8

OLIVER HARRIS

William S. Burroughs
Beating Postmodernism

"Something Out of an Old Evil Dream"

When elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in May 1983, William Burroughs responded to the honor with defiant indifference: "Twenty years ago they were saying I belonged in jail. Now they're saying I belong in their club. I didn't listen to them then, and I don't listen to them now."[1] This is typical Burroughs: refusing to accept the official version – what "they" say – and turning it upside down by equating apparent opposites. When is a prestigious club a kind of jail? When being a member gives the impression of being known and therefore safe. If the American Academy is such a club, then so too are the canons of literature and such classifications as "Beat" or "Postmodern" – and even books such as *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats*.

The "they" who said Burroughs belonged in jail also attacked the other Beat writers from the late 1950s onwards, and it is hard to overstate the media vilification and misrepresentation they endured. Such negative coverage ironically helped to promote the Beats, intriguing a young generation of Americans not seduced by television sitcoms and home appliances. But, while Kerouac and Ginsberg were mocked and patronized in the media and likewise marginalized for years by the critical academy, Burroughs was always singled out for special treatment: "For sheer horror no member of the Beat Generation has achieved effects to compare with William S. Burroughs," declared a major feature on the Beats for *Life* magazine in 1959, noting the "hideous preoccupation with man's lowest appetites" in his recently published *Naked Lunch* and describing its author as "cadaverous," as if barely living, hardly human.[2] Burroughs' first public image as a writer, this tabloid typecasting of the man and his work as beyond the pale would never go away. Who is William Burroughs? Not a "Beat writer" nor a "postmodern artist" but a homosexual heroin addict who shot his wife and wrote obscene books with a pair of scissors. Such a mockery stands

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in the way of recognizing one of the most influential, visionary, and original oeuvres of modern times.

In the 1980s, Burroughs saw official acceptance on the horizon and rightly mistrusted it, but he was wrong about it then and remains so in the twenty-first century. For his place in the canon is still highly equivocal: acclaimed by some, overlooked by many more. Cultural conservatives continue to trash and traduce Burroughs, such as the reviewer for *The New Criterion*, who in 2006 saw his work "as a case history of psychopathology" and therefore not "worthy of serious consideration."[3] Such extreme hostility to Burroughs is a good measure of his enduring influence, which has made him the patron saint of new creative generations and genres from punk to cyberpunk and mashup video, and has quite literally inspired an A to Z of radical writers, artists, musicians, and filmmakers from Kathy Acker to John Zorn and back again, from Frank Zappa to Laurie Anderson. Burroughs' cultural reach is unique and turns up in unsuspected places, so that anyone who has heard "Lust for Life" knows, whether they know it or not, bits of *The Ticket That Exploded* (1967), one of Burroughs' cut-up novels that Iggy Pop and David Bowie cut up to make the lyrics of the song. On the one hand, the extent of Burroughs' cultural presence makes nonsense of the label "Beat writer," which would limit his relevance, historically fixing him in the postwar era. On the other hand, to call him a postmodernist might make Burroughs more our contemporary only at the price of enrolling him in an equally unsuitable club.

Before considering the merits and effects of preferring one label over another, we should recognize the most ironic point of intersection between the Beat Burroughs and the postmodern Burroughs: his mythologization as a Beat. For the creation of Burroughs as an iconic figure could be said to inaugurate the postmodern world of mediated realities, celebrities, and free-floating signs, the society of the spectacle and simulacra. To borrow one of his own key terms, Burroughs went "viral" as copies of his image began to replicate independently in the culture. The Beats were the first generation of writers to emerge through the modern mass media, and Kerouac appeared on television the same month that *Life* poured scorn on them all, November 1959; but the projection of Burroughs was always different. To begin with, he had an image whose attraction was almost the opposite to that of Kerouac – cold, sinister, and dangerous rather than soulful and rebellious – so that it appealed to quite different people. Just as importantly, the Burroughsian identity was created and circulated in unique ways.

The sensationalized image of Burroughs distributed by the mass media only spread more widely the shadowy, legendary figure already fabricated

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by his fellow Beats. Before readers had a chance to encounter Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* in 1959, they knew from Ginsberg's dedication to "Howl" (1956) that it was "an endless novel which will drive everybody mad" and from Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) that Burroughs, thinly fictionalized as "old Bull Lee," radiated "phenomenal fires and mysteries" like "something out of an old evil dream."[4] Such fantasy visions became lenses for reading *Naked Lunch* or – since the book is a challenge for most readers – replaced the need to read it at all. This ironic triumph of the image was always one of Burroughs' central subjects and it made *Naked Lunch* the first plausibly postmodern novel. And so, when Brian Nicol asserts in his *Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* that "Burroughs is significant to postmodernism not just as a literary influence but as an iconic cultural figure," he implicitly backdates postmodernity to the iconographic images of Burroughs projected by his fellow Beats.[5]

Does this make Burroughs the first postmodernist or a postmodern Beat? No answer can resolve the problem of definition. "Beat" was a loose term, an adjective rather than a noun, so that, even if it least fitted Burroughs, in a sense none of the Beat writers were Beat. As for "postmodern," it is probably the most contested term in cultural history. But, broadly speaking, the labels denote incompatible if not mutually exclusive realities. Historically, "Beat" corresponds to the America of the 1940s and 1950s, when the major authors first met and then published their most famous works. In contrast, "postmodernism" is usually dated from the 1960s and is identified far more globally as the cultural logic of late capitalism (to use Fredric Jameson's terms).[6] Aesthetically, the labels likewise seem to be worlds apart: whereas "Beat" is shorthand for relatively straightforward, autobiographically based writing that resists social authority, "postmodern" is shorthand for complex, language-based fiction that questions its own status as literature and mirrors back a fragmented, relativistic world. Put in such reductive terms, Burroughs is too Beat to be postmodern (too autobiographical, too political) and too postmodern to be Beat (too complex, too experimental).

The result of thinking through these labels is to make clear why the binaries they produce exist but do not hold, why they are more apparent than real. For example, there were direct points of contact and inspiration between Beats and postmodernists: Burroughs and William Gaddis knew and admired one another's work; Thomas Pynchon acknowledged his debts to Kerouac. Above all, there was a strong experimental strain in Beat writing that was hidden by the very level of popular success that particular works achieved. This is the case with Ginsberg's "Howl," whose fame as a

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generational "protest poem" eclipsed the sophisticated and rigorous poetics that informed it. Likewise, Kerouac's *On the Road* was destined to totally overshadow its aesthetically more challenging sequel, which went unpublished for two decades, *Visions of Cody* (1972). Perceptions are slow to change, but scholars like Tim Hunt have demonstrated that both novels are advanced experiments in literary form,[7] and Kerouac's work was indeed, in Robert Holton's phrase, "on the road to the postmodern."[8] Then again, as we will see, Burroughs's extreme experimentalism does not necessarily make him a postmodernist, any more than his role in the Beat Generation makes him a Beat.

"Jesus Christ, Get Him Out of Here"

Burroughs appears absolutely central to Beat history, one of its three major literary figures, who mentored the other two in New York during the mid-1940s, giving Kerouac and Ginsberg esoteric reading lists and subversive direction to their desires as fledgling writers. The same facts can support an entirely different reading, however, one where Burroughs is not central but marginal. He played the role of mentor because he came from *another* generation, being a decade older than Ginsberg and Kerouac, and was equally set apart by his class background, which connected him on both sides of his family to institutions in American business and public relations. He didn't *look* like a Beat, and when, in 1944, he first turned up in his Chesterfield overcoat and snap-brim fedora to sell a sawed-off shotgun and some morphine, Herbert Huncke thought Burroughs must be the FBI: "Jesus Christ, get him out of here, man. This guy is heat."[9] The irony is that, as a gay man and a drug user, Burroughs was doubly criminalized, and by the end of the decade he had to get himself out of America, to begin twenty-five years as a writer-in-exile. While the Beat Generation spread from East Coast to West throughout the 1950s, Burroughs was living and writing thousands of miles away in Latin and Central America, North Africa, and Europe. He then spent the 1960s in Paris and London developing the Cut-Up Project, a radical multimedia experiment with collage-based methods (of which more below) that was as far removed aesthetically and politically from the Beat scene as it was geographically.

By the time he returned to New York in the mid-1970s, to be received as a counterculture hero by a new generation of post-Beat artists and writers from Patti Smith to Anne Waldman, Burroughs had created an oeuvre and established a reputation that existed quite independently of Beat history. To be sure, his name was essential to the academic field of Beat Studies that

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began to emerge at this time, but this reveals less about his work than about the politics of canon formation, which needed Burroughs to form with Ginsberg and Kerouac a Beat Holy Trinity. Since the 1990s, as the "major authors" approach declined and new critical agendas massively expanded the Beat field in terms of race and gender, the centrality of Burroughs has no longer been necessary or even seemed so desirable. A similar situation applies within Burroughs criticism: most studies have followed the example of Robin Lydenberg's *Word Cultures* (1987), which did not even mention Kerouac and related Burroughs's experimental work to critical theory and by association postmodernism, rather than that of Jennie Skerl's *William S. Burroughs* (1985), for which "Burroughs's aesthetic – the Beat aesthetic – is one that defines art as consciousness."[10] Just as Beat Studies no longer needs Burroughs to firm up its legitimacy, so too Burroughs' reputation is such that his scholars can now ignore a field of dubious relevance. It is only in the more general cultural and biopic narratives, which continue to inform the way both are popularly understood, that Burroughs and the Beats still belong inseparably together, as in films based on their lives and works such as *Naked Lunch* (1991), *On the Road* (2012), and *Kill Your Darlings* (2013).

If Burroughs seems to exist in parallel universes as a Beat – now central, now marginal – so does he as a postmodernist. Again, this curious position has much to do with the politics of canon formation. Most Burroughs critics recognize the relevance of postmodernism as a context, but many have distanced him in one way or another: from Jamie Russell, who sees Burroughs as "a writer whose inherent essentialism has always made him a poor postmodernist at the best of times" to Timothy Murphy, who theorized "Amodernism" in order to separate Burroughs from the self-reflexive language experiments of postmodernism and better argue for his work's political power.[11] As for the critical field of postmodernism itself, Burroughs was named in the second paragraph of one of its founding texts, Jameson's "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984); however, appearing alongside Thomas Pynchon and Ishmael Reed may have been less recognition of Burroughs than a sign of how few major writers could then be labeled postmodern. Once postmodernism began to flourish, with very few exceptions critics and theorists mainly name-checked Burroughs or avoided him.[12] The indifference, and even outright hostility, of much postmodern criticism toward Burroughs accounts for the prevalence of barely credible thumbnail sketches in many introductions to the field: "This rigmarole," declares one of them, when describing Burroughs' cut-up methods, "has prompted skeptical critics

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to make unflattering comparisons between Burroughs and monkeys with typewriters."[13] It is as though Burroughs remains trapped in the early 1960s, when *Time* magazine mocked his cut-up novels as "utter babble" in a review so malicious that he was forced to sue.[14] We are left to wonder why, in the twenty-first century, so many critics still fail to take seriously Burroughs' experiments with collage – the central aesthetic of postmodernism – and prefer to exclude or ridicule him, as if to say, "Jesus Christ, get him out of here!"

"A Good Bedside Manner"

If we turn from the popular and critical reception of Burroughs to his actual work, at first it looks surprisingly simple to divide his oeuvre into decades and map these along a Beat–postmodern axis. Everything in the 1950s seems to bear the Beat stamp: from his debut novels, *Junky* (1953) and *Queer* (1985; but written in 1952), and *The Yage Letters*, which he co-authored with Ginsberg (1963; but partly published in the mid-1950s), up to *Naked Lunch*, whose title Burroughs credited to Kerouac in the book's de facto introduction. The first works have always been seen as by far Burroughs' most conventionally realist and autobiographical narratives, while *Naked Lunch* is hailed as the third of the three great Beat works, after "Howl" and *On the Road*. What followed, the Cut-Up Project of the 1960s, separates Burroughs from Beat literature and brings him closer to postmodernism, as does later work such as his final trilogy of novels concluding with *The Western Lands* (1989), which has been described as "an exemplary text of postmodern subversion."[15] However, there is both more and less to Burroughs' Beat decade than first appears.

Certainly, the 1950s was the one period when Burroughs' personal and creative relationships with Ginsberg and Kerouac were of material textual importance, and to the above sketch we can add that Ginsberg played a vital role promoting Burroughs' writing, serving as his amateur agent by tirelessly lobbying magazine editors and publishing houses. Ginsberg was also actively involved in editing Burroughs' manuscripts, most famously in Tangier in 1957 along with Kerouac and others, helping to turn his fragments into "Interzone," a first draft of *Naked Lunch*. Above all, Burroughs' dependence on Ginsberg had been essential to his writing after he moved to Tangier in 1954. Four thousand miles away, Burroughs invested desire and dark creative energy in an intense long-distance epistolary relationship with Ginsberg that, as I have shown elsewhere, generated many of the comic-grotesque routines that give *Naked Lunch* its mosaic structure and the corrosive force of its political critique.[16] But do such material connections make

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the resulting work "Beat"? Where are the hallmarks of Beat literature in Burroughs' writing of the 1950s?

Junky is often read as one of the first Beat books because of its assumed basis in autobiography. And yet, on this very ground, Burroughs' debut novel actually stands apart. Its minimal plot does derive from the facts of Burroughs's experience, which is what makes the first-person narration of William Lee an authentic first-hand piece of reportage, documenting the addict's view of how early postwar America looked behind the billboards. But to read Lee's narrative as a *roman à clef* only draws attention to the conspicuous exclusion of scenes involving versions of Kerouac or Ginsberg in a narrative that begins in New York in the mid-1940s, the precise time and place the three met and formed the original Beat circle. In striking contrast, Kerouac and Ginsberg consistently mythologized both Burroughs and each other in their work as a commitment to narrowing the gap between art and life. Likewise, if there is a Beat aesthetic of spontaneity that embodies a utopian desire for self-expression and spiritual community, it is not there in the cold, solitary, and grimly affectless world of *Junky*.

Queer and *The Yage Letters* (specifically the "In Search of Yage" section dated 1953) were again drawn from Burroughs' immediate experience, but the dramatic change in writing style and persona signal the dangers of reading this early trilogy as autobiography. In *Junky*, William Lee is an ironically deadpan narrator, slyly trapping the reader into taking his advice about how to become a heroin addict: "You need a good bedside manner with doctors or you will get nowhere."[17] In *Queer* and *The Yage Letters*, both set in Central and Latin America, Lee transforms into a manic, monstrous character who takes on the burden of his national identity to perform the role of the Ugly American. Lee therefore becomes the vehicle for an entirely different type of political critique: as an American abroad, he exercises a fascistic racism and colonialist elitism that invert his own demonized status as a homosexual at home. The result of baring the contradictions in American national identity seems designed to insult and alienate the reader, whose discomfort in *The Yage Letters* is only increased by uncertainty about the status of the text: is Lee a satirical fictional character or is this Burroughs' own voice? The epistolary form invites us to take the 1953 letters at face value, but they are signed five different ways (Bill, William, Willy Lee, W. Lee, William Lee), hinting at both the confusion of and gap between the author and his persona. That appearances are deceptive is confirmed by the complex manuscript backstory, which reveals how carefully Burroughs fabricated its epistolary structure out of notes and real letters. For Burroughs, the safety of "fiction" lets the reader off too lightly,

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and we begin to see how disturbingly his work undercuts the expectations we bring to literature.

To speak of the "manuscript backstory" to Burroughs' early writing might seem a secondary issue, a digression, but it actually brings to the foreground one of the unique features of all his work: its extreme *materiality*, from a physical manipulation of text to its dependence on contingency and collaboration. While these factors long went unnoticed in his early writing, in the case of *Naked Lunch*, a mythologized version of its materiality is only too well known: after the novel was assembled by Kerouac and Ginsberg from notes written while Burroughs was out of his mind on drugs, "the shape of the rat-gnawed typescript of *The Naked Lunch* was determined by the random order in which its sections happened to fall into place as the final draft went to the printer" (*Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* 66). Such glibly inaccurate accounts focus attention in the right place – the agency of factors other than the author's intentions – but only to trivialize the important point: Burroughs embraced contingencies as part of his working methods. His goal was to short-circuit a determinism within, a terrifying force inside himself that corresponded to the controlling power of external determinisms. That force was language, and he wasn't lazily surrendering control but fighting it.

The material dimensions to Burroughs' texts matter because they clarify why the singularity of his oeuvre is so easily misrecognized: critical interpretations that assume a self-reflexive literary purpose stand Burroughs on his head. Ironically enough, those postmodern critics who attack him may actually get the point: he is *not* a writer of metafiction playing sophisticated philosophical games with words. *Naked Lunch* materializes dark traumas of determinism and exercises power in order to exorcise it, and so, while it subverts realism and is highly self-conscious, it is no more adequate to call it the first novel of postmodernism than it is to call it the third of the three great works of Beat literature.

"So Long Flatfoot!"

Consider the opening scene of *Naked Lunch*, set on a New York subway:

> Young, good looking, crew cut, Ivy League, advertising exec type fruit holds the door back for me. I am evidently his idea of a character. You know the type: comes on with bartenders and cab drivers, talking about right hooks and the Dodgers, calls the counterman in Nedick's by his first name. A real asshole. And right on time this narcotics dick in a white trench coat (imagine tailing somebody in a white trench coat. Trying to pass as a fag I guess) hit the platform.

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> I can hear the way he would say it holding my outfit in his left hand, right hand on his piece: "I think you dropped something, fella."
>
> But the subway is moving.
>
> "So long flatfoot!" I yell, giving the fruit his B production.[18]

Although we start reading as invisible spectators, we quickly find ourselves included in the scene, directly addressed by a narrator who presumes not only that we know what he knows ("You know the type") but also that we agree with him ("A real asshole"). We are therefore forced to identify with him, even though his performance is a cheap fiction, a "B production." If we don't immediately recognize that *we* are the ones being taken for a ride, it is made clear soon after when the narrator confides in us his plan to con his victim, arranging "to sell him some 'pod' as he calls it, thinking, 'I'll catnip the jerk.' (Note: Catnip smells like marijuana when it burns. Frequently passed on the incautious or uninstructed.)" (5). The note presumes we know no more about catnip than the jerk who is about to be catnipped, revealing us as potential prey for the narrator rather than his trusted confidant. Since the jerk works for the desire factory that drives consumer capitalism – advertising – it is entirely fitting payback that he should be lost in a world of fake drugs and false images; but then so are we. As *Naked Lunch* goes on, the images get uglier and uglier, testing our stomach in line with Burroughs' definition of the book's title as "a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork" (199). The strategy is to make the lunch hard to swallow, forcing us to *see* what we eat, to *look* before we buy.

On this reading, Burroughs' text appears as postmodern in its self-reflexive playfulness as in its mosaic assemblage of every literary style from hard-boiled pulp fiction to surrealist prose poetry. However, such a reading fails to take into account the level of affective experience. For, while often very funny and highly literary, displaying Burroughs' dazzling mastery of idiom and a memorable phrase, *Naked Lunch* does not feel like a clever critique of political and aesthetic norms; reading it mainly feels like being physically assaulted. One of Burroughs' running jokes is to address us as the "Gentle Reader," as if this were a nineteenth-century novel on friendly, helpful terms with its audience: a kind of *companion*, indeed. The gag is played most fully in the "Atrophied Preface," the book's final section, which seems to belatedly offer an explanation for the text's disorientating disarray. "Why all this waste paper getting The People from one place to another? Perhaps to spare The Reader stress of sudden space shifts and keep him Gentle?" (182). Although Murphy claims that here "Burroughs himself offers a straightforward, practical pedagogy of his writing," the exact opposite is just as plausible: that Burroughs gives us only more of what we

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want.[19] Playing on our desire to grasp the rules of the literary game and our dependence on others to guide us, it's just another B production, more catnip.

In fact, *Naked Lunch* is so relentlessly hostile to interpretation that we must invert the standard question "How can a critical guide help to understand it?" for that can only explain the text *away*. With Burroughs, the question is always: "How can we preserve what is most difficult and distinctive?" We have to learn how to read a Burroughs text without turning it into something it is not, even while being led to question what "reading" is. Like any other label, once we apply "postmodern" to it, *Naked Lunch* becomes less confusing, less shocking, less alien and alienating – robbing us of precisely the reading experience unique to it. And so, if *Naked Lunch* is postmodern, it is a virulently aggressive and utterly nihilistic form of it, as if the so-called first postmodern novel were also its self-negating terminal point. "So long flatfoot!"

"Is Burroughs *Serious*?"

As the title of Fred Kaplan's cultural history puts it, 1959 was "the year everything changed," and, in ways that help to clarify his relationship with the Beat Generation and postmodernism, this could not have been more true than for William Burroughs.[20] That July *Naked Lunch* was published, and three months later Burroughs was introduced to what became known as the cut-up method. Both these events took place in Paris and helped seal to the fame of a shabby thirteenth-class establishment in the Latin Quarter at 9 rue Gît-le-Coeur. Indeed, no other locations achieved for the American writers what Ginsberg later claimed for the Beat Hotel in Paris: "our coming together at the hotel allowed us to spark each other. That was its contribution: getting us all under the same roof at the same time so we could hit off each other's energy day and night."[21] However, this site of Beat rendezvous, which in 1958 brought Burroughs together with Ginsberg and Corso, was also a point of rupture and radical new beginnings.

Between 1957 and 1963, the Beat Hotel was the base for two separate, almost antagonistic periods: the nine months to July 1958 when Ginsberg lived there, and the remaining four and a half years when Burroughs stayed on and off, working with his new creative partner, the painter Brion Gysin. During that time, Burroughs completed *Naked Lunch*, began the cut-up collaborations with Gysin that resulted in the manifestos *Minutes to Go* and *The Exterminator* (both 1960), and composed two volumes of the Cut-Up Trilogy, *The Soft Machine* (1961) and *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962).

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Therefore, 9 rue Gît-le-Coeur ought to go down in cultural history not as "the Beat Hotel" but as "Burroughs's Cut-Up Headquarters."

The story of Gysin's discovery has often been retold, but it has been easy to miss both the materially precise and the broadly historical significance of what happened that day in October 1959 when his Stanley knife accidentally sliced through magazines to create surprisingly meaningful results. Materially, it was crucial that Gysin happened to cut up copies of *Life*, because the very next month the magazine's vicious attack on Burroughs and the Beats appeared. Turning the coincidence into a meaningful connection, Burroughs realized that chance operations and collage techniques applied to printed materials offered a practical response to the media's falsification of reality by the manipulation of words and images. That is to say, he recognized the methods of the media as forms of black magic and decided to fight fire with fire. Accordingly, the first cut-up text in *Minutes to Go* was entitled "OPEN LETTER TO LIFE MAGAZINE" and was a scrambled collage of the *Life* article that made a mockery of the magazine's own effort to mock Burroughs and the Beats.

What does this material scenario reveal about the bigger historical picture for Burroughs, the Beats, and postmodernism? First, it confirms that in 1959 Burroughs effectively cut up the Beat Hotel, splitting himself off from his Beat associations. Corso, Ginsberg, and Kerouac were all mystified and appalled by his new methods. For Burroughs took literally the military metaphor of the avant-garde, announced in a wraparound band issued with *Minutes to Go* that declared "un règlement de comptes avec la Littérature." This "settling of scores" against not only political enemies, such as Henry Luce, the media magnate behind *Life* magazine, but also literature itself inevitably alienated Burroughs' former literary allies. Indeed, while Corso had been one of the four contributors to *Minutes to Go* (with Burroughs, Gysin, and Sinclair Beiles), he withdrew his support and the pamphlet included a retraction in which he dismissed cut-ups as an old Dada trick: "Tzara did it all before."[22] Cut-up methods actually had little in common with Tristan Tzara's notorious stunt for making poems by randomly pulling words out of a hat (actually, a bag), and over the years Burroughs would prove Corso wrong with extraordinary rigor and creativity. More immediately, Corso's retraction helped to draw battle lines and made clearer Burroughs' plan to mobilize others to join a cut-up revolution. His cut-up texts did not address the traditional reader of fiction, of course, but nor did they solicit the "active co-creator of meaning" valorized by postmodern criticism (*Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* xiv). As radical acts of *détournement* – turning

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received texts against themselves – cut-up methods sought to sabotage lines of power, create new possibilities, and recruit allies in a war, as Burroughs insisted: "The cut ups are not for artistic purposes. The cut ups are a weapon."[23]

In fact, it was more a case of both/and rather than either/or, since there would be many versions of the method, with various aims and results. Working empirically rather than from a coherent theory, Burroughs developed cut-up techniques for political warfare, scientific research, personal therapy, magical divination, and conjuration as well as for artistic purposes. And so, while 1959 may have been the high-water mark of Beat literature and media coverage involving Burroughs, it was also a switch point, the year that everything changed for him. Up until the publication of *Naked Lunch* it is still possible to call Burroughs a writer, even possibly a "Beat writer." But, from this point on, he was no more a writer than his texts were novels, and the phrase "experimental writing" seems hopelessly metaphorical for work that literally conducts experiments on language, and indeed on the reader. From 1959 onwards, writing was one technology in an ever-larger experiment involving a series of collaborators applied to tape recordings, film, photography, collage, and photomontage. Even the most stable textual results, such as the novel-length Cut-Up Trilogy, *The Soft Machine, The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express* are highly *un*-stable, disorientating texts that exist in multiple revised editions. Combining manuals for political revolution with instructions for time travel while creating highly disturbing poetic effects, they defy classification and fiercely resist being confined in the category of the "literary."

It is possible to see the cut-up method as simultaneously the end of the Beat road for Burroughs and the ground zero of postmodernity, and indeed for David Banash the discovery of the cut-up method "has become a kind of myth about the origins of postmodernism itself."[24] However, the Cut-Up Trilogy should not be mistaken for early postmodern science-fiction novels, ludic meta-fictional literature that plays on the equation of word with world. Burroughs wasn't playing the literary game. On the contrary, he believed he had *weaponized* writing. To ask the question, "Is Burroughs *serious*?" (as Frederic Dolan has done) is reasonable, even if it is not strictly answerable (545). In the end, the undecidability of his work is itself part of the challenge it poses, and we have to accept the paradoxical situation in which Burroughs exists in parallel universes, both highly literary and absolutely literal, at the heart of movements and at the edges of them, a Beat, a postmodernist, and entirely *sui generis*, in a club all his own.

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"You Are Reading the Future"

In their early anthology of criticism, Skerl and Lydenberg noted that, just as Burroughs was "the quintessential postwar or Beat writer to critics in the 1960s, he was now [in the 1980s] perceived as an exemplary model of postmodernism."[25] In the twenty-first century, perceptions should change again, in part because the Beat and postmodern fields have been dramatically redefined and in part because our understanding of Burroughs's oeuvre has begun to alter quite radically. He appears less and less Beat not only because his work developed over time but also, just as importantly, because his oeuvre has enlarged so much since his death in 1997. Now that it is far more widely available, his enormous body of cut-up work beyond the book form and in multiple media has become increasingly central. As a result, it's clear how far Burroughs's experiments left behind the Beat 1950s, and it's also clear how distinct these works were from other 1960s work labeled postmodern. To some contemporaries, Burroughs appeared to be going back to the future, rehashing the avant-gardism of the Dadaists and Surrealists.[26] Now we can see that what looked like old hat or utter babble was in fact a scissors-and-paste prophetic preview of the digital age. And, whereas postmodernism is often seen to uncritically reflect that age, years in advance of it Burroughs offered visionary tools for resistance and rewriting. Burroughs was one step ahead, and still is. And so, to update Barry Miles's claim that "each Beat had his own decade"[27] – Kerouac the 1950s, Ginsberg the 1960s, Burroughs the 1970s – we might conclude by identifying the distinctive relationship to time in each of their oeuvres and say that, if Kerouac's time was the past and Ginsberg's the present, then with Burroughs, as he put it in a collage for *Nova Express*, "you are reading the future."[28]

NOTES

1 Quoted in Ted Morgan, *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), 13.
2 Paul O'Neil, "The Only Rebellion Around," *Life* (November 30, 1959), 123, 126.
3 Anthony Daniels, "All Bark, No Bite [review of *The Yage Letters Redux*]," *New Criterion* (November 2006), 77.
4 Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1956), 3; Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 129, 135.
5 Brian Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 65.
6 See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July/August 1984).
7 See Tim Hunt, *The Textuality of Soulwork: Jack Kerouac's Quest for Spontaneous Prose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

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8 See Robert Holton, "Kerouac Among the Fellahin: *On the Road* to the Postmodern," *Modern Fiction Studies* 41.2 (1995).
9 Benjamin Schafer, ed., *The Herbert Huncke Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 247.
10 Robin Lydenberg, *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs' Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Jennie Skerl, *William S. Burroughs* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), 18.
11 Jamie Russell, *Queer Burroughs* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 163; Timothy Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
12 Among the most important exceptions is Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
13 Stuart Sim, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 129.
14 "King of the YADS," *Time* (November 30, 1962), 97.
15 Frederick M. Dolan, "The Poetics of Postmodern Subversion: The Politics of Writing in William S. Burroughs's *The Western Lands*," *Contemporary Literature* 32.4 (1991), 535.
16 See Oliver Harris, *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).
17 William S. Burroughs, *Junky: the Definitive Text of "Junk,"* ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Grove, 2003), 18.
18 William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*, ed. James Grauerholz and Barry Miles (New York: Grove, 2003), 2.
19 Timothy Murphy, "Intersection Points: Teaching William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*," *College Literature* 27.1 (2000), 84.
20 See Fred Kaplan, *1959: The Year Everything Changed* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009).
21 Ginsberg quoted in Christopher Sawyer-Laucano, *The Continual Pilgrimage: American Writers in Paris 1944–1960* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 287.
22 William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Gregory Corso and Sinclair Beiles, *Minutes to Go* (Paris: Two Cities, 1960), 63.
23 William S. Burroughs, unpublished typescript cited in *Nova Express: The Restored Text*, ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Grove, 2014), xx.
24 David Banash, "From Advertising to the Avant-Garde: Re-thinking the Invention of Collage," *Postmodern Culture* 14.2 (2004).
25 Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg, eds., *William S. Burroughs at the Front: Critical Reception, 1959–1989* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 11.
26 On postmodernism and the avant-garde, see Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
27 Barry Miles, *William Burroughs, El Hombre Invisible* (London: Virgin, 1992), 7.
28 Burroughs, untitled collage, cited in *Nova Express*, xl.

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