

many spices, and use them often, they also reached for the spices with the strongest antibacterial properties more frequently than people in cooler areas did. According to information gathered by Billing and Sherman, four spices—garlic, onion, allspice, and oregano—act against every bacterium on which they were tested.

Interestingly, lemon and lime juice and pepper, though among the most frequently used spices, are relatively ineffective against bacteria. Why are those spices used? Because they enhance the antibacterial effects of

other spices, the researchers say.

The folk wisdom that spices are used to disguise the smell or taste of spoiled or contaminated foods is “seriously flawed,” the authors maintain. Thousands of people are killed every year, and millions made ill, by ingesting foodborne bacteria. Even undernourished individuals would likely be better off passing up tainted meat. Using spices to disguise the danger would be evolutionary folly. Indeed, say Billing and Sherman, that may be precisely why humans are so sensitive to the smells and tastes of decaying food.

## ARTS & LETTERS

### *The Last Modernist*

“The Forgotten Killer” by Vince Passaro, in *Harper’s Magazine* (Apr. 1998),  
666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012.

By the time William S. Burroughs died last year, at age 83, he “had been commercially morphed into the grand old man of American freakdom,” a neatly dressed Beat icon, and “a ‘cool’ face in a Nike ad,” writes Passaro, a contributing editor of *Harper’s Magazine*.

The “real” Burroughs was a heroin addict, a homosexual, a masterly writer of satire and modern affect—and a killer. In 1951 in Mexico City, attempting, on his own initiative, to shoot a glass off his wife’s head, he missed and fatally shot her. Burroughs also was “a theoretician of crime and resistance,” notes Passaro, “someone who strove to forge the unspeakable into an art form.” Unlike his friends, the Beat writers Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who belonged to “a tradition of spiritual exuberance and preacherly optimism” that includes Emerson, Whitman, and Twain, Burroughs drew on darker influences, such as Poe, Crane, and Kafka. Out of “the idioms of hard-boiled pulp and the lyrics of surrealism,” Passaro says, Burroughs “created a strangely effective hybrid of European symbolism and American criminality.”

The universe that he created, in such works as *Naked Lunch* (1959) and the trilogy that followed in the early 1960s (*The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*), Passaro writes, was one of “shifting time, transmogrifying characters, and ambiguous geography in which forces of evil—generally represented as heavily repetitive, viral forms of images and addictions—

are eternally and invisibly at war for Control.”

*Queer*, written in 1952 but not published until 1985, now seems most to define Burroughs, says Passaro. In it, he found “his true comic-psychotic voice and his time- and character-shredding narrative style.” Of his protagonist, Bill Lee, Burroughs writes: “The limitations of his desires were like the bars of a cage, like a chain and collar . . . and his eyes looked out through the invisible bars, watchful, alert, waiting for the keeper to forget the door, for the frayed collar, the loosened bar . . . suffering without despair and without consent.” In his portrayal of Lee’s caged desires, Burroughs captured not only the condition of the heroin addict and the situation of the homosexual at odds with society, Passaro asserts, but the plight of “the individual in late modernity.”

A satirist in the great tradition of Swift, Sterne, and Gogol, Burroughs was also “a Modernist with a capital M,” Passaro writes. Bill Lee’s “condition of endless, frustrated want and the image of the caged animal predict a general return to savagery that Burroughs and other modernists identified not with the loss of civilization but with an elaboration of civilization so multiple, so attenuated, so fundamentally dishonest, hypermarketed, and lethal that it renders the individual a stranger to his community and to himself. This is absolutely the modern condition, and Burroughs was its last and one of its best American representatives.”