

Alan Burns

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Table of Contents:

Biographical and Critical Essay

Buster

Europe after the Rain

Celebrations

Dreamerika!: A Surrealist Fantasy

Writings by the Author

Further Readings about the Author

About This Essay

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

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Celebrations (London: Calder & Boyars, 1967).

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Alan Burns is one of the most challengingly innovative novelists in contemporary British fiction. Inspired by painters, he strives to create what René Magritte once described as the "magic of unforeseen affinities" by means of a collage, cut-up technique that he attributes to the fiction of William Burroughs. The result is a surreal assemblage of events, images, even syntactical arrangements that challenge the reader's comfortable assumptions about what a novel is or can be. Burns possesses a thoroughly original voice.

Burns was born in London on 29 December 1929 into the middle-class family of Harold and Anne Marks Burns and educated at the Merchant Taylors' School. When he was thirteen his mother died, and his older brother died two years later; both deaths profoundly affected him both emotionally and artistically. Burns has described the impact of these separations: "The consuming nature of this experience showed itself not only in the disconnected form but also in the content of my 'work.'" The most obvious treatment of these experiences is in *Buster* (1972; originally published in *New Writers*, 1961); however, the theme of death pervades all his novels. From 1949 to 1951, Burns served in the Royal Army Education Corps, stationed at Salisbury Plain. After his discharge he traveled through Europe; he married Carol Lynn in 1954. He was called to the Bar in 1956 and practiced as a London barrister until 1959, when he spent a year as a postgraduate researcher in politics at the London School of Economics. For the next three years Burns was assistant legal manager for Beaverbrook Newspapers, "vetting [appraising] copy for libel and copyright."

While walking down Carey Street on his lunch hour one day he saw, in a jeweler's window, a photograph of a man and woman kissing, which reminded him of a photo of his mother and father on their honeymoon. Having previously felt stymied in his attempts to write, Burns describes the artistic significance of this moment: "I understood in literary terms, the value of the image because I saw that I didn't have to grapple, as it were in essay form, with the endless complexities and significances of the love and other feelings that existed between my mother and father, and what they meant to me. I could let it all go by the board, let it take care of itself; I could, in the time-honoured phrase, show, not tell. . . . I could tell this story in a series of photographs, which is to say, a series of images, and let the stories emerge and the ideas emerge from that series of fragments, and that's how I found myself able to write that first book, *Buster*."

Although quite different from the novels that follow it, *Buster* suggests some of the fictional concerns and techniques Burns employs in all his works. Central to his fictions is the technique of fragmentation, and although *Buster* is more conventional than any of his other novels, it too employs a limited form of fragmentation. Events in the work follow one another rapidly, and the temporal links between incidents are implied more than they are stated. The effect is one of an associative rather than a temporal pattern of organization.

The novel's protagonist, in fact, hints at the truncated method in Burns's later works when he attempts to write a story that concludes with the lines "Uniqueness demanded disjointedness. Irrelevance was the key." The hero goes on to define some of Burns's attitudes toward the nature and function of language when he thinks, "Words don't describe, they point, and poets hit the source in history, the shadow behind each word. . . . Words are abstract isolate ancient huge, flipping and floating in coloured balloons in fanlight air." The quality of disjointedness and the idea of the "shadow behind each word" play increasingly larger roles in the compositional techniques of later novels.

Buster chronicles the growth from childhood to maturity of Dan Graveson, apple of his father's eye and failure in the eyes of others. At an early age the boy loses his mother when she is blown apart by a bomb before his eyes, and soon after that his older brother dies in military service. Graveson then deliberately flunks out of school, is dismissed from the army for Communist sloganeering, initiates and abruptly quits a peace committee, fails his law exams twice, and is eventually evicted bodily from his apartment. The novel ends with Graveson returning to his father's home where he greedily consumes the meal left in the pantry for his parent.

The domestic theme featured in this autobiographical novel is shared by many of Burns's other novels. Beginning and ending with the line "They stood over him," Buster records the joys and suffocations that domestic life breeds. Continually feeling the pressure to succeed and please his father, Graveson inevitably fails at every undertaking, and the novel's epigraph, which is a collection of dictionary definitions of the title, describes Graveson's fate--"to fall or be thrown."

Buster also introduces readers to another significant feature of Burns's fiction: his keen eye for detail, often rendered in arresting descriptive and figurative language. Frequently he will interrupt or clarify the ambiguity or disjointedness of a scene with a vivid metaphor or image, as in the following passage in which the narrator describes the dead mother's body: "The foot had a slight unnatural twist at the ankle. She could not have bent her foot like that if she had been alive. The difference was small, an angle of ten degrees. But alive she could not have done it without breaking the bone, gouging one bone into the other, wrenching the muscle enough to make her scream with pain or come as near screaming as an ill middle-aged woman can, not a young clean scream, but a choke, a sob, a cough, a constriction in the throat caused by too much trying to escape at one time."

John Calder published *Buster* in 1961 in the first volume of the *New Writers* anthology series. Encouraged by the critical success of his novel, Burns ended his legal career and on a monthly £50 subsidy from Calder moved to Dorset, where he spent the next four years writing. During this period he

and his wife adopted a son, Daniel Paul, and a daughter, Alshamsha. In 1965 Calder published his second novel, *Europe after the Rain*. Taking the title from a 1942 painting by Max Ernst, Burns creates a horrifying vision of lives and of a landscape devastated by war. He was inspired not only by Ernst's painting but also by transcripts of the Nuremberg trials and by an account of life in Poland after World War II. He set his novel in an indefinite future in which people and events lack logic and hope. Wandering throughout this waking nightmare, the unnamed narrator searches for an unnamed girl he may have loved at one time. The girl is being held prisoner by a battalion commander, who is later demoted to command a labor camp. She eventually murders him, escapes, and then wastes away. To say this much is to imply a greater cohesiveness than the plot actually offers.

Developing his fragmented style, Burns presents the reader with a phantasmagoric assortment of horrors and brutalities as anonymous characters struggle against one another to survive an intolerable life. Sentences are terse and clipped, employing almost no subordination or transitional devices. Consequently, images and events take on an intensely isolated, disconnected relationship with each other, where linguistic austerity mirrors the austere conditions of the environment. Burns has explained that much of the fragmentation in the novel results from the semihypnotic state in which it was composed. Glazing his eyes over as he typed, Burns wrote "from the unconscious" by emphasizing only the strongest and most concrete words, usually nouns. It is a technique he has compared with that used by many landscape painters.

In *Europe after the Rain* the domestic theme reappears, but in a less evident way than in many of Burns's other works. Although the narrator is the focus of the novel, the reader knows less about his family than that of the nameless girl for whom he searches. Like the children in Burns's other works, she has been separated from her father (here by the leader of an opposing political faction), and her eventual reunion with him leads not to a new life but to a physical decline. Family is finally an ineffective alternative to the violence and chaos of this world and may perhaps even contribute to the widespread devastation.

As in *Buster*, the images of death in this second novel are compelling and abundant. Burns renders these events with detailed precision, in a thoroughly prosaic tone. The disturbing quality of a passage such as the following stems not only from its graphic nature but, more important, from the matter-of-fact manner in which the narrator relates such carnage: "Disturbed, she gave the cry, went up to the body and touched it, dragged it down as the others crowded round, clamoured for it, each one desperate for it. She wrenched off the leg, jabbed it, thick end first, into her mouth, tried hard to swallow it, could not get it down, the thicker part became less visible, there was nothing but the foot, she twisted off the protruding foot." Critical reaction to *Europe after the Rain* was mixed, as it would be toward many of Burns's later novels.

In 1967 Burns received an Arts Council Maintenance Grant and saw the publication of his third work. In a much more obvious way than *Europe after the Rain*, *Celebrations* explores the tensions and ambushes of family life, and, similar to the pattern in *Buster*, the work presents a family in which the woman is dead and one of the sons, Phillip, is killed when his brother Michael crushes him under a machine. Overseeing these two is the father, Williams, who as factory boss dominates his sons as both parent and employer. After Phillip's death, the father and Michael compete for the affections of Phillip's wife, Jacqueline, and for leadership of the company. Although she weds Michael, Jacqueline sleeps with and controls each man.

Once again the narrative technique is a disjointed one, as events crowd ridiculously and inexplicably in upon each other. Punctuating the details of the familial rivalry are descriptions of the various rituals that form the "celebrations" of the title. Beginning with Phillip's inquest and funeral, Burns catalogues Michael and Jacqueline's wedding, their advance in wealth and social stature, Williams's physical and professional decline, Michael's unexpected death, and Jacqueline's remarriage. The novel grows from "a mosaic of fragments" as Burns uses these celebrations to create absurdly comic and surreal sequences in, for instance, Williams's funeral march: "A procession of black castles slowly through the suburbs, patience of the dead face, his clothes taken from him, his feet buried in nettles, there was no significance. Black walnut, brick wall. Michael asked for a carton of coffee, it was water heated up. A brick wall advocated huge white letters hidden by coal. A seizure. Vegetable houses. A grubby bird, fancy-dress Spaniard, did not stay long. The living were talking." As in Surrealist paintings, striking and outlandishly dissimilar images are juxtaposed, producing new, comic, and startling effects.

Like the novel which preceded it, *Celebrations* frequently eschews rational logic for the logic of the dream. Thus the reader moves between different levels of time and of consciousness, discovering a pattern of thought and emotion beneath the sequence of the narrative's events. One of the best examples of this method is the description of Williams's death in a car accident, one that leaves details ambiguous but the result certain: "In the street there were few people, he had not begun, it was unfair, life had gone badly, he had begun and ended." Passages such as this remind the reader of Burns's preoccupation with the theme of death and the spare, abrupt manner with which he renders its horrors, inevitability, and finality. The novel enjoyed a favorable reception, with reviews by B. S. Johnson and Robert Nye being particularly perceptive.

In 1969 Burns received a second Arts Maintenance Grant as well as a £2,000 Writing Bursary from the Arts Council. During this period he and Johnson founded Writers Reading, a collective to "establish a circuit, organize bookings and publicity, create a recognized 'norm' for fees, [and] be generally a co-operative centre for otherwise isolated and scattered fictioneers." They produced a booklet with photos

and biographies of twelve writers, among them Ann Quin, Alan Sillitoe, Barry Cole, Carol Burns, Stephen Themerson, and Eva Figes, and organized readings throughout the United Kingdom. Although the organization began to fade by 1972, it was only officially terminated following the deaths of Johnson and Quin in 1973.

In the same year that Writers Reading began, Calder published Burns's fourth novel, *Babel*. Inspired once more by a painting, in this case *The Tower of Babel* (1563) by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, Burns took his fragmented snapshot method as far as possible. His most experimental, surreal, and difficult work, *Babel* is composed of a series of isolated paragraphs that occasionally center on an identifiable character and that frequently lead to incidents or personages in later paragraphs. More often than not the effect is nonsensical because "I used the cut-up method to join the subject of one sentence to the object from another with the verb hovering uncertainly between." Thus Burns rejects the methods of traditional storytelling, and his novel is best viewed as a series of voices competing with one another for the reader's attention. Using the biblical image of the tower of conflicting languages and purposeless action, *Babel* details the chaos, dislocations, and disjunctions of modern life.

As it was in his earlier novels, Burns's prose style here is sparse, concise, and thoroughly compressed, while thematically the work expresses the writer's concern with the power of the state. Of the theme, Burns writes: "Babel described not the obvious apparatus of dictatorship but the hints nudges nods assents implications agreements and conspiracies, the network of manipulations that envelops the citizens and makes them unaware accomplices [sic] in the theft of their liberty. In *Babel* the crude despots of the earlier books, camp commander, factory manager, death, are re-constituted in the subtle dominance of the amorphous State." The critics, however, either glibly dismissed or bitingly denounced *Babel* as a failure.

During the summer of the following year Burns gave a single lecture on censorship for the National County Libraries Summer School, and he was approached by producer Charles Marowitz to write a play. The result was *Palach*, which was performed at London's Open Space Theatre on 11 November 1970 and was published four years later. Employing four separate stages, speakers blaring various voices, and actors interrupting and speaking over one another's lines, the play concerns the self-immolation of the Czech student Jan Palach, who died on 16 January 1969 protesting the Soviet invasion and occupation of his country. The multiple stages and conflicting voices remind one once again of Burns's commitment to random methods of storytelling, and the play's theme reflects the author's continuing concern with the sacrifice of youth and the overwhelming power of the state.

For ten weeks in the summer of 1971 Burns was the first holder of the Henfield Fellowship (with a stipend of £600) at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, where he spent most of his time writing. Here he gave a pair of lectures ("Writing by Accident," which explored various aleatoric writing methods, and "The Novel of the Future"), held weekly writers' workshops, and helped found and edit a magazine of student creative writing.

In 1972 *Buster* was published by Red Dust Books of New York, marking both its first American and first separate publication. Burns also had two new works published in 1972: *To Deprave and Corrupt*, a study of pornography and censorship; and *Dreamerika!: A Surrealist Fantasy*, his fifth novel. Since he had gone as far as he felt he could with the fragmented technique in *Babel*, Burns attempted to give the reader of *Dreamerika!* specific points of reference for his collagelike images in the figures of the Kennedy clan. Using offset litho printing, the novel combines a fantastic vision of the family with cuttings from newspaper headlines that act as commentaries on and counterpoints to the fiction's activities. As Burns describes it, "I played hell with the documented facts, made crazy distortions of the alleged truth, in order to get some humour out of it, and also to raise questions about the nature of documentary realism. Screwing up the story made some very undocumentary truths emerge."

Once again the themes of the power of the state and of the family fueled by rivalry and torn apart by death are immediately recognizable. In Burns's hands the Kennedys become the embodiments of the American dream in its most mercenary and exploitative form, with the reality of the dream suffusing all action and painting an emotional landscape of a culture gone awry.

Although roundly criticized as bitter and cruel, the work is an especially important one in Burns's career because it marks a turning point in his artistic development. While it uses the cut-up, collage effects of *Babel* and the surreal exaggerations of his earlier works, *Dreamerika!* also represents a recovery from the artistic dead end that *Babel* implied. By linking the fragmented method to a comprehensible narrative line, Burns was able to give this "surrealist fantasy," as he calls it, the cohesion that his earlier work lacked. The penultimate chapter, in which grandson Joe Kennedy dallies with communes and Marxism, foreshadows the lost revolutionaries who people Burns's next novel, *The Angry Brigade* (1973).

In 1973 Burns was again awarded an Arts Council Bursary and held the C. Day Lewis Writing Fellowship at Woodberry Down School in London. In the same year he and eleven other writers-- among them Margaret Drabble, Johnson, Piers Paul Reid, Themerson, and John Brunner--published a "group novel," *London Consequences*, commissioned and published by the Greater London Arts Association. Meeting

one evening in Drabble's house in Hampstead, the group assigned each contributor a separate chapter, and the entire project was completed in ten weeks.

Also in 1973 another novel, *The Angry Brigade*, was published. Here Burns again experiments with documentary realism in what is ostensibly a transcription of tape-recorded interviews with six London revolutionaries. Extending the method of *Dreamerika!*, he relies less on the subconscious for his material than on found pieces woven into a fictional framework. While in the preface the author contends that he met and interviewed six people, Burns admits in a letter to David W. Madden that the work is entirely fictional. He did, however, interview subjects,

mainly friends who agreed to talk with me about many matters unconnected with the book's content. I transcribed the tapes and then altered them to suit my purpose, the book's purpose. Thus I retained, I hope, the convincing rhythm of real speech and thus helped maintain the fiction of a journalistic coup--real interviews with real members of the Brigade. As an example, one of very many: I talked with and taped a friend who'd been on a series of visits to the dentist. She'd been scared and nervous about the visits. Also the dentist and his nurse had the habit of talking to each other, rather intimately, "over the patient's head." The resulting discomfort-tending-toward-paranoia characterised the story my friend told. I transcribed the tape and then changed, particularly the nouns, to make the story fit one of my character's recollection of attending meetings of a faction of the Brigade at which she had felt rather intimidated, a bit scared, and had the sense that the others were discussing rather dangerous topics "over her head."

Divided into six chapters, which are then broken into the language and recollections of the four men and two women, *The Angry Brigade* presents the ignorant, misguided, and selfish attempts of a group of young, disaffected street kids and pseudo-intellectuals who vainly try to make a "political statement." Such statements result in the occupation and defacement of the Ministry of Housing, an action that brings about the five-year imprisonment of one member; the bombing of a railway embankment, which blinds a child, leads to the arrest of one of the women, and prompts another member to flee to his native India; the bombing of the Post Office Tower, which kills a waitress; and an ambush on police, with uncertain casualties.

Employing his now characteristic political theme, Burns shows the conflict between the powers of the state and the personal sacrifice made by some of the youths. However, the seriousness of many of the revolutionaries' actions is undercut by their own internecine power struggles and forms of personal and gender inequity. Ultimately the novel reveals not only the state's deadly powers but also the ways in

which victims and the exploited can easily turn into victimizers and exploiters. Burns, however, has admitted to a rather different intention for his work:

I wrote the novel in protest against, and with the intention of off-setting, the demonizing of the members of The Angry Brigade in the press and other media. However, the book was pretty widely reviewed, and generally seen as an attack on the "real" Brigade, satirizing them, depicting their petty squabbles, their male chauvinism, and so on. Those negatives were part of my intended subtle characterization of people I did not see as simple heroes and heroines, but with whom I had many sympathies.

Although it uses the collage technique once again, the book is scrupulously controlled and concise. Unlike the profusion of voices that confound the reader of *Babel*, the differing voices in *The Angry Brigade* establish varying points of view for the same incident and thus question assumptions about the nature of verifiable facts. Burns uses ambiguity to reinforce the tension and paranoia that animate these lives. And, like the children in his earlier novels, the youths in this novel, dispossessed of their biological families and frightened by their own confusion and isolation, strive to create a pathetic substitute family in their commune. Casually dismissed by many critics, *The Angry Brigade* is actually one of Burns's strongest works.

Feeling artistically exhausted and financially strapped, Burns accepted a position in 1975 as senior tutor in creative writing at the Western Australian Institute of Technology in South Bentley, Australia. He spent his time teaching fiction writing and also oversaw a student production of *Palach* that was performed at the National Australian Student Drama Festival in Sydney. In the same year Hutchinson published *Beyond the Words*, an anthology, edited by Giles Gordon, of works by eleven contemporary British novelists. Burns's contributions consist of a particularly revealing essay about his fictional methods and concerns and a short story, "Wonderland."

Prepared at first to remain permanently in Australia, he nevertheless returned to London the next year to accept an Arts Council Fellowship. There, attached to the City Literary Institute, Burns enjoyed a good deal of free time for writing and the generosity of a £4,000 stipend. In 1977 he returned to teaching, accepting a position in the English department at the University of Minnesota, where he remained until 1993. In 1978 he and his second wife, Jean, had a child, Katherine Anne. While on leave in England in 1981, Burns turned five years of note taking and writing into his seventh novel, *The Day Daddy Died*. Returning to the domestic theme, the novel presents a tough, working-class woman, Norah, who, despite repeated pregnancies and financial difficulties, perseveres. During the Depression her father loses his job and later dies, leaving a lonely, adolescent Norah to find a succession of lover-father

surrogates. Despite her poverty she manages to raise five children, the eldest of whom commits suicide, but unlike Burns's other fictional families, which ultimately tear one another apart, this family bands together and eventually buys the woman her first house.

Interwoven with this narrative, which is delivered in a conversational, straightforward manner, is a second story of a girl who has a love affair with her father. This narrative strand is highly surreal, and the novel shifts back and forth between the two modes. Interspersed with both of these are photo-collages by Ian Breakwell, which form a parallel narrative of memories and imaginings that float through the book. Despite the generally cool response, a review in *The Times Literary Supplement* was especially favorable and insightful.

Several months later Allison and Busby published another book, *The Imagination on Trial*. Coedited with University of Minnesota colleague Charles Sugnet, this is a series of interviews of twelve contemporary British and American novelists, including Burns, Alan Sillitoe, John Gardner, John Hawkes, J. G. Ballard, Michael Moorcock, Eva Figes, Grace Paley, Ishmael Reed, Wilson Harris, Tom Mallin, and B. S. Johnson. The interviews focus on the ways each writer's ideas germinate and evolve into fictions.

Burns's next novel, *Revolutions of the Night* (1986), in many ways hearkens back to techniques and concerns of his earlier fictions. Once again a Max Ernst painting--this time Ernst's *Revolution by Night* (1923)--inspires the novel's title and strongly hints at still another exploration of the domestic and familial themes. Once more, dreams, the workings of the unconscious, and surreal effects are clearly manifested. In fact, the last chapter, which is highly surreal and confusing, is actually an exactly precise description of Ernst's painting *Europe after the Rain*, suggesting a movement full circle in Burns's career. This passage also exemplifies a narrative technique used throughout the novel, where detailed descriptions of various paintings or sketches by Ernst suddenly invade and blend with the workings of plot. The effect is obviously startling and disorienting yet dramatic proof of Burns's renewed commitment to the vision that has informed his entire career.

The story involves the death of a mother, who is replaced by her husband's lover. The children, Hazel and Harry, are emotionally unhinged and fall into an incestuous relationship. Later Hazel turns her attention to a middle-aged capitalist named Bob, whom she jettisons from a hot-air balloon, while Harry takes up with a cocktail waitress named Louise. Eventually the siblings escape to the country for a brief pastoral interlude that is destroyed when invaders murder Hazel and threaten her brother.

In his description of Ernst's painting *Europe after the Rain*, Burns writes that "caught between two pillars was a youth, blindfolded and gagged," and this image of a young person trapped between intractable forces is a perfect metaphor for the situation in all of Burns's fictions. In each of his works the young are sacrificed by the selfishness and obsessions of their elders, yet they continually struggle, like young Palach, for a freedom that is rarely achieved. Burns describes the connection between dreams, surrealism, and the yearning for freedom in this way: "we are free in our dreams. Not only free, but we are expressing those deep impulses that, if unleashed, are upsetting to the social order. And anything that expresses the essence of our free selves is itself subversive and dangerous to the hierarchy and the settled order. That's what my books are about, I hope, to share that, to push it."

In 1993 Burns returned to England, a return prompted by a definite sense of cultural unease, as he explains in a letter: "my connection with the States was never solid and uninterrupted. I also had very strong reservations about the US political setup. Great country to have a good job in, hell if not. On the buses I saw Dickensian poverty, faces and bodies mutilated by bad diet and living conditions. I was appalled by the desecration of that beautiful land. . . . I think, those unfamiliar accents got on my nerves . . . more the timbre than the accent maybe. . . . those years [were a] kind of exile that made me discover how English I felt, my delight at being here, the greens, the way folks are with each other--not to idealize, for the same lousy Tory lot [were] in power, [and I] think the English upper classes are even more obnoxious than your rotten gang, but there it is."

Currently Burns is at work on four separate nonfiction projects; "Art by Accident" is nearly completed. The book represents the culmination of and elaboration on his earlier essay on aleatoric art, where the creator, by design or chance, has allowed random forces to determine the result of the artistic process. The book is unique in its broad range of references and in its multidisciplinary approach; novelists, poets, painters, and composers are all represented, and the work demonstrates a spirit of mutual dependence and influence among these media.

A second work in progress is a biography of his close friend and colleague, Johnson. Burns attempts to capture the diversity of Johnson's personality, moods, and influences on others through a variety of sources, assembled in a fashion that has much in common with the fragmentational method he has used in his fiction. Another biography, provisionally titled "Gangster," examines the life of the British convict Frank Cook, who has spent most of his adult life incarcerated. At age thirty-eight Cook began sculpting in prison and showed such promise that a pair of his works have been exhibited at the Metropolitan Gallery in New York. Burns's approach is in no way apologetic, à la Norman Mailer with Jack Henry Abbott; both convict and biographer are quick to reveal the scope of Cook's vicious past, but he is nevertheless humanized by the close inspection of his life and motives.

"Imaginary Dictionary," the fourth work in progress, is in the tradition of "alternative" dictionaries by such writers as Gustave Flaubert and Ambrose Beirce. It is by turns playful and profound but is always subversive: words become animated and assume unique characteristics independent of their traditional usages and the expectations of readers. Parts of the Johnson biography and the dictionary were published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* in the summer of 1997.

All of Burns's emphasis on fragmentation, the cut-up method, surreal intrusions, and wild juxtapositions may suggest rather formidable reading. After all, Burns has admitted that he wants "to shock readers into a new awareness" and that he seeks "to work more like a painter than a writer; place images side by side and let them say something uncertain and fluctuating. This work will not be literary and will not lead to discussion or redefinition, but simply exist--like a Magritte painting." Such remarks may give the impression of an utterly anarchic art, but this is not the case.

At the heart of these methods of fictional disorientation is Burns's resistance to traditional notions of the novel and his rejection of any idea of the genre as being an inflexible monolith of changeless features. "The great attraction of the novel," he has said, "lies in its search for form. The secret may lie in the word novel itself. If it's new, then it's novel." Thus the novel, in his view, is malleable and accommodating to the mutable nature of a writer's and audience's perceptions, and by insisting that it shares in the characteristics of painting, Burns reveals his adamant concern for hard, concrete prose, a prose that is nearly palpable and strongly visual. Scenes and chapters often have an almost independent relationship with their larger narrative, which is nowhere more obvious than in *Babel*.

Burns is also a writer of strong ideological convictions that, while deeply held, never prompt him to lapse into didactic preaching. His political beliefs and his aesthetic proclivities underscore a deeply humanist point of view. "It sounds pathetic--this avant-garde novelist wanting to change the world--but I do, I simply want to leave it a little bit better." Burns is a champion of individual freedom and consistently attempts to reveal those forces that would stunt or limit expressions of individuality. As he explains, "Like others, I have in a way been writing and rewriting the same basic book, again and again. All that material about the recurrent father figures, and the father-State, and the absent mother, and the young man dead." Such a characterization might imply simple repetition, yet what this description reveals is the consistency of his vision and his steadfast dedication to opposing the most destructive tendencies of human beings.

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