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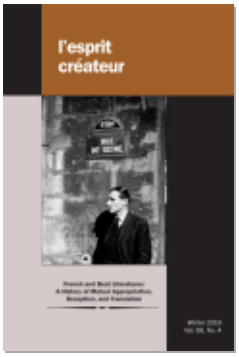

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Oliver Harris

FROM *NAKED LUNCH* (1959) to *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962), William Burroughs completed or composed as well as published four major works in Paris that marked his rapid passage from obscurity to international fame. For him, 9 rue Gît-le-Cœur was not only the Beat Hotel but Cut-Up Headquarters, the launch site for a decade-long weaponization of avant-garde methods. Yet, while biographers and cultural historians have documented the Beat Hotel years in detail, the literary history of Paris as Cut-Up Ground Zero has been very little examined at a textual level in either Anglophone or Francophone scholarship. To begin to bridge this significant gap, what follows explores the role of French language both in the cut-up texts that Burroughs produced in Paris and in their reception through translation.

Since Anglophone and Francophone scholars rarely enter into dialogue with one other, few Anglophone readers will know how controversial the translation of Burroughs into French has been. In his 1975 monograph, Philippe Mikriammos declared the works of Burroughs' principal translators, Mary Beach and Claude Pélieu, so problematic, "si malmenées," that he advised French readers to stick as far as possible with the English texts.[1] The translations of Beach and Pélieu, which did so much to popularize Burroughs in France during the 1960s and 1970s, have had their defenders—most notably Benoît Delaune,[2] Clémentine Hougue,[3] and Gérard-Georges Lemaire[4]—and it would be hard to overstate the daunting scale of the task they set themselves to translate so much so rapidly. But the point here is less the controversy than the relevance of translation for Burroughs criticism. What gets lost in translation often makes visible what has been missed or misunderstood in the original, so that to explore both Burroughs' own use of French and the French translations of his cut-up texts promises to reveal much about his aesthetic practice for the Anglophone reader as well as the Francophone one. Crucially, what's missed and what's revealed is not only textual but *intertextual*.

To approach Burroughs' practice of intertextuality through the lens of translation makes visible not only the vast scale but the cellular level at which it operates, and therefore the precision required to trace the transfer of material genetically across texts. The practical difficulty of detecting origins, of recognizing from which of his previous texts particular words derive, is an

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issue of special relevance for translating cut-up texts, as Hougue has noted in a spirited defence of Beach and Pélieu: "À la décharge des traducteurs, une version française qui tiendrait compte de toutes les phases de composition du texte original et de toutes les sources des fragments relève de l'utopie: un tel travail nécessiterait de décomposer totalement le cut-up avant de le traduire et de le réagencer" (Hougue 18). The case is well made, but to look at this problem the other way around, we might say that it is precisely by tracing a certain phrase as it passes virally from text to text that we can recognize Burroughs' unique working methods and their significance.

L'origine française

To speak of what Burroughs published in Paris is inevitably to think first of Maurice Girodias and his Olympia Press editions of *Naked Lunch* (1959), *The Soft Machine* (1961), and *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962). As landmarks in postwar literature as well as breakthrough works for Burroughs, it is natural to put Girodias' three books center-stage. In contrast, it has been easy to overlook *Minutes to Go,* the sixty-page pamphlet Burroughs co-authored with Brion Gysin, Gregory Corso, and Sinclair Beiles, which was published in Paris in April 1960 by Jean Fanchette. Despite being the launching manual and manifesto of cut-up methods, *Minutes to Go* has almost never been considered a fourth 'major' work. It has gained only a limited place in Anglophone criticism,[5] while in the Francophone field Delaune is almost alone in recognizing the text as "un recueil extrêmement important" ("Le cut-up chez Burroughs" 37). More typically, the most comprehensive of all studies, *Le cut-up de William S. Burroughs*, skips over *Minutes to Go,* even when discussing the cut-up method's "origine française" (Hougue 8). Compared with the three novels published by Girodias in Paris before and after it, *Minutes to Go* has seemed entirely barren ground, its short fragmentary texts merely the earliest, crudest chance-based collage experiments in cutting up newspaper articles, with a bit of polemic and poetry thrown in.

The neglect of *Minutes to Go* might also be put down as a simple matter of availability: after a thousand copies in 1960 and another thousand in the 1968 American edition published by Mary Beach, the pamphlet went out of print, and while a limited selection of Burroughs and Gysin's texts from *Minutes to Go* appeared in *The Third Mind* (1978), that too has not been republished. For Francophone readers the situation has been worse still, since there has been no full translation of *Minutes to Go*, and even the Burroughs texts from it have been only partially translated. To confuse matters further, when translations of the Burroughs texts were published in 1976, two quite different selections

made by two different sets of translators appeared: those by Gérard-Georges Lemaire and Christine Taylor as part of *Œuvre croisée*—the French edition of *The Third Mind*, ironically published before the English language 'original'—followed shortly after by translations from Mary Beach and Claude Pélieu in *Le métro blanc*, an assemblage of numerous cut-up texts by Burroughs, Pélieu, and Carl Weissner.[6] Even leaving aside the many editorial problems and outright errors marring both editions, Francophone readers therefore came to *Minutes to Go* only as fragments in other contexts, in two versions, and after some sixteen years, a far longer delay than was the case for the three Olympia books, which were all translated within the decade of their original publication. Why, then, is it *Minutes to Go* that has the stronger claim to a significant genetic point of intersection with Paris and with French language?

To begin with, the connection between *Minutes to Go* and Paris has been far from obvious to most readers, since they likely know it either from the parts reprinted in *The Third Mind / Œuvre croisée* or from the American edition, whose cover design of airline baggage labels scattered its authors internationally ("BURROUGHS LONDON"; "CORSO NEW YORK"; "GYSIN TANGIER"; "BEILES ATHENS") and so lost its place of provenance. Indeed, nothing in the American edition acknowledges its first publication in Paris, an ironic erasure of its origins, given the connection to France of both Beach, its publisher, and Pélieu, her husband. The irony, which may well reflect an antagonism towards French literary society on the part of Beach and Pélieu, is all the greater because *Minutes to Go* was entirely written as well as originally published in Paris. With the aid of Gysin and Beiles, Burroughs assembled *Naked Lunch* in the Beat Hotel, but he wrote barely a tenth of the text there. Likewise, he wrote much of *The Soft Machine* and parts of *The Ticket That Exploded* outside Paris. It's worth bearing in mind, too, that the French translations of the three novels were not based on the Olympia editions, but on the Grove versions published in New York. Since the American texts differ significantly from the Olympia originals, the genetic relation to Burroughs' time in Paris has been obscured or lost completely. In the case of *La machine molle* (1967), Francophone readers lost the most in translation because the text based on the 1966 Grove Press edition was so radically different from the 1961 Olympia. In particular, what has been lost is Burroughs' homage to Rimbaud's color vowels, which he used to divide the 1961 *Soft Machine* into four "Units" of red, green, blue, and white. While traces of "Voyelles" remain in the editions of *The Soft Machine* available in French and in English, Rimbaud was highly visible in *Minutes to Go* as a source for two cut-up poems attributed to Burroughs and Corso ("EVERYWHERE MARCH

YOUR HEAD"" and "SONS OF YOUR IN"), the name of the French poet standing out against the American and British newspaper sources cited for all other cut-up texts.

The privileged space given to Rimbaud in *Minutes to Go* has been the subject of the most detailed of what little critical attention the text has received. This includes Véronique Lane's revelation that the source text of "SONS OF YOUR IN" was not just the English translation of Rimbaud's poem, "To a Reason," but its French original, "À une raison."[7] Choosing or adapting Rimbaud's French words so that they appeared English, the composition demonstrates an engagement with French language and a delicacy of touch that contradicts the image of such works as merely lazy gestures of affiliation or *détournement*. On the contrary, while its role at the heart of the creative process is concealed in *Minutes to Go*, the genetic backstory to the two Rimbaud texts reveals the true extent of Burroughs' engagement, including a series of cut-up versions in English, French, and in combinations of both. The manuscript backstory also affirms the hand of Burroughs (rather than of Corso), and so indicates that he was the one behind the claim to a larger intertextual relation between *Minutes to Go*, French language, and French literary history that is implied by the striking prominence given to Rimbaud. That claim was put on the front cover of *Minutes to Go* in 1960 through the addition of a wraparound band, whose words in French declared the pamphlet as a whole to be "*un règlement de comptes avec la Littérature.*"

"un règlement de comptes"

Like the presence of Rimbaud inside *Minutes to Go*, the appearance of these seven words of French outside it has not gone unnoticed. Or rather, while they have been almost completely ignored by Francophone scholars, the words have been a regular part of *Minutes to Go*'s Anglophone reception. This is because for the past four decades critics, bibliographers, and biographers have consistently reported them, offering brief comments and their own translations. For Barry Miles, the meaning of the band—"To settle a score with literature"—makes "clear that from the beginning Burroughs saw cut-ups as weapons,"[8] while for Phil Baker, the phrase "a settling of accounts—scores even—with Literature" is in "aggressive Lettrist style."[9] Such interpretations are entirely valid, but they miss a mystery so obvious it is hidden in plain sight: why should *Minutes to Go*, a text written in English by Anglophone writers for an Anglophone readership, declare its message and launch the cut-up project in words of French? The answer reveals both the words' secret intertextual significance and the cut-up working methods Burroughs developed in Paris.

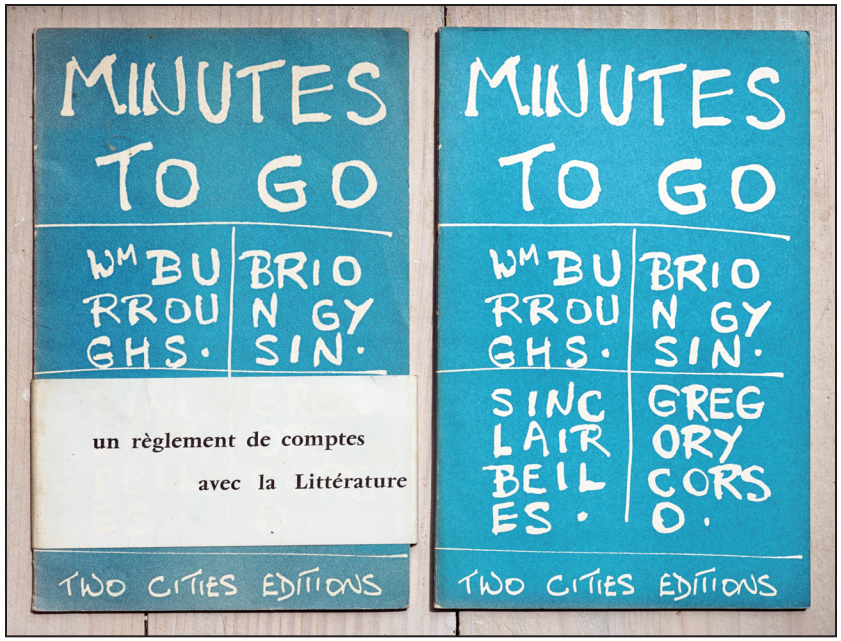

Figure 1. William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Gregory Corso, and Sinclair Beiles, *Minutes to Go* (Paris: Two Cities Editions, 1960), cover images courtesy of the Association Jean Fanchette.

Burroughs, Gysin, Corso, and Beiles were all Francophiles with a basic competence in French, but the most plausible answer to the existence of the wraparound band is that it was the work of Jean Fanchette, the fully bilingual publisher of *Minutes to Go*. Fanchette's recently launched literary magazine, *Two Cities*, was promoted as "La revue bilingue de Paris," and the format of *Minutes to Go* followed its template; initially, Burroughs even referred to *Minutes to Go* as a "special issue of *Two Cities*."[10] Since most issues of Fanchette's magazine had similar wraparound bands, the question of its authorship might seem answered in terms of the circumstances of production in Paris. However, while similar to each other, the wraparound bands used for *Two Cities* all differ categorically in ideological and formal terms from the one around *Minutes to Go*. Fanchette's bands always speak the conventional language of homage, quite literally in several cases, such as the autumn 1960 issue, whose band declared "HOMMAGE A RABINDRANATH TAGORE." Publicizing the name of the author in upper case let-

ters, such bands are totally at odds with the words declaring an assault on authorship and literary conventions on the band around *Minutes to Go*. Fanchette, who characterized the circle from which his magazine emerged as lacking "tout parisianisme, tout terrorisme littéraire,"[11] deserves recognition and credit for his boldness as a publisher, but he wasn't the author of "un règlement de comptes avec la Littérature."

The unexpected appearance of French words to launch the cut-up project is significant because it poses for an Anglophone readership questions of provenance and authorship: whose words are these, where do they come from, who speaks? These are the questions of *Minutes to Go* itself, whose cut-up texts are signed with the names of authors even though we know their words have been clipped from various source texts. The question of origins is in turn made central to *Minutes to Go* by the overwhelming number of Burroughs' texts that cut up articles on virus, cancer, and gene research. His experiments applied similar research methods to the replication and mutation of language. Issues of pathology, biological heredity, and genetic code determinism indeed coincide with questions of literary paternity, agency, and intentionality in a text like "VIRUSES WERE BY ACCIDENT?" which begins:

> (Resevoir of rabies and other virus? discovered in *Brown* fat of vampire bats and their well known and easily chosen human constituent.)
> Cancer tests… brown blood.. live babies.. proof of virus. vacine?
> (Burroughs et al., *Minutes to Go* 15)

> (Réservoir de la Rage et d'autres virus? découverts dans le gras *Marron* des vampires et de leur composant humain bien connu et facilement choisi)
> Analyses cancérigènes… sang marron… bébés vivants… preuve de virus. Vaccin?
> (Burroughs et al., *Métro blanc* 72)

When Anglophone readers who must translate the "règlement de comptes" on the cover of *Minutes to Go* try to read such a cryptic, fragmented cut-up text, with such non-standard typography and punctuation, they are forced to experience a suddenly alienated relationship to their 'own' language. The very title of the text—"VIRUSES WERE BY ACCIDENT?"—questions our assumptions of intentionality.

Poems produced by chance operations and the appropriation of source texts problematize both authorship and interpretation. Likewise, the words in French on the wraparound band that declare the mission of *Minutes to Go* simultaneously announce a message and insist on its indeterminacy. Are we to understand them as anonymous or as the product of a collaboration, speaking on behalf of a collective voice? Even the object of the attack is not clear, since

what is meant by "la Littérature" is defined only by its majuscule, which insists on hierarchies that are fixed by the definite article "la." The indefinite article with the lower case ("un" in "un règlement") therefore establishes the terms of opposition, contesting the essentialism and elitism of "la Littérature." In its indeterminacy of meaning and origins, the phrase is therefore performative, suggesting how precisely chosen it was to act as the *slogan publicitaire* and *cri de ralliement* for the cut-up manifesto.

Although the language of the band is not tied to the place of *Minutes to Go*'s publication through the agency of its publisher, Fanchette, it certainly invites a connection to Paris in evoking a larger French avant-garde context. This assumption underlies Baker's claim to identify the "settling of accounts" with an "aggressive Lettrist style" (Baker 126). In fact, the text itself of *Minutes to Go* invokes not Isidore Isou but his fellow countryman, Tristan Tzara, and the Dadaists who operated in the Paris of the early 1920s. French, in other words, is on the cover of *Minutes to Go* as the language identified with avant-garde movements, whether led by Romanians in the 1920s and 1940s or by two Americans, a Canadian, and a South African in the 1960s.

Indeed, the wraparound band inevitably evokes both the movements and the methods of the avant-garde in Paris, to the extent that they too constituted "un règlement de comptes avec la Littérature." Inside *Minutes to Go*, Gysin accordingly speaks of the infighting between Dadaists and Surrealists as well as of Tzara as a precursor who "pulled words out of a hat" (Burroughs et al., *Minutes to Go* 42). The debt of cut-up methods to Tzara's "pour faire un poème dadaiste" is significant because, if ever there was "un règlement de comptes avec la Littérature," his ironic recipe for making poems out of newspaper clippings was surely it. While the connection with Tzara is always made in discussions of cut-up methods, its importance depends on taking into account when, where, and in what language he originally performed and published his most famous text.

Tzara first publically practiced his cut-up method on January 23, 1920, when he made his debut in Paris at an event organized by André Breton, advertised as the "premier vendredi de *Littérature*." And it was in *Littérature*, the most important journal for Paris Dada (and later, Surrealism), that Tzara's "pour faire un poème dadaiste" was first published, in July-August 1920. The connection between *Minutes to Go* and Tzara is as much one of provenance as of practice. For that capital letter in "un règlement de comptes avec la Littérature" now appears as a reference to Breton's journal, which it names as the object of attack. Breton's *Littérature* was nowhere near anti-literary enough for Tzara, which is why, in November 1920, he settled his own score with

Breton through another Dada journal, Francis Picabia's *391*. In a text on the journal's front cover, Tzara attacked Breton by quoting Cocteau's pun on the title of Breton's journal: "Rimbaud est allé au Harrar pour fuir 'Littérature.'" Forty years later, this avant-garde history of settling scores and play on words haunts the wraparound band of *Minutes to Go*.

The band points, therefore, both to Breton's *Littérature* and to Tzara and Rimbaud as the writers most closely identified with settling scores against French Literature. And yet, nothing could be less *anti-literary* than to evoke *literary* forbears. What makes the unsigned words of the wraparound band the emblem of *Minutes to Go*'s deconstruction of authorship is not a literary allusion; rather, it is the process of intertextuality itself. Delaune is quite right to insist that, in Burroughs' work, intertextuality is not 'literary,' not a practice of citation and allusion.[12] Rather, the process set in motion by cut-up methods renders agency, intentionality, and reference indeterminate and multiple. Thus, while Miles is correct to attribute the band on *Minutes to Go* to Burroughs, we need an explanation for the language of the phrase and its provenance in order to grasp how it paradoxically transcends his authorship. The source text of "un règlement de comptes" is revealed in *Naked Lunch*, although it is fully apparent in only *Le festin nu*:

> Reading the paper … Something about a triple murder in the rue de la Merde, Paris: "An adjusting of scores." … I keep slipping away … "The police have identified the author […] Does it really say that? … I try to focus the words … they separate in meaningless mosaic …[13]

> Lu dans le journal… quelque chose à propos d'un triple meurtre perpétré rue de la M. à Paris… "Un règlement de comptes"… tout se brouille, je perds pied… "La police a identifié l'assassin […] Ai-je vraiment lu cela? J'essaye de déchiffrer les mots… ils sont de plus en plus flous, ils s'émiettent en un puzzle absurde…[14]

The passage identifies the provenance of the phrase used on the wraparound band, geographically as Paris and textually as a newspaper. From this context, we can deduce that Kahane's translation of the English phrase ("An adjusting of scores") into the French ("Un règlement de comptes") unknowingly restored Burroughs' original source text. For Kahane was translating *back* into French a phrase that Burroughs had himself translated from French *into* English.[15] And the particular context of the passage informs the phrase's significance, since here we find all the other key ingredients relevant to *Minutes to Go*: the difficulty of textual interpretation (a "meaningless mosaic"), newspaper source material, a writer who identifies himself as a reader and translator, a settling of scores in the city of Paris, and the criminalization of authorship

("The police have identified the author," poorly translated as "l'assassin" in *Le festin nu*). Burroughs wrote these lines of *Naked Lunch* in Tangier in 1956, two years before moving to Paris. In spring 1960, when the wraparound band was fitted to *Minutes to Go*, he must have looked back to this passage and recognized in it a magically portentous intertextuality, multiple points of intersection with his new methods for settling scores by making mosaics out of French phrases and newspapers.

In short, behind the words of French on *Minutes to Go*'s wraparound band we discover *Naked Lunch*, and behind Burroughs' novel we find words from a French newspaper, in a dialogue across languages and between the literary and non-literary. Burroughs achieved his own "règlement de comptes avec la Littérature" by giving a new twist to Tzara's "pour faire un poème dadaiste," which began "Prenez un journal." For by quoting the original French source of his words in *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs cites not the authored book with his name on the cover but its anonymous newspaper source text, and so affirms the deconstruction of authorship declared by and practiced within *Minutes to Go*. Burroughs' choice of words to launch the cut-up project was both utterly cryptic and absolutely fitting. The irony—that it is only the French back-translation of the phrase in *Le festin nu* that reveals its provenance in *Naked Lunch* and so makes visible the intertextual relation between the novel and *Minutes to Go*—is significant because, in the text of *Minutes to Go* itself, we find the exact opposite.

In *Minutes to Go*, intertextual connections to *Naked Lunch* that are fully apparent to Anglophone readers are repeatedly lost in translation for Francophone ones. To give just one of many examples, Burroughs' text "REACTIVE AGENT" begins by recycling numerous lines from the "atrophied preface" section of *Naked Lunch*, including such memorable phrases as "My whippets are dying" (26). Beach and Pélieu translate the line as "Mes *whippets* sont en train de mourir" (Burroughs, *Métro blanc* 65), while Lemaire and Taylor have "Mes chars d'assaut légers sont en train de mourir" (Burroughs, *Œuvre croisée* 74); neither version will take Francophone readers back to *Le festin nu*, however, since Kahane translated the phrase as "mes lévriers vont crever" (Burroughs, *Festin nu* 251). No doubt the œuvres of many writers suffer from different translators working on different texts, but in the case of the Burroughs œuvre, which is defined by its infinite networks of intertextual echoes, its ceaseless reiteration and recombination of words and phrases *across texts*, the problem is specific to his entire aesthetics. Burroughs' practice of radical interconnectivity was there from the beginning of his cut-up work and so first appears where it has least been suspected: in *Minutes to Go.*

"Solemen Accountants"

When comparing the translations of Burroughs' texts in *Minutes to Go* by Lemaire and Taylor in *Œuvre croisée* with those by Beach and Pélieu in *Le métro blanc*, there's little need to think about fidelity or quality in the conventional sense. The point is not whether the opening line of "FROM SAN DIEGO UP TO MAINE"—"Solemn Accountants are jumping ship"—is better translated as "De graves Comptables sautent du navire" (Burroughs, *Œuvre croisée* 73) or "Comptables solennels abandonnent leur bâtiment" (Burroughs, *Métro blanc* 63). Although it is easily missed on a casual reading, what matters most is not the individual phrase or the individual text, but the systematic reiteration and recombination of phrases across texts.

"FROM SAN DIEGO UP TO MAINE" is one of only three texts from *Minutes to Go* translated in both *Œuvre croisée* and *Le métro blanc*, which makes it a useful focus of attention. On an initial reading, we observe the issue most often recognized in French versions of Burroughs: that identical phrases in the original are frequently translated differently. Here, for example, the English phrase "Teen Age Future," which appears identically in the opening and closing paragraphs of "SAN DIEGO," is translated first as "Avenir Adolescent" (Burroughs, *Métro blanc* 63) and then as "Temps Avenir Adolescence" (64). In *Œuvre croisée*, the same phrase is again translated differently, first as "l'Adolescence Future" (Burroughs, *Œuvre croisée* 73) and then as "Temps Futurs Adolescents" (74). Whatever we think about the translations of Beach and Pélieu or Lemaire and Taylor, they both make the same decision: to reject the exact repetition in Burroughs' original.

This refusal to respect Burroughs' repetitions goes to the heart of the difficulties faced by his translators, now as then. For example, when working on *Lettres du yage* in 2007, Théophile Aries' concern to "make a good translation" recognized the problem of "French, where repetitions of words are almost strictly forbidden."[16] In fact, the problem applies generally, as Burroughs' Czech translator, Josef Rauvolf, acknowledged when admitting in 2018 that "it's tempting to translate these repeating units differently (to show how many expressions I know, how sophisticated a translator I am…)."[17]

What goes for the translation of repetition internally, within a single text, also goes for repetition across texts and this, although little studied by critics, is the crucial dimension of Burroughs' work as well as the one that poses the greatest possible challenge for translators. In *Minutes to Go*, the intertextuality across texts is made explicit in the case of "SAN DIEGO" because it is immediately followed by a text identifying itself as a cut-up of it: "'San Diego Up to Maine' Cut Up." Together, the texts form a model of cut-up intertextuality,

and the reader is invited to recognize both differences and duplications. For example, the phrase "his assailant" is repeated in the second text just as it appears in the first. In Beach and Pélieu's translations of both texts, however, the first occurrence is translated as "son assaillant," the second as "son agresseur" (Burroughs, *Métro blanc* 64). The translation introduces variety where the original insists on repetition, and in the process it diminishes the precise duplication that forms part of the two texts' complex interconnectivity.

Since in *Œuvre croisée* only "SAN DIEGO" is translated, not its cut-up version, this lesson, this crucial demonstration of intertextuality, is lost. From a 'conventional' literary point of view, the second text seems inferior because repetitious, but this is to misunderstand how Burroughs applied cut-up methods precisely to explore repetition. What "SAN DIEGO" and its cut-up version show is that repetition of the same always produces a difference, a supplement, a change in meaning and affect—whether an uncanny sense of déjà vu or boredom. It's never just more of the same. Ironically, when a translator replaces the repeated words with a variation, this difference through repetition is lost. Variety dilutes the experiment, standardizes Burroughs' writing, makes it more like conventional writing, more of the same.

The scale and complexity of Burroughs' explorations are evident in the case of "SAN DIEGO," which has intertextual relations with no fewer than six texts in *Minutes to Go*, and in the case of one of them—"OPEN LETTER TO LIFE MAGAZINE"—what is at stake in the translations of Beach and Pélieu becomes especially clear.

Let us recall those "Solemn Accountants" who appear in the opening words of "SAN DIEGO" and become "Comptables solennels" in the translation of Beach and Pélieu. In *Minutes to Go*, attentive readers encounter them with an uncanny feeling of déjà vu. Flicking back through the pamphlet, sure enough we find these "Solemn Accountants" had first appeared in "OPEN LETTER TO LIFE MAGAZINE." And if we continue to turn back and forth between these two texts, we discover no fewer than thirteen phrases the texts have in common, appearing in the same sequence in both texts. Because we encountered "OPEN LETTER" first, we identify these phrases as the originals, echoed in "SAN DIEGO." In *Le métro blanc*, however, it is "SAN DIEGO" that appears first, so that "LETTRE OUVERTE" becomes the echoing text. Reversing the order of texts in the structure of the whole inverts the relation of original to repetition and transfers the effect from one text to the other. The change of sequence in *Le métro blanc* might seem an editorial error, pure and simple. But to think of it as a corruption of the original text, as a betrayal of authorial intentionality, is to call upon the very literary conven-

tions against which cut-up methods are deployed. In this sense, *Le métro blanc* continues the subversive work of *Minutes to Go*, which includes the aim to subvert notions of originality and textual integrity. On the other hand, when we compare the texts and realize that out of the thirteen phrases shared between "SAN DIEGO" and "OPEN LETTER" only three are translated identically, it is the subversive practice that is itself being subverted.

We can follow our "Solemn Accountants" beyond *Minutes to Go* and into *The Ticket That Exploded*, which reproduces nearly half of "SAN DIEGO." Before they translated them as "Comptables solennels" in *Le métro blanc*, Beach and Pélieu had in *Le ticket qui explosa* rendered them as "des Employés Aux Écritures,"[18] thereby short-circuiting Burroughs' use of exact duplications to connect *The Ticket That Exploded* back to *Minutes to Go.* The same is true for other phrases originating in *Minutes to Go* that recur in *The Soft Machine* and *Nova Express*, such as the refrain that puts translation at the heart of Burroughs' method: "shift lingual." While in their translation of *Minutes to Go* texts*,* Lemaire and Taylor translated it as "déplacer linguale" (Burroughs, *Œuvre croisée* 72), Beach and Pélieu used two different translations: "Déplacez les linguales" in *Le ticket qui explosa* (Burroughs, *Trilogie* 329) and *La machine molle* (175, 178) and, in *Nova Express*, both "Déplacez les linguales" (529, 532) and also "Linguales déplacées" (535). Such minute variations would not matter in other contexts and might seem irrelevant to the message, but in *Minutes to Go*, the medium is the message, commanding precise attention to detail. This is why what is lost in translation for the Francophone reader can also reveal something significant for Anglophone readers, and if we look closer at these "Solemn Accountants" in *Minutes to Go* we discover the subtler ways in which errors function in Burroughs' work.

Comparing texts, we discover that the "Comptables solennels" of "SAN DIEGO" appear in "LETTRE OUVERTE" as "semellemâles comptables" (Burroughs, *Métro blanc* 68). The highly visible difference between words in French makes obvious what the Anglophone reader probably failed to notice, namely, that in "OPEN LETTER" we have not "solemn accountants" but "solemen accountants" (Burroughs, *Minutes to Go* 11). The easily missed single extra letter "e"—which might be dismissed as a typo even if it is spotted—transforms the meaning completely. The solution of Beach and Pélieu, to create the neologism "semellemâles," is pragmatic but in no way recreates the subtlety and economy of the English original, or its questionable agency: the difficulty of deciding whether the extra "e" is intended or accidental, should be interpreted or ignored. The original throws such binaries into irresolvable doubt; the translation restores them. For the translator, like the tex-

tual editor or the close reader, cut-up texts pose constantly and insistently this question of agency, and so choosing one interpretation negates the unsettling effect of exposing the ambiguity and uncertainty of meaning.

"Shift Lingual"

The larger context here, in which Burroughs was cutting up newspaper reports of genetic engineering, indicates that he was taking the linguistic metaphor for molecular biology—the idea that life is "written in four letter words with our genes" (Burroughs, *Minutes to Go* 60)—and applying it in reverse. Decades before scientists would speak of the genome as a "coded text" or of using "molecular scissors" to carry out "gene editing," in *Minutes to Go* Burroughs was manipulating letters by chance and by choice to edit words and produce the equivalent of genetic variants. His experiments with repetition and textual 'corruption' were ways to combat determinism and enlarge the gene pool of language that produces identity and reality.

The inventiveness of cut-up practices at such a molecular level in *Minutes to Go* is made visible by the translations precisely because of examples that work only in English. Demonstrating this creativity is one of the functions of juxtaposing "SAN DIEGO" with its cut-up version, which introduces differences through the action of the scissors. Thus, "appalling conditions" in "SAN DIEGO" becomes "appalling con" in "'San Diego Up To Maine' Cut Up" (Burroughs, *Minutes to Go* 21, 22), where "con" is ambiguously polysemic and could mean "un escroc," "une escroquerie," "un inconvénient," even "un prisonnier." In the translation of Beach and Pélieu, "conditions effroyables" becomes "effroyable cond," and while the cut is visible, it produces no new meaning (Burroughs, *Métro blanc*, 63, 65). Or again, the "cabbage" that appears in "SAN DIEGO" is cut up and turned into a "cab" in "'San Diego Up To Maine' Cut Up" (Burroughs, *Minutes to Go* 21, 22). Beach and Pélieu translate each word accurately—"chou" in "SAN DIEGO" and "taxi" in "'San Diego Up To Maine' Cut Up"—but they don't share the materiality of the signifier that arbitrarily connects and creates the two signifieds in English (Burroughs, *Métro blanc*, 64).

The problem for translation here is not just the polysemy of words in English. Rather, Burroughs' use of cut-up methods works against classical translation theory because they treat words as material: his scissors in effect *translate* the original source text by paying attention to the signifier, not to the signified, the surface material not the deeper meaning. Significantly, the priority of the phonetic over the semantic has been recognized by other practitioners of cut-up methods, such as Jürgen Ploog, precisely because of the dif-

ficulties involved in translating cut-up texts. While Ploog has observed how much easier he found it to create in English than in his native German, his conclusion goes beyond acknowledging the linguistic advantages of English as the natural language of cut-ups ("its grammar is more flexible and semantically not so determined").[19] Rather, what "puts translating into a new light" for Ploog is the effect of semantic disruption central to cut-up texts, which means that priority must be given to achieve a version that "somewhat resembles the sound of the original."

In short, Ploog proposes a homophonic translation, or at least one as focused on sound as on sense, and in so doing he connects Burroughs' practice to a tradition going back to Raymond Roussel's use of homophones to generate texts, and his legacy in the work of Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, and OULIPO (which was launched in Paris six months after *Minutes to Go* appeared), as well as to Concrete and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. All such experimental work calls into question the priority given to meaning in both reading and translating a text at the expense of its materiality or sound. This non-semantic dimension has been neglected in the case of Burroughs because he is so widely seen as either an experimental novelist or a revolutionary thinker, not as a poet. This point of view is another reason for the neglect of *Minutes to Go*, which is visibly poetic in form and frame of reference. Restoring that context clarifies why Burroughs' own engagement with translation is so revealing, as indicated by his cut-ups of Rimbaud.

Building on Véronique Lane's recognition that in "SONS OF YOUR IN" Burroughs created a text that is entirely legible as English by appropriating French words from Rimbaud's original poem, we can understand his use of cut-up methods as a practice of translation: the words cross languages—so that "sons" swaps its French meaning of "noise" for its English meaning ("les fils").[20] Burroughs here performs the literal meaning of the injunction to "shift lingual," and a close comparison shows how subtle was his practice: "SONS" avoids taking some of the most obvious words that cross languages, such as "fortunes," for example, and instead generates the English homophone "knows" out of "nos" in Rimbaud's original (Burroughs, *Minutes to Go* 25). This interlingual creativity, which in "SONS" also produces the English word "harm" out of Rimbaud's "harmonie," is a direct product of Burroughs' residence in Paris and a reflection of his attention to linguistic detail, neither of which have been previously taken seriously into account.

In matching Burroughs' aesthetics, the translations of Beach and Pélieu fall short in many respects. In particular, while Delaune has quite rightly favorably contrasted their approach to that of Kahane, arguing that they rec-

ognized the repetitive intertextuality of Burroughs' work, the evidence suggests that both the scale of repetition, and the minute attention to detail it demands, defeated them—even though, according to Delaune, they worked from "un carnet téléphonique roulant" precisely in order to keep track of recurrent phrases (Delaune, "Le cut-up" 140). However compromised, their work would become a model for later translators, such as Josef Rauvolf, who found himself struggling "to remember all these different phrases and units, checking them over and over." Consequently, in the case of *Nova Express,* he turned to the translation by Beach and Pélieu, even though he didn't speak French, "to see how the units were divided, what was connected to what."[21] Significantly, Rauvolf complemented this structural rather than semantic approach to translation by listening to recordings of Burroughs reading his text, following the sound and rhythm as much as the sense.

In defence of Beach and Pélieu, they suffered from the same fate that befell Burroughs himself, who was also overwhelmed by the sheer volume of cut-up work he produced and its infinite interconnectivity. As Beach and Pélieu discovered, no analogue concordance would have been sufficient to master Burroughs' cut-up textuality: even with digital age tools, a complete genealogy remains Utopian, as Hougue argued, since the intertextual genetic history can never be complete for works whose origins are always other texts, only some of which could ever be retraced. Although the scale of Burroughs' experiment defeated them, there are times when Beach and Pélieu do demonstrate a remarkably astute sensitivity to the microscopic linguistic level at which he was working. The most spectacular example is the way in which they dealt with one of *Minutes to Go*'s many apparent typos.

Generally, the approach of Beach and Pélieu was entirely conventional: for example, in "VIRUSES WERE BY ACCIDENT?" they ignored the significance of the question mark in the title and interpreted the error in the opening line—"Resevoir" for "Reservoir"—as just an accident in need of correction, resulting in "Réservoir" (Burroughs, *Métro blanc* 72). However, in their translation of "THE ACTUAL MA VIRUSES," they didn't see carelessness in its final line: "Cut up articles on polio virus und subliminals" (Burroughs, *Minutes to Go* 16). In "LES VRAIS VIRUS" Beach and Pélieu neither let "und" stand as an error nor corrected it to "and" by translating it as "et." Instead, with a translator's sensitivity to languages, while seeing the error in English they heard it as a German word, adding italics—"*und*"—so that, without altering a letter, they restored the correct meaning. It is an inspired reading, for although they could not have known the text's genetic backstory, Burroughs *was* using phrases of German in his source texts. As the archival

typescripts reveal, here it is the title of Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* that was the provenance of "und" in "THE ACTUAL MA VIRUSES."[22] By italicizing the word, Beach and Pélieu draw attention formally not only to the way the text "shifts lingual" but to its subject matter, which is one of Burroughs' central concerns with language: the subliminal operation of signs that, like actual viruses, communicate below the level of conscious perception.

Identifying the general difficulties and occasional triumphs in translating Burroughs' cut-up texts doesn't necessarily point the way towards better translations. Rather, in revealing the limits and possibilities of translation, it tells us more about the working methods that produced Burroughs' cut-up texts, and how we might best read them.

"Hommage à l'Académie Française"

One of the few clues to what Burroughs thought about the translation of his work into French appears in his very next publication after *Minutes to Go*. Published in June 1960 in the first issue of the short-lived revue *Haute Société*, it comprises two parts: the cut-up text "NOTHING IS TRUE, EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED" and the explanatory "NOTES ON THE CUT UP METHOD OF BRION GYSIN," running in parallel columns side by side with their translations, "RIEN N'EST VRAI, TOUT EST PERMIS" and "NOTES SUR LA METHODE DU DEPEÇAGE DE BRION GYSIN."[23] One of Burroughs' most obscure works, it is unique in several respects, including its bilingualism.

The editor of *Haute Société* was Jacques Houbart, and although he didn't translate the text (Allan Zion did), he was then completing his translation of Kerouac's *On the Road*, published later in 1960 by Gallimard, and at this time discussed with Burroughs the question of translation itself. Houbart reports, "il ne s'intéressait qu'aux intégristes musulmans, qui—comme on le sait—estiment que le Coran est intraduisible."[24] Since Burroughs cut up parts of the Koran in "RIEN N'EST VRAI" (as he did in *Minutes to Go*), his fundamentalism has nothing to do with respecting the sacred integrity of the original text. Rather, it seems directed against the possibility of fidelity in French, which explains a striking footnote Burroughs added to his text, translated by Zion: "Hommage à l'Académie Française" (Burroughs, "NOTHING" 34). Since the "NOTES" text names Tzara and Rimbaud and promotes cut-up methods for "des possibilités illimitées de distendre ou de franchir la Frontière des Mots" (33), the inference is clear: the mocking homage in the footnote takes aim at the official guardians of linguistic order in Paris and points the title of the text in the direction of l'Académie Française—the hegemonic institution for which everything is true and nothing is permitted.

For Burroughs, French was fixed, and he knew where to lay the blame: "French is hard to cut-up because it has been made so by the Académie Française."[25] Although Burroughs was drawing on a limited experience of cutting up in French, and while a fully bilingual writer might have reached different conclusions, this understanding was one he shared at the time with all his closest cut-up collaborators in Paris. Indeed, its central importance to the early days of the project is suggested by the way in which they each named the same institutional culprit housed at the Institut de France. In March 1960, even as he was excommunicating himself from *Minutes to Go*, Gregory Corso echoed Burroughs' position when describing the response to a poetry reading he'd just given in Paris: "the French are all screwed up because of their language, the 40 men in the Academy hold on to the language, no change possible: that's why English is so great, it can be changed augmented twisted, everything!"[26] A couple of months later, it was Gysin's turn to lament the fate of French in almost identical terms, when he wrote to Paul Bowles in May 1960: "The poor things are dying inside the fossil language and don't even know that they commit cultural suicide with their Académie."[27]

As Burroughs put it the month after he began using cut-up methods, in English you could turn error into creativity: "If my writing seems at times ungrammatical it is not due to carelessness or accident. The English language—the only really adjustable language—is in state of transition" (Burroughs, *Rub Out* 7). Being "adjustable" made English a living language, open to genetic engineering with a pair of scissors, and ideal for "an adjusting of scores." Putting that phrase in French around *Minutes to Go*—"un règlement de comptes avec la Littérature"—Burroughs invited the Anglophone reader to think of cut-up texts in terms of translation. Initially, the effect is to make us see the foreignness of even our own language, to hear the alien tongue inside us all. But beyond that, through their transformations and mutations at even the smallest scales of legibility, Burroughs' cut-up texts innovate new forms of readability, which is why we discover in the extreme challenges faced by their translators the radical potentials of his experiment.

Keele University

Notes

1. Philippe Mikriamos, *William S. Burroughs: La vie et l'œuvre* (Paris: Seghers, 1975), 153.
2. Benoît Delaune, "Le cut-up chez William S. Burroughs: Modèle plastique, création littéraire" (PhD Thesis, Université Rennes 2, 2003).
3. Clémentine Hougue, *Le cut-up de William S. Burroughs: Histoire d'une révolution du langage* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2014).

4. "On a dit parfois que ses traductions étaient médiocres, ce qui est faux" (Gérard-Georges Lemaire and Olivier Penot-Laccassagne, "Conversation à batons rompus autour de William S. Burroughs," *Beat Generation: L'inservitude volontaire*, Olivier Penot-Lacassagne, ed. [Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2018], 186).
5. The only work focused on the text remains my essays "'Burroughs is a poet too, really': The Poetics of *Minutes to Go*," *The Edinburgh Review*, 114 (2005): 24–36; "Cutting Up Politics," in *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization*, Davis Schneiderman and Philip Walsh, eds. (London: Pluto, 2004), 175–200; and "Cutting up the Corpse," in *The Exquisite Corpse: Chance and Collaboration in Surrealism's Parlor Game,* Davis Schneiderman et al., eds. (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2010), 82–103.
6. William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *Œuvre croisée*, Gérard-Georges Lemaire and Christine Taylor, trans. (Paris: Flammarion, 1976); *Le métro blanc*, Mary Beach and Claude Pélieu, eds. and trans. (Paris: Bourgois/Seuil, 1976).
7. See Véronique Lane, *The French Genealogy of the Beat Generation: Burroughs, Kerouac and Ginsberg's Appropriations of Modern Literature, from Rimbaud to Michaux* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 35–40.
8. Barry Miles, *William S. Burroughs: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2014), 659, 365.
9. Phil Baker, *William S. Burroughs* (London: Reaktion, 2010), 126–27.
10. William Burroughs, *Rub Out the Words: The Letters of William S. Burroughs, 1959–1974*, Bill Morgan, ed. (London: Penguin, 2012), 21.
11. Jean Fanchette, "The Real Tale of Two Cities" (1976), unpublished manuscript, courtesy of Véronique Fanchette.
12. See Benoît Delaune, "Texte itératif et stéréotypes chez William Burroughs: De l'intertextualité à l'autostéréotypie," *Cahiers de Narratologie*, 17 (2009), http://narratologie.revues.org/1268.
13. William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*, James Grauerholz and Barry Miles, eds. (New York: Grove, 2003), 58.
14. William Burroughs, *Le festin nu*, Eric Kahane, trans. (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 90.
15. The archival history of the manuscript includes one version with "adjustment of scores" rather than "adjusting," surely measuring a hesitation in how best to translate "règlement." (See the "Outtakes" in Burroughs, *Naked Lunch,* 270.)
16. Théophile Aries, personal email, October 2, 2007.
17. Josef Rauvolf, personal email, January 9, 2018.
18. William Burroughs, *Trilogie* (*La machine molle, Le ticket qui explosa, Nova express*), Mary Beach and Claude Pélieu, trans. (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1993), 382.
19. Jürgen Ploog qtd. in Edward Robinson, *Shift Linguals: Cut-Up Narratives from William S. Burroughs to the Present* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 122.
20. Gysin, too, equated cut-up methods with translating, although his emphasis was on revealing a hidden meaning: "il s'agissait là d'une véritable traduction d'un message quasiment codé que seule notre méthode pouvait rendre possible," he told Gérard-Georges Lemaire (*Burroughs* [Paris: Henri Veyrier, 1986], 60).
21. Josef Rauvolf, personal email, January 9, 2018.
22. Typescript (1959), "William S. Burroughs Papers, 1951-1972," The Berg Collection, New York Public Library: 12.50, 15.
23. William Burroughs, "NOTHING IS TRUE," *Haute Société*, 1 (June 1960): 33–34.
24. Jacques Houbart, "Traduction ou décryptement?," *Un homme grand: Jack Kerouac à la confluence des cultures*, Pierre Anctil et al., eds. (Ottawa: Carleton U P, 1990), 109.
25. *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs*, Sylvère Lotringer, ed. (New York: Semiotext(e), 2001), 263.
26. Gregory Corso, *An Accidental Autobiography: The Selected Letters of Gregory Corso*, Bill Morgan, ed. (New York: New Directions, 2003), 236.
27. Gysin to Paul Bowles, May 16, 1960, Paul Bowles Collection, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. I'm grateful to John Geiger for sharing a copy.