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A Response to John Watters, "The Control Machine: Myth in *The Soft Machine* of W. S. Burroughs*

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It's no calligraphy for school children.
Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony"

Four decades of critical reaction to William Burroughs has generated so much more heat than light that his position has stayed paradoxical: a figure of widely recognised cultural influence—indeed in multiple fields, from Beat to Cyberpunk, his presence is iconic— Burroughs remains a canonically marginal writer, *sui generis* to the point of monstrosity, a man gone too far beyond too many personal and artistic pales for serious literary attention. Over recent years, the noisy voices of extreme reverence and repulsion have at last given way to more considered analysis and assessment. And yet this more measured academic response may, perversely, subtract as much as it adds to our understanding, especially of his most radical work. This is because, finally, the response of the critical world may be only as Manichean as Burroughs' writing has itself demanded. Polarities tell us something that middle ways cannot, after the fashion of Burroughs' own radical extravagances, which reached their zenith in the cut-up 1960s—the recklessness of those experimental methods, the scandalous recycling of his homoerotic fantasies, the provocative brinkmanship of his prophetic theses, above all the sinister, viral, force of words that infect the imagination. The partisan, fragmentary, *inadequate* state of Burroughs criticism may, in short, accurately measure the absolutely extreme ambivalence, both emotional and ideological, about the power of the word itself, that unites Burroughs' work.

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*Reference: John G. Watters, "The Control Machine: Myth in *The Soft Machine* of W. S. Burroughs," *Connotations* 5.2-3 (1995/96): 284-303.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <http://www.connotations.de/debwatters00523.htm>

I offer this broad, impressionistic sketch as a context for responding to John Watters' analysis of "The Control Machine" for two purposes. Firstly, because one of the key issues raised by Burroughs' work has always been its relation to other work. Hence the weary critical catch-22: if genuinely different, then his work is anomalous, even irrelevant; if firmly embedded in a tradition, then its originality, and claim to our attention, fades before the denaturing embrace. In the case of myth this reductive opposition is particularly relevant, as Watters' uncertainty in the face of Burroughs' new "mythology for the space age" hints. Indeed, we have been here before: twenty years ago one critic recouped a trilogy of Burroughs' 1950s texts (*Junkie*, "In Search of Yage," *The Naked Lunch*) inside the archetypal structure of the quest narrative, via Joseph Campbell's primordial monomyth, enabling him to argue for Burroughs' readability against claims for his works' ultra-novelty.[1] Watters, in fact, says nothing about Burroughs' space age mythology, entirely passes over the cosmic conflict between the Nova Mob and Nova Police that is played out across the wounded galaxies of his so-called cut-up trilogy of the 1960s (*The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, *Nova Express*). This is a loud silence, given the focus of Watters' article, and yet one that is understandable for reasons that lead on to my contextualising sketch's second purpose.

The state of Burroughs criticism is such that *The Soft Machine* has been read, if at all, in one of two ways.[2] Jennie Skerl's introductory primer, *William S. Burroughs* (1985) offered the generalised, thematic reading. She did this by reconstructing five stages of Burroughs' mythological narrative in chronological order, even though, as she acknowledges, this is not how they appear in the text. Skerl's approach here is consistent with her other critical move, which is to isolate these five sustained narrative sections from the rest of *The Soft Machine*, and to claim that they, not the cut-up material, dominate the reader's interpretation: for Skerl, the most significant section—"The Mayan Caper," with which Watters also deals—is the most straightforward exposition. (As we shall see, there is a precise irony to her comments that "the fantasy that is earliest in time is actually placed at the end of the book," and that "The Mayan Caper" is crucial because of its "central placement in the text.")[3] Perversely, by making sense of the text and its mythic narrative in this

way, Skerl not so much reads against the grain as she utterly undoes the text, restoring—or, rather, creating—the very coherent linearity that Burroughs refused. Watters' silence is therefore wise, to the degree that such exposition may be unwise. For reasons we shall see are central, Burroughs' space age mythology is not in fact amenable to lucid, systematic summary. The alternative line of analysis, one that pays close attention to the actual reading experience, to our encounter with the text, has been modelled by Robin Lydenberg, in her deconstructive *Word Cultures* (1988). Although Watters does not cite Lydenberg, his analysis certainly follows in her pioneering wake, if only because her starting point was precisely the recognition that Burroughs' cut-up texts had been dismissed without "ever having been rigorously examined."[4] However, Lydenberg's merits as a ground-breaker have not been matched by her value as a ground-layer, and it is here that Watters' article is in need of serious review. To get a measure of Lydenberg's failure, consider this: that James Joyce's aesthetic progressed from *Finnegans Wake* to *Ulysses*, and from *Portrait of the Artist* to *Dubliners*. Once more, accurate chronology is the issue and, as we shall again see, the effects of getting this wrong are dramatic because Burroughs' development across time is essential. Finally, if adequate textual analysis requires attention to chronological development, this is equally the case for Burroughs' methodologies of textual production. Watters' foundational error, which he shares with other Burroughs critics, is to treat as static and singular what was dynamic and multiple and subject to change. When Watters, like Skerl and Lydenberg, refers to "the cut-up" and to "*The Soft Machine*," his language contradicts the force of his own analysis, grounded as it is in an understanding of Burroughs' central concern: precisely, language.

Having advanced so many critical claims, I had best begin at the beginning. Watters notes that *The Soft Machine* was first published in 1961, was Burroughs' first work to incorporate the cut-up method, and was followed by *The Ticket That Exploded* and *Nova Express*. Three basic observations, but each in need of revision and expansion. Firstly, Watters passes over *Minutes to Go* and *The Exterminator* (both 1960), which were the collaborative manuals and manifestos of the methodology. Effectively ignored by Burroughs' critics, these short texts, whose titles set the tone

of apocalyptic threat, marked a "first stage" of experiment and promotion. In brief, they offered to disseminate a technique for individual production, rather than a product for mass consumption, and so made clear that what was to be produced by cut-up methods should not be understood as artistic except in the sense of a liberating life praxis, in the tradition of the Surrealist maxims of Breton and Lautréamont: that poetry should be *practised*, and that poetry should be made *by all*. This crude, polemical stage is crucial to approaching Burroughs' full-length cut-up texts, because it enables us to understand his shift of emphasis: from the material activity of cutting-up to producing texts that are themselves productive. Secondly, Watters is disingenuous concerning the sequence and substance of the cut-up trilogy. For this has to be the most bizarre trilogy ever written: three titles, indeed, but *six* different texts! (*The Soft Machine* exists in three quite different versions, published in 1961, 1966, and 1968, while *The Ticket That Exploded* exists in two different versions, 1962 and 1967. *Nova Express*, 1964, alone went unrevised.) So garbled is the history of these texts that the first title—*The Soft Machine* (1961)—has become the last text (1968), and the last title—*Nova Express*—has ended up the earliest text (1964). As completed, the trilogy manages to reverse beginnings and ends, to lose its centre—and to confuse the critics. Now we can appreciate the irony of Skerl's manipulations of *The Soft Machine*—all the more so, since the narrative myth she identifies as "central" was not present in the original text—as failures to recognise how Burroughs revised both text and project over time.

Although they are well known, these revisions have important consequences that have not been addressed. Sequence becomes an issue for Burroughs' development, as it does for the identity of any specified text—and it only ceases to be an issue if these awkward niceties are remaindered among the footnotes. When Watters refers to *The Soft Machine* as if it were a physically single, historically stable, fixed entity, his analysis elides seven years of development, and forgets that the text he cites marks both the origin and terminal point of Burroughs' book-length experiments. The transgressions of textual stability performed by these repeated revisions matter doubly because they act out in the literary history of Burroughs' Sixties trilogy the same

procedures enacted within each text: in fact, I would argue that it was in the nature of cut-up methods, a direct result of their key features rather than of any theoretical position, that necessarily led Burroughs to make his revisions. This brings us to the third, and most elementary, of Watters' claims. Typically, Burroughs critics refer loosely to "the cut-up"; Watters refers to "the cut-up itself." Now, there are cut-up practices and there are cut-up texts, and there is the cut-up project, but there is no such thing as "the cut-up *itself*."

In other contexts, the above may well be pedantry. Here it is of the essence. "The cut-up," as an abstraction fixed by a definite article, must stand as the very antithesis of what is under discussion, and represents exactly the reductive, falsifying, essentialising kind of linguistic usage against which Burroughs deployed his cut-up methods in the first place. We need as much specificity and precision as possible: Burroughs employed a *range* of cut-up *procedures*, which resulted in *a range* of cut-up *texts*, which created a *range* of *effects* and served a *range* of *purposes*, while both procedures and results *varied* and were *revised* over time—as evidenced by the trilogy's on-going revisions. This recognition is essential if we are to get the measure of *The Soft Machines* (sic), because it faces us with the two central and distinguishing facts of Burroughs' cut-up project. One, that it was *experimental*, and two that it was based on *material practices*. Both facts critically informed Burroughs' understanding of language far more than any of the theoretical models (such as Korzybski's General Semantics) on which he drew, and both ensured that there was no cut-up "itself."[5]

Understanding Burroughs' experimentalism allows us to elaborate upon the key to Watters' analysis: Burroughs' articulation of language as a technology of control. When Watters writes that *The Soft Machine*'s "fantastic narratives" "take the hypothesis" constituting "the myth of control," he argues from the same position as other critics, who, for example, claim that "Burroughs narrativizes this theory in his cut-up 'trilogy.'"[6] The twin assumption is that theory and myth alike somehow exist in full prior to the texts, and that these can be extracted or abstracted from them. The problem here is specific, but also indicative. For Watters' silence concerning the Nova mythology—in favour of identifying local elements, such as his intriguing analysis of Kali—wit-

nesses a failure to comprehend it that is ironically appropriate. That is, at a basic level, Burroughs' mythological system fails—because as a system it must fail. Contra Skerl, the system does not, cannot, add up. It remains necessarily obscure, partial, contradictory. It can only work on the most elementary level—the fixed paradigmatic axis of Manichean conflict, pitting Nova Cops against Nova Robbers—precisely because the cut-up text is committed to as much freedom as possible on the syntagmatic axis, deploying the random to sabotage the rigid.[7] Elsewhere, Watters knows this: recognising that the cut-up text is exemplary of the "unknown, the unpredictable, the uncontrollable" which Burroughs valorizes against the forces of determinism. In Burroughs' mythology there exists only Heaven and Hell:[8]

> Hell consists of falling into enemy hands, into the hands of the virus power, and heaven consists of freeing oneself from this power, of achieving inner freedom, freedom from conditioning. I may add that none of the characters in my mythology are free. If they were free they would not still be in the mythological system, that is, in the cycle of conditioned action.

As Roland Barthes argued, in terms eerily consistent with those of Burroughs, "the very end of myths is to immobilize the world": "Thus every day and everywhere, man is stopped by myths, referred by them to this motionless prototype which lives in his place, stifles him in the manner of a huge internal parasite and assigns to his activity the narrow limits within which he is allowed to suffer without upsetting the world."[9] Taking a view more sociobiological than social, Burroughs' premise is that the "human race was fixed from the beginning,"[10] in the sense that our life scripts are written even before birth: that is, genetically encoded in the "soft machine" of the body. The war against linguistic determinism, for Burroughs, began at home—not merely in the structuralist sense of language constituting rather than expressing the subject, but also in the biological sense of the DNA code: presciently, some of the very first texts he cut up concerned virus, genetic, and cancer research, early and ominous steps in "deciphering the language of life" (*Minutes to Go* 60).[11] (Thirty years on, the Harvard sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson would define the brain as "an exposed negative waiting to be slipped into developer fluid.")[12] Accordingly, the strategic

response of Burroughs' characters, his agents of resistance, always emphasises the metamorphic dynamic of his own position: "His plan called for total exposure—Wise up the marks everywhere show them the rigged wheel—Storm the Reality Studio and retake the Universe—The plan shifted and reformed as reports came in" (*The Soft Machine* 144). The final phrases are crucial: the plan *must* shift and re-form.[13] Committed, like William Blake, to "Creating a System or be enslav'd by another Man's," Burroughs goes one step further, and refuses to be enslaved by his own,[14] or to pass off on his readers what Derrida termed a "white mythology."[15] And so the battle plan must shift because it needs to remain mobile, subject to feedback, and so as to maintain the guerrilla's strategic advantage. "Since our theater is under constant attack it must be constantly shifted and re-created."[16] As the plan and the theatre of operations must shift, so too must the myth and the theory.

Burroughs' military terms here are an important dramatisation of his avant-gardism, but, as so often with Burroughs, they apply literally rather than figuratively. That is, the inspiration of his science-fiction scenarios is emphatically *operational* rather than metaphorical,[17] his narratives designed to produce effects rather than to represent them. Burroughs' decade-long applications of cut-up methods—beyond the text, to tape, film, photomontage—took on the appearance of laboratory-to-field research: it is as plausible to say, with Ian MacFadyen, that Burroughs' scientificism led to extraordinary artistic results, as it is to say, with Jan Herman, that he produced scientific results from artistic intentions.[18] Burroughs always insisted on the experimental as a practice, as when he recommended them to Allen Ginsberg in 1960: "Don't theorize. Try it."[19] From the start, his cut-up methods were material activities intended to produce material results. The cut-up project thus began by being profoundly ante-, even anti-theoretical. Over time it then *produced* theory in the same way as it produced texts. This process has never been recognised by critics who talk of "the theory of the cut-up"; for while Burroughs, and his collaborator Brion Gysin, wrote numerous expository texts, these do not add up to a coherent, consistent, fully articulated theorized programme. Indeed, they were unable to progress beyond limited polemic and instruction. At a certain point they were always

forced back into practice, obliged to cut-up their attempts to theorize, visibly demonstrating that anything other than methodological exemplification risked missing the point. Hence the permutation of a key three paragraph statement to produce a four page text, under the title, "Cut-Ups *Self-Explained*."[20]

The experimental for Burroughs was speculative in a scientific sense—pushing beyond known limits, achieving provisional results, revising data, testing out alternative functions and forms. This exploratory, dynamic economy was grounded in the very nature of the physical activity of cutting-up—the whole point of which is that the results are potentially infinite and cannot be predicted in advance of the scissors' slicing. Therefore the results would inevitably be judged according to the experimental value of interest rather than by the normative criterion of quality, discovery taking precedence over creation. And since the outcomes were prized for being unforseeable, Burroughs would periodically suffer under his writing-machine's semi-autonomous momentum. At the time of their inception, Burroughs' key collaborator, Brion Gysin, predicted a "Project for Disastrous Success"—and the verdict may stand in retrospect too.

The historical context might be elaborated here, to situate Burroughs' work within both the "linguistic turn" of the structuralist Sixties, and within the resurgence of other collage-based practices during the same decade. In particular, Burroughs' project ought to be considered in relation to debates about the relationship between the historical and neo-avant-gardes. For Peter Burger, whose *Theory of the Avant-Garde* remains the central text on the subject, the historical avant-garde failed—but failed heroically—whereas the post-war neo-avant-garde could only play out a "farcical repetition" as the once transgressive became institutional, and the anti-aesthetic artistic.[21] As Watters astutely observes in a footnote, at the time Burroughs himself inscribed within his cut-up texts the burden of that original failure—for example, dismissing photomontage as like "charging a regiment of tanks with a defective slingshot" (*Nova Express* 42)[22]—but, when he looked back two decades later, his verdict on Dada ("They deserved to lose for such vapid nonsense") uneasily resembles that passed on his own project: "It all reads like sci-fi from here. Not very good sci-fi, but real enough

at the time. . . . Maybe we lost. And this is what happens when you lose" (*The Western Lands* 14, 252).[23] This is of course a large subject—beyond the horizon of the present article—but it does raise crucial questions begged by Watters' argument. His claims for the subversive political potency of Burroughs' texts, which follow in the tradition of Lydenberg, rest on assumptions that the visible recuperation of the avant-garde should call to account. Adorno's well-known culture-industry thesis, that the avant-garde is to capital what research is to development, has been more successfully updated than refuted. At times Burroughs himself certainly presumed too much on the efficacy of his textual strategies, as if his "Machine-Age Knife Magic" could scientifically perfect the Surrealist plan to transform the world by transforming the word. And so in "The Mayan Caper" the way to dismantle "the control machine" rests on a premise too easy, too final: "I had only to mix the order of recordings and the order of images and the changed order would be picked up and fed back into the machine" (*The Soft Machine* 76). This simplified equation of sequence with command structure bears, politically, down upon Watters' major claim for *The Soft Machine*: that it "seeks to attack the use of language by institutions" (285). If language is truly determinant, then the social and political fields can be only symptomatic and secondary extensions—parasitic upon an original viral parasite given to invasion, occupation and irreversible damage, the virus being "an organism with no internal function other than to replicate itself."[24] Politicised readings, in short, are necessary but not sufficient for Burroughs' work, since the site of causality and so of change is for him always beyond history: "What we call history is the history of the word. In the beginning of *that* history was the word."[25] On the assumption that Watters might have added the institution of literature to those he does specify—religious, political, economic—I want now to shift from broad arguments to precise textual analysis, by reviewing Watters' own close-reading of a passage from *The Soft Machine*, ending this article by focusing on the beginning of that text, appositely entitled "Dead on Arrival."

To begin by summarising Watters' procedure. He subjects his selected passage to three kinds of response: one identified as "the prose-poem approach"; the second as a way "to integrate the surroundings into the

text"; and a third, incorporating the others, which "analyses the effect of that reading" (288-89). Watters prefaces his commentary by observing that he needs to quote at length "in order to illustrate, at least to some extent, the problem of actually reading a cut-up" (288). Problem is certainly the *mot juste*. Firstly, because the illustrative value is open to question: apparently chosen quite arbitrarily, the passage under scrutiny can in no sense be taken as representative, given the overdetermined nature of both cut-up techniques and textual results. (This was also Lydenberg's mistake: to generalise from specific analysis, an error doubled by her confusion of textual chronology.)[26] Secondly, Watters does not quote at sufficient length to render the problematic of reading—nor could he, in this particular instance, without reproducing the entire section, which runs to five pages. To clarify: Watters rightly warns against reconstructing the text in order to fix on it a specific meaning. Focusing on a single line—"Freight boat smell of rectal mucous went down off England with all dawn smell of distant fingers"—he concludes: "Each reading opens up new possibilities, and the rules of grammar do not apply as they are not used" (289). The error in the second half of this claim—Burroughs' mode of juxtaposition patently does observe at least minimal grammatical rules—is less pressing than that in the first half. Critics have routinely talked of "new possibilities"—Burroughs himself claimed as much—but I would argue that this overstates the case in general and here misses the particular point. Due to his—understandable—selective quotation, Watters keeps back the essential context for both this line and the passage as a whole, and thereby withholds the text's own implied instructions for use.

The text entitled "Dead on Arrival" is very deliberately structured in three parts. Firstly, we are presented with a realist, if elliptically composed, first-person narrative depicting the familiar world of drug addiction. At a certain point it becomes undecidable whether this narration constitutes a single scene, punctuated by memories, or whether it is formed from a succession of such scenes, economically juxtaposed. This sense of witnessing discrete elements in combination coincides with a series of precise verbal returns, repeated phrases that suggest structurally the closed circularity of the addict's world. It is at this point in the text that we encounter the first cut-up passage: "There is a boy

sitting like your body. I see he is a hook" (8). Far from opening up new potentials, these lines insist on being read in relation to their preceding originals: "There is a boy sitting at the counter thin-faced kid his eyes all pupil . . . I see he is hooked" (7). The element of shock—at the semantic incongruities—coincides with recognition, so that surprise and familiarity affect the reader simultaneously. The effect of this recycling has to be registered in thematic context: the stale, dead-end, repetitious experience of addiction, with its meaninglessly familiar rituals of waiting, scoring, pushing. This passage is then followed by another alternation of narrative and cut-up prose, culminating with a free-floating line of dialogue admitting defeat in the fight against addiction: "I can't make it" (9). The next line provides a structural hinge for the text's second part: *"Imposible quitar eso."* As the translation indicates, the scene now shifts from North American locales (Long Island, St Louis) to Spanish-speaking locations (Morocco, Madrid, Mexico). With this linguistic and geographic shift, the world of endless addiction now meets its end, and gives way to multiple scenes of death that trace a tragic orbit around the narrator—death by overdose, drowning, hanging, stabbing. These scenes, again narrated elliptically, are likewise cut up, but with a difference. Now we encounter the recombined or fragmentary elements in advance of their coherent narrative contexts, as well as after them. This was a structure Burroughs would exploit on a massive scale to produce temporal as well as semantic dislocations in the reading experience. Here the effect of anticipation has once again to be measured in context, demonstrating less the predetermination of an imposed identity than the persistence of memory through language. Finally, the text concludes with the passage selected by Watters, a third, terminal post-script in effect, which consists of a cut-up reworking of the previous two parts.

When Watters acknowledges that "some of the material used in this cut-up undoubtedly" came from the preceding pages (288), he therefore severely understates the case. In fact practically *all* the material in his chosen passage derives from the previous pages, while the structural relation between these parts is clearly calculated.[27] In the case of the cited line, we have read every word before: more to the point, we are clearly expected to recognise the repetition and recombination as such.

Necessarily, we are invited to analyse the procedures by which the text is created and recreated, and, having experienced the way words manipulate and can be manipulated, to reflect on Burroughs' position that the status quo is an infernal machine, fatal in any language—hence his use of the choric refrain, itself repeated from the last lines of *The Naked Lunch*, to frame the cut-up final part of "Dead on Arrival": "No good. No bueno." (10, 11) In short, it is the reading experience—so carefully and visibly manipulated by Burroughs, so *dominant*—that should determine our approach to this text.

However full the above contextualisation may appear, I have in fact but scratched one textual surface. For here we have to consider both the location and character of this material within *The Soft Machine* as a whole. Fortuitously, Watters' choice turns out to be especially interesting and revealing. Imagine a reader who has encountered each of Burroughs' three versions of *The Soft Machine*, and read them in sequence. Such a reader would not only have already read this material twice before, but would now encounter it in a third distinctly different form (Watters cites the final edition). Bizarrely, this text itself now constitutes a trilogy, and achieves through its revised states the recombinatory logic of any one of its conditions.[28] Two significances are paramount. Firstly, in the 1961 original this material was located near the very end; secondly, it stands out clearly from the rest of that text. Far from being representative, it is absolutely atypical. What makes it so is that this was the only episode of sustained autobiographical narrative. To give a detailed example: the freight boat that sank off England was the *Gerda Toft*, which went down on 23 December 1954, carrying with it a friend identified in *The Soft Machine* as "Leif repatriated by the Danish" (10).[29] There are two rejoinders to those who would cry, "Autobiographical fallacy!" Firstly, that "Dead on Arrival" is recognisable as a reprise of Burroughs' life-story: "William" is directly addressed in its dialogue, while the events, names, and itinerary are all familiar from other texts. Secondly, external reference only confirms the procedures played out within the text: the cut-up operations evidently work on the return of personal memory, on memories textualised, trapped like ghosts in the circuits of language. Indeed, "Dead on Arrival" makes repeated intertextual relations back to *Junkie* (1953) and *The Naked*

Lunch (1959), so that its recycling of addiction images takes place across and through as well as within Burroughs' texts. It is exactly this experience of haunting, of the traces of moments lived and lost, of the persistence of the past and of identity through language repetition, that the cut-up text reproduces explicitly for the reader as conjuration and exorcism. Watters' focus on *institutional* targets is, therefore, too limited and limiting. More to the point, as he ably documents, Burroughs' methods developed in parallel to his involvement with Scientology, whose system of Dianetics promised individual psychic hygiene and emotional deconditioning through techniques of repetition.

Burroughs' decision to shift his material reveals much about his reworkings of *The Soft Machine*. Whereas the original edition began with a fragmentary science-fiction scenario, within which were embedded didactic appeals—"Come out of the Time-word 'The' forever. Come out of the Body Word 'Thee' forever" (11)—this was displaced in favour of a text that was methodologically more exemplary, textually more familiar, and that grounds *The Soft Machine* in the dislocations of a single subjectivity.[30] I see this as one of a number of moves Burroughs made in order to recuperate his cut-up texts: alongside a wholesale deletion of the most dense cut-up material—material balanced on a knife-edge of boredom and nausea; and the insertion of coherent narrative sections, such as "The Mayan Caper." This was only evidence of the experimental logic of his project, whose results had to be either discarded or revised in the light of subsequent practices, theoretical understandings, and re-readings. And so, while his interviews and statements published as *The Job* (1970) are often cited in relation to his Sixties experiments, most telling is the distance he puts between his positions during and at the end of the decade: "when I said that I was perhaps going a bit far"; "I think I was being over-optimistic," and so on.[31] My point is that it was inevitable that the cut-up project would go too far, be too optimistic, and inevitable that Burroughs should return to, rewrite, and try to recover his texts. To avoid the polarities of valorisation and dismissal, it is necessary to recognise that the cut-up project had a complex, at times traumatic history—given Burroughs' investment in his techniques as therapeutic tools, each dead-end was not just aesthetic but emotional. Although this is not the place to develop the psychology of the cut-up

project, we ought to ask what kind of trauma is played out in the obsessive self-woundings of the cut-up text, what individual and collective neurosis is manifested through the melancholic activity of such obsessive collecting and cutting—and why the results are so disturbing.

It seems fitting to reach a terminal point suggested by Watters' invocation of Plato's cave. In Book VII of *The Republic*: "If they could lay hands on the man who was trying to set them free and lead them up, they would kill him."[32] These are salutary words. It is easy enough to agree with Lydenberg's argument that the logic of *The Soft Machine* is that, if the self is sufficiently fragmented, "one will no longer fear its loss."[33] But, to the extent that Burroughs' programme for liberation from language, from the power of the word to determine the subject, its relations, its reality, was serious—and to the degree that his work might produce genuinely transformative effects—to that extent it is we, ourselves, who are endangered by the cut-up text. One way or another—whether by academic interpretation, by neglect, by resistance—"we" have to kill such texts to preserve "our" selves, our known world of shadows. Unlike Joyce, Burroughs does not invite his readership to live and work inside his complex linguistic and mythological systems: on the contrary, his texts would force us to see those viral codes and mechanical circuits already typed on our insides. Maybe it is those who would gladly burn Burroughs who have best understood the force of his warnings against The Control Machine.

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NOTES

[1]William L. Stull, "The Quest and the Question: Cosmology and Myth in the Work of William S. Burroughs, 1953-1960," *The Beats: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Lee Bartlett (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1981). Stull argues that Burroughs' early texts "follow the outline of departure, initiation, and return that Campbell describes," so that his mythology and cosmology cannot lay claim to being new, only variant forms.

[2]The only exception to this critical division has to be Gregory Stephenson's astute, if overstated, reading (he claims *The Soft Machine* as "the central work of Burroughs' oeuvre"), which sees the text in terms of the rituals and mythologies of Gnostic tradition. See "The Gnostic Vision of William S. Burroughs," The *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4.1 (1984): 40-49.

Note that all references, except where indicated, are to the third and final edition of *The Soft Machine* (London: Calder, 1968).

[3]Jennie Skerl, *William S. Burroughs* (Boston: Twayne, 1985) 54.

[4]Robin Lydenberg, *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs' Fiction* (Chicago: Illinois UP, 1988) 55.

[5]Most recently, for example, David Ingram, in "William Burroughs and Language" (*The Beat Generation Writers*, ed. A. Robert Lee [London: Pluto, 1996]) claims that Korzybski's critique of Aristotelian language (whereby phenomena are "simplistically represented as singular, finite and static, rather than as multiple, complex and in processual movement") "forms the basis of Burroughs' explorations of language" (95, 96). For all the merits of Ingram's account, he too fails to bring either textual specificity or chronological development to his readings, so that his own language usage tends to reproduce precisely those errors of generalization and abstraction under analysis.

[6]Rob Latham, "Collage as Critique and Invention in the Fiction of William S. Burroughs and Kathy Acker," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 5.3 (1993): 48. Latham's article is actually one of the most incisive published accounts of the cut-up project as a collage-based enterprise.

[7]See Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981) 362.

[8]Burroughs, interviewed by Eric Mottram, as quoted by Tony Tanner in *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971) 110.

[9]Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris, 1957; London: Granada, 1973) 155.

[10]William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (Paris: Olympia, 1961) 158. This line was not retained for later editions.

[11]Sinclair Beiles, William S. Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Brion Gysin, *Minutes to Go* (Paris: Two Cities, 1960; San Francisco: Beach Books, 1968).

[12]Edward O. Wilson, cited by Tom Wolfe, in "Sorry, But Your Soul Just Died," *Independent on Sunday* (2 February 1997): 6.

[13]The fate of Burroughs' Nova mythology thus restages that of his political allegory in *Naked Lunch*: looking back on his system of factualists, liquefactionists, divisionists, and senders, he recognised it as "crude and tentative," abandoned because "it doesn't stand up too well at the present time" (*The Job* 68).

[14]See Tanner 16, 109.

[15]David Ingram (111) glosses Derrida's "white mythology" (form his *Margins of Philosophy*) as a system "which would efface its own fictiveness in an assertion of transcendental, immutable truth."

[16]William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: Viking, 1978) 91.

[17]See Brent Wood, "William S. Burroughs and the Language of Cyberpunk," *Science Fiction Studies* 23 (1996): 12.

[18]Ian MacFadyen, "Machine Dreams, Optical Toys and Mechanical Boys," *Flickers of the Dreammachine*, ed. Paul Cecil (Hove: Codex, 1996) 33; Jan Herman, "Editor's Note," William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Ian Sommerville, *Brion Gysin Let the Mice In* (West Glover, VT: Something Else Press, 1973).

[19]William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, *The Yage Letters* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1963) 64.

[20]Brion Gysin, "Cut-Ups Self-Explained," reprinted in *The Third Mind* 34-37. Burroughs and Gysin were, in short, acutely aware of the impossibility of articulating as theory, in normative language, what were supposed to be radically new methods of language use. They were also aware of the equal impossibility of the corollary: of avoiding normative language in their extra-textual accounts. Burroughs, as much as any of his critics, lapsed into speaking of "the cut-up."

[21]For a recent critique of Burger, see Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1996).

[22]William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express* (New York: Grove, 1964).

[23]William S. Burroughs, *The Western Lands* (New York: Viking, 1987).

[24]William S. Burroughs, *The Adding Machine* (London: Calder, 1985) 48.

[25]William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1962; New York: Grove Press, 1967) 50.

[26]Lydenberg's analysis of *The Soft Machine*, as the earliest experiment, is determined by her focus on material not present in the original edition. Far from being "tentative and restrained" (56), Burroughs' earliest text was exceedingly reckless in its application of cut-up techniques: and far from being "aberrant digressions" (72), the cut-up passages were the norm. The narrative Lydenberg analyses actually demonstrates the kind of material Burroughs *added* in order to recover readability.

[27]By my reckoning, of the 235 words in this passage, only 17 do not appear in the previous pages; even fewer, if we take account of the text as originally published in 1961, and later cut.

[28]The version I have analysed as "Dead on Arrival" forms the opening section of the 1968 edition; it forms only most of the opening section of the 1966 text (which ends with a page of new narrative material); and formed only most of the section entitled "white score" in the 1961 text (two initial paragraphs were cut for both later editions).

[29]See *The Letters of William S. Burroughs, 1945-59*, ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Viking, 1993) 257.

[30]The relocation of this material to the start of the text clearly now grounded *The Soft Machine* in the narrative world of *The Naked Lunch* and, at root, *Junkie*. With a certain symmetry, Burroughs thereby contrived a bridge back to earlier published texts that parallels his use of passages from *Junkie* to construct an opening section for *The Naked Lunch*. Although the entire Burroughs oeuvre is an omnibus of recycled elements, there were, as these cases show, very specific functions to his re-use of given material.

From publishers' galley-proofs, it is clear that the decision to shift "white score" to the beginning of *The Soft Machine*, was made at least as early as June 1963, while it had acquired its new title by October 1965 at the latest.

[31]William S. Burroughs, *The Job* (New York: Grove, 1970) 48, 51.

[32]Although I believe Burroughs has never referred to the Platonic simile, he did cite an implicit adaptation of it, in *The Yage Letters* (44): "Did you ever read H. G. Wells' *The Country of the Blind*? About a man stuck in a country where all the other inhabitants had been blind so many generations that they had lost the concept of sight. He flips. 'But don't you understand I can *see*?'" Dramatising Burroughs' intense isolation at the time of writing, this strong identification clearly recurs in other contexts, such as his appended 'Introduction' to *The Naked Lunch* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1959; London: Paladin, 1986): "If man can *see*" (14).

[33]Lydenberg 63.