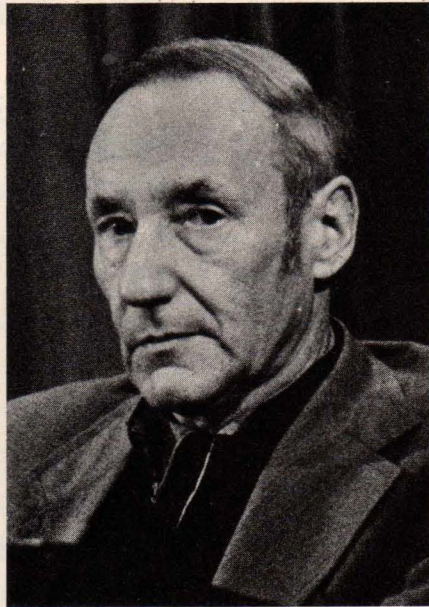
BY WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

□ I realize I am widely perceived as a misogynist. But quoting from the Oxford dictionary: "Misogynist—woman hater." Presumably this is his full-time occupation? Korzybski, the founder of General Semantics, always said to pin a generality down; so *what* women? Where and when? My English nanny from the pages of "The Turn of the Screw"? She did teach me some useful jingles—"Trip and stumble, slip and fall. . . ." Or the old Irish crone who taught me how to call the toads and bring the blinding worm from rotten bread? How remote and nostalgic, with a whiff of peat and pigsties. Or the Saint Louis matron who said I was a walking corpse? Well, it isn't every corpse that can walk; hers can't.

Bring on the heavies. The *femme fatale* in all her guises . . . Kali does her sideshow coochy dance . . . the White Goddess eats her consort . . . the Terrible Mother goes into her act . . . the Whore of Babylon rides in on her black panther screaming "You fools! I will drain you dry." Enough to turn a man to stone. But these are only surface manifestations, B-girls in fact: servants. After one look at this planet any visitor from outer space would say "I WANT TO SEE THE MANAGER."

Women may well be a biological mistake; I said so myself in *The Job*. But so is almost everything else I see around here. The dinosaurs turned out to be a mistake too, but what are a few hundred million years, more or less, for such a noble experiment? And now—as the deadly cycles of overpopulation, pollution, depletion of resources, radioactivity and conflict escalate towards a cataclysmic *sauve-qui-peut*—thoughtful citizens are asking themselves if the whole human race wasn't a mistake from the starting gate. The question then arises as to *whose* mistake, since mistakes imply intention—and I am convinced that nothing happens in this universe without will or intention.

Now it would be presumptuous, not to say impious, to say the Creator has done a bad job; since a bad job from *our* point of view may be a good job from his or her or its point of view. The history of the planet is a history of idiocy highlighted by a few morons who stand out as comparative geniuses. Considering the human organism as the *artifact* of an intentional Creator, we can then see more or less where we are. To date, no supergenius has managed to achieve what might be called normal intelligence in terms of



the potential functioning of the human artifact.

"Look at this artifact." The instructor holds up a flintlock rifle. "What's wrong with it? Quite a bit. It still has a long way to go." He holds up a modern automatic rifle. "Now we are getting close to the limit of efficiency for small arms on the principle of a projectile propelled by an exploding charge. Now look at *this* artifact." He holds up a cage in which a weasel snarls. "What's wrong with this artifact? Nothing. It's limited, but in terms of its structure and goals it functions well enough. . . ."

Take a look at the human artifact. What is wrong with it? Just about everything. Consider a species that can live on the seacoast, watching ships come in day after day, year after year, and still believe that the Earth is flat because the Church says so; a species that can use cannonballs for five hundred years before the idea of a cannonball that explodes on contact blossoms in this barren soil. . . . I could go on and on. So why has the human artifact stayed back there with the flintlock? I am advancing the theory that we were not designed to remain in our present state, any more than a tadpole is designed to remain a tadpole forever.

The human organism is in a state of neoteny. This is a biological term used to describe an organism fixated at what would normally be a larval or transitional phase. Ordinarily a salamander starts its life cycle in the water with gills; later the gills atrophy, and the animal develops lungs. However,

certain salamanders never lose their gills or leave the water. They are in a state of neoteny. The Xolotl salamander found in Mexico is an example. Scientists, moved by the plight of this beautiful creature, gave him an injection of hormones, whereupon he shed his gills and left the water after ages of neoteny. It is perhaps too much to hope that one simple injection could jar the human species out of its neoteny. But by whatever means the change takes place, it will be irreversible. The Xolotl, once he sheds his gills, can never reclaim them. Evolution would seem to be a one-way street.

Considering evolutionary steps, one has the feeling that the creature is tricked into making them. Here is a fish that survives drought because it has developed feet or rudimentary lungs. So far as the fish is concerned, these are simply a means of getting from one water source to another. But once he leaves his gills behind, he is stuck with lungs from there on out. So the fish has made an involuntary step forward. Looking for water, he has found air.

Perhaps a forward step for the human race will be made in the same way. The astronaut is not looking for space; he is looking for more *time*—that is, equating space with time. The space program is simply an attempt to transport our insoluble temporal impasses somewhere else. However, like the walking fish, looking for more time we may find space instead, and then find that there is no way back.

Such an evolutionary step would involve changes that are literally inconceivable from our present point of view. Is the separation of the sexes an arbitrary device to perpetuate an unworkable arrangement? Would the next step involve the sexes fusing into one organism? And what would be the nature of this organism? As Korzybski always said, "I don't know. Let's see." Is it too much to ask that this beached fish of a species—the human race—should consider the unthinkable, for evolution's sake? ■

Norman Mailer once described William S. Burroughs as "the only American novelist living today who may conceivably be possessed by genius." His best-known novel is Naked Lunch, and he is the author of Junky, The Soft Machine, Nova Express and The Wild Boys. After a long exile in London, Burroughs now lives in New York and Colorado.