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*Modernist Genre Decadence: From H. G. Wells  
to William S. Burroughs*

*Preliminary: Dandies and Drudges from Carlyle to Burroughs*

In Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1836), the satirical sartorial philosopher Diogenes Teufelsdröckh predicts an apocalyptic future in which all of England has been drawn off into two opposed poles: a "Dandiacal Sect," lounging around in elaborate and expensive clothing, and a "Drudge Sect," "Poor-Slaves" who live in "dark dwellings" and can afford no better food than potatoes and salted herring. "To me it seems probable that these two Sects will one day part England between them," Teufelsdröckh explains. Carlyle expresses anxiety about the extremes produced by a rapidly industrializing England by likening his sects to two great "Electric Machines," one positively and the other negatively charged. These opposed bodies will come to thunderous conflict:

Hitherto you see only partial transient sparkles and sputters: but wait a little, till the entire nation is in an electric state: till your whole vital Electricity, no longer healthfully Neutral, is cut into two isolated portions of Positive and Negative (of Money and of Hunger); and stands there bottled up in two World-Batteries! The stirring of a child's finger brings the two together; and then—What then? The Earth is but shivered into impalpable smoke by that Doom's thunder-peal; the Sun misses one of his Planets in Space, and thenceforth there are no eclipses of the Moon.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Time Machine* (1895), H. G. Wells would give Carlyle's conflict between dandies and drudges a scientific twist. Drawing on the pseudo-Darwinian discourse of degeneration theory, Wells imagines a future in which Carlyle's bifurcated society has become biologized in the conflict between the Eloi and the

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I owe thanks for advice and suggestions to Merve Emre, Amy Hungerford, Leslie Jamison, Andrew Ollett, Glyn Salton-Cox, and Katie Trumpener.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 217.

Morlocks. The effete Eloi are upper-class decadent-dandies gone slack, lassitude their one remaining posture. “These exquisite creatures” have a “Dresden china type of prettiness”; they adorn themselves and the Time Traveler with the “delicate and wonderful flowers countless years of culture had created.”<sup>2</sup> The underground Morlocks, conversely, are a drudge sect turned feral, feeding on the Eloi, their one-time masters.

At first, the Time Traveler fails to discern the relationship between the Morlocks and the Eloi. “But gradually the real truth dawned upon me; that man had not remained one species, but had differentiated into two distinct animals...”<sup>3</sup> The Time Traveler concludes that both the Eloi and the Morlocks are “heir to our age,” a formulation emphasizing the metaphorical power of hereditary thinking:

But at first, starting from the problems of our own age, it seemed as clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference of the capitalist and the laborer was the key to the explanation. No doubt it will seem grotesque enough to you and wildly incredible, and yet even now there are circumstances that point in the way things have gone [...] Even now, an East End worker lives in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth and the clear sky altogether.<sup>4</sup>

The temporal telescoping of Wells’s urban present into the distant future, achieved most succinctly in the deployment of the perfect tense (“circumstances that point in the way things have gone”), positions these creatures as both biological heirs of nineteenth-century humanity and, in Wells’s monitory sci-fi allegory, the symbolic climax of the income inequalities attendant on industrialization. Class has become species. The Time Traveler, having absorbed both Wells’s socialism and his admiration for Carlyle, attempts to console himself for the grisly fate of the Eloi by “regarding it as a rigorous punishment

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<sup>2</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1895), 54, 56.

<sup>3</sup> Wells, *The Time Machine*, 110.

<sup>4</sup> Wells, *The Time Machine*, 114-15.

of human selfishness [...] I tried even a Carlyle-like scorn of these wretched aristocrats in decline.”<sup>5</sup>

William S. Burroughs had been thinking about *The Time Machine* since at least 1953, when, in a letter to Allen Ginsberg, he discusses his career-long fascination with time-travel: “H. G. Wells in *The Time Machine* speaks of undescrivable vertigo of space time travel. He is much underrated.”<sup>6</sup> Thirty years later, Burroughs would incorporate aspects of *The Time Machine* in *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), the first volume of his second trilogy, which also includes *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983) and *The Western Lands* (1987). At one point in *Cities* a young boy named Toby is reading *The Time Machine*; a passage of Wells’s prose describing the construction of the machine is excerpted at length.<sup>7</sup> And a key episode in that novel replays the species-war between the Morlocks and the Eloi: “The inhabitants [of the cities of the red night] were divided into an elite minority known as the Transmigrants and a majority known as the Receptacles.”<sup>8</sup> In this radically bifurcated, metempsychotic society, Transmigrants exploit Receptacles as vessels they can inhabit when their own bodies weaken. Because Transmigrants have access to an endless series of Receptacles, they can jump from body to body indefinitely. Just as the decadent Eloi subjugated the animalistic Morlocks, so have “the Transmigrants reduced the Receptacle class to a condition of virtual idiocy.” Like good dandies, the Transmigrants develop a cult of youth, committing suicide “at the age of eighteen to spare themselves the coarsening experience of middle age and the deterioration of senescence,” only to be reborn again, still young, via a subjugated Receptacle. In something of an ironic understatement, the narrator observes that “[t]here was a basic conflict of interest” between the two groups; there are rumors of Receptacle rebellion.<sup>9</sup>

From Carlyle to Burroughs, these apocalyptic scenarios of biologized class antagonism are remarkably consistent. Carlyle’s “Electric Machine” conceit—an

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<sup>5</sup> Wells, *The Time Machine*, 115-16, 148.

<sup>6</sup> *The Letters of William S. Burroughs, 1945-1959* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 178, 181.

<sup>7</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night* (New York: Picador, 1981), 243.

<sup>8</sup> Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, 154.

<sup>9</sup> Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, 158, 155, 158.

imaginative spasm both partaking of and reacting against the transformative energies of the Industrial Revolution—might be thought of as an instance of dystopic science fiction *avant la lettre*. It is no coincidence that anxieties about world-ending class warfare should take such a form. At the very heart of the impulse towards such speculative fantasizing lie the twinned figures of the dandy and his abject opponent, the drudge: the weird, unprecedented creatures generated by a terrifyingly unfamiliar and rapidly unfolding modernity.

I begin with the conjunction of speculative fiction and the dandy to show that Burroughs, more than any other heir to modernism, recognized that formal experimentation was grounded in the convergence of two strands of the *fin de siècle* imagination not obviously connected: dandyism and Darwinian science fiction. Critics such as Peter Nicholls and Andrew Goldstone have observed the centrality of the dandy and of aestheticism to modernism's imagination of formal autonomy, while Helen Sword and Leon Surette have reconstructed modernism's reliance on occult technologies such as the Ouija board.<sup>10</sup> Burroughs's oeuvre, with its decadent dandies, its "cut-up" techniques for semi-randomized textual production, and its elaborate Darwinian mythologies, represents the most radical extension in post-War American letters of modernism's weirder tendencies. For Burroughs, formal techniques like the cut-up find their thematic corollary in his novels' fictional world, obsessed as it is with such Wellsian scenarios as time travel and surgical experimentation. Burroughs's dandiacal self-fashioning is the indispensable grounds for his literary experiments, partially because the dandy's "voice" is one of the earliest Burroughs knew how to sample, but more importantly because the dandy, as the personality corresponding most readily to an aesthetic practice understood as "autonomous," would constitute for Burroughs the regnant model of the artist.

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<sup>10</sup> For discussions of modernism and the occult, see Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), discussed at greater length below, and Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and the Occult* (Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993). For aestheticism and modernism, see Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), discussed below. For the dandy and modernism, see Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 11-15.

The first part of this article will examine the role of the dandy in Burroughs's fiction—particularly insofar as Burroughs uses him to harness aestheticism and decadence, tendencies associated with the *fin de siècle* and with major stakes for modernism proper—alongside Burroughs's plundering of such “genre” forms as science fiction. In the second part, I will discuss Burroughs's cut-up technique alongside H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and the Dadaism of Tristan Tzara in order to explicate Burroughs's reformation of modernist formal precedent in the crucible of science fiction. By showing us how modernist formal experimentation depends on converting into formal terms the thematic preoccupations of *fin de siècle* science fiction, Burroughs can help make modernism itself seem strange again.

### *William Burroughs's (In)continent Dandies*

Burroughs was one of the great dandiacal literary celebrities of the twentieth century, a claim that may at first seem counterintuitive. Burroughs the gun-toting, misanthropic junky hardly seems to conform to the type of the “dandy,” if we understand that term primarily to denote sartorial elegance and the habits of the bon-vivant. But Burroughs's influence on the group of considerably younger men who became the Beats hinged on his anachronistic identification with an aristocratic composure fascinating precisely for its inconsistency with the grimy marginality glorified by students like Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Ginsberg would later recall “the strange Burroughs that Kerouac and I knew, the gentle melancholy blue boy, the proud elegant sissy, the old charmer, the intelligent dear.”<sup>11</sup> As Elisa Glick points out in her discussion of Burroughs's “gutter dandyism,” Ginsberg's characterization of his friend “creates an image of Burroughs as an effete, costumed dandy whose hyperrefinement is the very antithesis of his image as a cool and cantankerous tough guy.”<sup>12</sup>

But the “tough guy” and the “dandy” were never really antitheses at all—they were instead entwined complementarities, and Burroughs understood their shared logic better than any writer before him. Burroughs's form of dandyism was the “decadent” dandyism inaugurated (at the latest) by Baudelaire, and his

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Elisa Glick, *Materializing Queer Desire: Oscar Wilde to Andy Warhol* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 129.

<sup>12</sup> Glick, *Materializing Queer Desire*, 129.

extraordinarily risky drug abuse represents the terminus of a trajectory of decadent consumption encompassing Des Esseintes's experiments with his "mouth organ" or Dorian Gray's drift into the opium dens. (By "decadent dandyism" I mean a dandyism not just of refined surfaces and witty *bon mots* but also of pathologized psychological interiors, flowers of evil—decadent dandies know that beneath the surface are so many varieties of corruption.) Burroughs was a late explorer of pathological interiority, and his insistence that language is a virus literalized familiar metaphors of psychical illness. Burroughs's fiction oscillates between the two constitutive poles of late dandyism: Oscar Wilde's cool surfaces and the baroque interiority of the *fin de siècle* sufferer.

Further, Burroughs's iconic role in the beat movement might be understood as part of the legacy of a dandiacal-decadent counterculture, particularly if we read the Beats as a post-war American resurgence of the *fin de siècle* "demimonde." Emily Apter describes the long afterlife of the "[e]minently recyclable" codes of 1890s decadence that constitute the "demimonde as a subcultural style" signifying through modernism and beyond.<sup>13</sup> For Apter, "decadence" continues to signify within subcultural sites that might broadly be described as queer, and which resonate with the underworlds associated with Burroughs's life and art. If, historically, "decadence" is legible as a cluster of period features contemporary with and subtending modernism, Apter suggests that this apparently quaint set of codes continues to reverberate in more recent countercultures.<sup>14</sup> Apter's description of the "half-worlds" symptomatic of "demimonde decadence" sounds acutely Burroughsian: "the shadowy viscosity of nightworlds in extramural locations; the pathos of codependency (including the 'queerly' familiar spaces of sexuality-by-half: bisexed, third-sexed, cross, and transgendered); half-steps on the ladder of social hierarchy (blurred distinctions of race, ethnicity, and class); and the poetics of psychosexual splitting."<sup>15</sup> Burroughs's own preoccupations with "splitting"—in, for instance, his likening

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<sup>13</sup> Emily Apter, "Spaces of the Demimonde/Subcultures of Decadence: 1890-1990," in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. Liz Constable, Denis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 143.

<sup>14</sup> For an account of decadence and its relationship to modernism, see Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 151-211.

<sup>15</sup> Apter, "Spaces of the Demimonde/Subcultures of Decadence," 144.

the page to the two halves of the human body—resonate powerfully with this characterization of decadence. Not for nothing, as I'll discuss below, does the year "1890" recur with totemic prevalence across Burroughs's *oeuvre*.<sup>16</sup>

Like the beat undergrounds of New York, Burroughs's Tangier, with its cast of Americans and Europeans on the run from Cold War conformity, constitutes just such a decadent demimonde. *Naked Lunch*'s Interzone (so called after Tangier's status as an "international zone") emblemizes the shift from nineteenth-century decadence to post-war genre decadence, terrain exuberantly explored by all of Burroughs's fiction. I mean "genre" in the sense of "genre fiction," those traditions of popular fiction (the detective story, science fiction, the western) that might broadly be considered as opposed to or dialectically engaged with the development of the modernist art-novel out of realism. By "genre decadence," I want to suggest two related narratives: first, the process by which both decadence and degeneration theory not infrequently served as the thematic motor of important early instances of genre fiction, from *The Time Machine* to *Dracula* to the Sherlock Holmes stories; second, the way Burroughs's own turn to genre fiction involves decadent period borrowings which occasion a distinctly Burroughsian disintegration and re-scripting of genre codes. Murray G. H. Pittock has observed that *fin de siècle* decadence's most durable legacy obtains in the long afterlife of the "fantastic tale" in twentieth-century genre fiction.<sup>17</sup> As in decadence proper, the dandy is at the center of genre decadence, albeit a dandy who, in keeping with the fantastic Darwinism of so much science fiction, has undergone some startling mutations.

About two-thirds of the way through Burroughs's 1983 novel *The Place of Dead Roads*, the Regency-era dandy Beau Brummell himself makes an appearance. Kim Carsons, the novel's young, gun-slinging hero, is thinking with displeasure about "the risk of being trapped by old age in a soiled idiot body like Somerset Maugham's." From the subject of Maugham's decay the narrator pivots to a consideration of Brummell, whose deterioration is figured as the archetypal instance of unfortunate aging:

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<sup>16</sup> For a different discussion of Burroughs and decadence, see "Beardsley, Burroughs, Decadence, and the Poetics of Obscenity," *Tri-Quarterly Review* 12 (1968): 139-55.

<sup>17</sup> Murray G. H. Pittock, *Spectrums of Decadence* (Routledge 1993), 208.

Like Beau Brummell, [Maugham's] rigid mask was cracking to reveal a horrible nothingness beneath.

“Brummell would rush upon his plate and gulp down a roast in such a revolting manner that the other guests complained they were nauseated and Brummell had to be fed in his room...”

And here is the mask in place. When Beau Brummell was exiled to Calais by his debts and Princely displeasure, a local lady sent him an invitation to dinner and he sent back the message:

“I am not accustomed to *feed* at that hour.”

Toward the end of the month when his allowance ran out, Brummell would rush into a sweet shop and cram into his mouth everything he could reach [...]

A friend who took care of Brummell in his last years wrote, “His condition is indescribable. No matter what I do it is impossible to keep him *clean*.”<sup>18</sup>

Brummell, the first dandy, was an icon of self-control and rigorously disciplined self-presentation, and the tragic irony of his geriatric decline depends on the faltering, the failure, of this self, what Burroughs calls the “rigid mask [...] cracking to reveal a horrible nothingness beneath.” Burroughs’s conception of this mask—and what it conceals—partakes heavily of the *fin de siècle*’s decadent dandy, particularly as (dis)embodied in Dorian Gray. As the division of Dorian between his youthful body and his ghastly portrait suggest, the decadent dandy is a split creature. The “nothingness” beneath the mask is not a blank; it is the excessive efflorescence of decay—like the hideousness of Dorian’s portrait—a hideousness sometimes associated by Burroughs as by Wilde with the symptoms of aging. The decay of aging had occupied Burroughs as early as *Junky* (1953), the final paragraph of which provides a melancholy appreciation of the “kick” (drug-induced or otherwise) that understands it as a defense against aging: “Kick is momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> William S. Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads* (London: Fourth Estate, 1983), 183.

<sup>19</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Junky* (New York: Grove, 2012), 150.



At the center of this project is a paradox Burroughs recognized from the start. Drug-taking not only accelerates the deterioration against which it's meant as buffer, it grants putative refuge from the claims of the flesh by raising appetite to the level of transcendence. To cathect consumption as the drug-user must is always to soil oneself. Beau Brummell's grotesque pursuit of candy produces his terminal filthiness as surely as, in *Junky*, William Lee's near-suicidal drinking produces the "incipient uremia" that makes his entire body smell like urine: "Bill, it's you smells like piss!"<sup>20</sup> From the beginning, Burroughs's fiction was obsessed by the specter of decay, and by the acts of consumption, notoriously chemical, which might allay the burdens of embodiment. The appearance of an elderly Maugham/Brummell encapsulates a pattern of tension found throughout Burroughs's work, a pattern organized around such binarisms as surface and interiority, youth and age, smoothness and decay, and control and incontinence. All of these pairs inform dandiacal-decadence as a master category concerned with the way surfaces both protect against, and betray, a pathological interiority.

Burroughs's ornate grotesqueries depend on the eruption of interior rotteness, an eruption always becoming general, exploding infinitely. The terms of the problem are earliest articulated in *Junky*:

I got drunk on the fifty pesos. About nine that night, I ran out of money and went back to my apartment. I lay down and tried to sleep. When I closed my eyes I saw an Oriental face, the lips and nose eaten away by disease. The disease spread, melting the face into an amoeboid mass in which the eyes floated, dull crustacean eyes. Slowly, a new face formed around the eyes. A series of faces, hieroglyphs, distorted and leading to their final place where the human road ends, where the human form can no longer contain the crustacean horror that has grown inside it.<sup>21</sup>

The gothic horror of a de Quincey opium reverie lies behind this passage, of course, and, just as de Quincey's hallucinations threaten to overwhelm the real world in the *Confessions*, Burroughs's own figures—hieroglyphs, amoebas, crustacean forms—will take on a life of their own as Burroughs moves from the

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<sup>20</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, 135.

<sup>21</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, 131.

realist reportage of *Junky* to the symbolist fantasias of *Naked Lunch* onward. The “crustacean horror that has grown inside” is Burroughs’s earliest formulation of the horror against which the masks of human sociality are constructed in defense.

Burroughsian genre decadence is the result of a particular network of influences, a mixed genealogy to which Burroughs himself often referred. In *The Adding Machine*, Burroughs presents a narrative of writerly development that moves from dandiacal identification and Wildean imitation to the fateful discovery of the hardboiled. “As a young child,” he recalled, “I wanted to be a writer because writers were rich and famous. They lounged around Singapore and Rangoon smoking opium in a yellow pongee silk suit [...] languidly caressing a pet gazelle.”<sup>22</sup> From this childhood fantasy of the writer as Orientalist adventurer Burroughs would go on, as a teenager, to write short Westerns, an interest to which he returned much later, in the second trilogy. His Western juvenilia was interrupted by his reading of Wilde, which inspired such characters as “Reggie” and Lord Cheshire, “a mawkishly sentimental Lord Henry.” Burroughs then describes a long period of writer’s block occasioned by re-reading his diary, which dwelt upon a childhood crush: “The act of writing had become embarrassing, disgusting, and above all *false*. It was not the sex in the diary that embarrassed me, it was the terrible falsity of the emotions expressed. I guess Lord Cheshire and Reggie were too much for me.”<sup>23</sup> Burroughs breaks his year-long aversion to writing by working on a collaborative story “in the Dashiell Hammett/Raymond Chandler line.” He attributes overcoming his block—what he calls “the curse of the diary”—to “the act of collaboration.”<sup>24</sup> But, as the hardboiled style of *Junky* attests, the adoption of the “Dashiell Hammett/Raymond Chandler line” was just as important.

By *The Place of Dead Roads*, the bullied, Wilde-reading child of *Junky* will have been transformed into the cowboy Kim Carsons. Kim begins not as a gunslinger but as a radically exaggerated version of the autobiographical Lee in *Junky*’s

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<sup>22</sup> Ira Silverberg, ed., *The Word Virus: A William S. Burroughs Reader* (New York: Grove, 2000), 16.

<sup>23</sup> Silverberg, ed., *The Word Virus*, 20, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Silverberg, ed., *The Word Virus*, 21.

preface. He is a figure of Yellow Nineties grotesquerie with undertones of Dorian Gray's "strange joys and stranger sins" and Des Esseintes's practiced perversities:

Kim is a slimy, morbid youth of unwholesome proclivities with an insatiable appetite for the extreme and the sensational. His mother had been into table-tapping and Kim adores ectoplasm, crystal balls, spirit guides and auras. He wallows in abominations, unspeakable rites, diseased demon lovers, loathsome secrets imparted in a thick slimy whisper, ancient ruined cities under a purple sky, the smell of unknown excrements, the musky sweet rotten reek of the terrible Red Fever, erogenous sores suppurating in the idiot giggling flesh. In short, Kim is everything a normal American boy is taught to *detest*.<sup>25</sup>

Kim is a parodically distended decadent-dandy, characterized by all the hallmarks of the type—outsider status, aestheticized pathology, heretically appropriated Catholic imagery. Not just the content of the passage but its very syntax and rhythm—the list of “abominations” unfurling in increasingly swollen clauses set off by commas, each clause a bit more drawn out and a bit more disgusting—recognizably mimic the standard idiom for decadent excess in the canonical novels of decadence. Those suppurating sores perform a hallmark mission of decadent literature itself: they break down the opposition between surface and interior:

There were a number of medical books, which Kim read avidly. He loved to read about disease, rolling and savoring the names on his tongue [...] the poisonous pinks and greens and yellows and purples of skin diseases, rather like the objects in those Catholic stores that sell shrines and madonnas and crucifixes and religious pictures. There was one skin disease where the skin swells into a red wheal and you can *write* on it.<sup>26</sup>

The *fin de siècle* topos of the forbidden book—most familiar from *Dorian Gray*, in which a French novel usually presumed to be *À Rebours* exerts a mysterious

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<sup>25</sup> Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads*, 25.

corrupting influence on Dorian—has been startlingly literalized, as the act of writing converges with infectious pus. Interest in the forbidden book is extended when *Cities of the Red Night*'s private detective, or “private asshole,”<sup>27</sup> must track down a set of rare volumes containing the history of a radioactive virus, books which operate on a principle of contagious synesthesia,

a mutating virus, a *color* virus, as if the colors themselves were possessed of a purposeful and sinister life [...] the purples, reds, and pinks of disease skin—rising from the books palpable as a haze, a poisonous miasma of color.<sup>28</sup>

These books are a magical version of Burroughs's own oeuvre, an ideally defiling viral text whose redundancies, obsessive repetitions, endlessly elaborated sexual fantasies, ritually developed scenes of violence, are all part of the infectious, subversive, contaminating possibility of the book not just as forbidden but as weaponized. Kim Carson's “first experiment with biologic warfare,” for instance, involves sending “free illustrated Bibles impregnated with smallpox virus” to a group of anti-vaccinationist Christian cultists.<sup>29</sup> Dorian Gray's “poisonous book” takes on new meaning.

The dialectic between surfaces and pathologized depths depends above all on how the Burroughsian “gutter dandy” reworks discourses drawn from the decadent aestheticism of the 1890s. Indeed, the phrase “the 1890s” appears with totemic frequency across Burroughs's fiction.<sup>30</sup> It is shorthand for the whole problem of decadent interiority, as well as the aestheticist surfaces with which the decadent-dandy makes an atmosphere for himself. “1890” is above all an atmosphere word, and what it captures is the back-and-forth between the polished surfaces of the boudoir and the pathologized interiority of the decadent

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<sup>27</sup> Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, 34.

<sup>28</sup> Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads*, 168.

<sup>29</sup> Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads*, 72.

<sup>30</sup> In *Junky*, a drug-buyer named Louis “looked like an 1890 portrait” (44). In *Naked Lunch*, there are “1890 cops” and a “vast empty hotel lobby in 1890 style”. See William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove, 1990), 17, 34. Examples can be multiplied.

sitting in it. Burroughs's cartoonish cowboy, his Kim Carsons riding off into the sunset, has vanquished that interiority. He is a dandy beyond decadence, supremely continent, all surface (and, unlike the cowboys of adventure fiction and Hollywood film, still gay). Kim's fixation on an aging Brummell demonstrates the risk to be avoided: the appetites indicated by dandiacal consumption result in a disgusting old codger—"it is impossible to keep him *clean*."

*The Cut-Up and The Larynx: Wells, Tzara, Burroughs*

Burroughs, in fact, is obsessed with cleanliness, a preoccupation which is the compulsive obverse of the deliberate obscenity of much of his work. Most famously, there is the "talking asshole" routine in *Naked Lunch*, in which a carnival performer "who taught his asshole to talk" ends up being taken over, literally engulfed, by that newly articulate organ. With the asshole's "teeth-like little raspy incurving hooks" and "jelly like a tadpole's tail," Burroughs offers a hyperbolic literalization of an imaginative metaphysic predicated on Darwinesque imagery of organic change over time. The passage is a riff on a familiar science-fictional set-piece in which an amoral mad scientist plays, God-like, with the fundamental codes of organic life. As Benway, the story's narrator, puts it: "We're scientists [...] Pure scientists. Disinterested research and damned be him who cries, 'Hold, *too much!*'"<sup>31</sup> For Burroughs, H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) is the most proximate model for the treatment of this convention and the host of questions it summons up: How might evolutionary theory provide a tool for shaping man anew? Can the line between man and animal be crossed in either direction? Where does speech come from? Finally, how should psychic interiority be understood after the ascendance of materialistic explanations for human consciousness? Burroughs's cut-up technique, itself a demented sort of surgery, provided the means for testing all of these questions, a textual laboratory where his most outlandish thematic and his most radical formal concerns meet. If, as the "talking asshole" routine suggests, articulacy and filth are inextricable, cleanliness will finally require a total escape from words.

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<sup>31</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 119-20, 119.

Burroughs's cut-up writing—by which he produced new material through cutting up and recombining his own and others' texts—produces heightened media awareness, and it is no coincidence that such a technique would find appropriate content in the fantastic speculations of science fiction, since, as John Guillory has pointed out, the emergence of a “media concept” is a ripe site for “science-fictional resonance.”<sup>32</sup> In Burroughs's case, such resonance will depend on his literalization of the organic metaphors behind the cut-up and its modernist ancestors, a literalization that, at the level of literary genre, will demand a return to Wellsian science fiction, which has more to do with the figures of the decadent and the dandy than one might first assume. The *Island of Dr. Moreau* was, according to Wells's preface to the 1924 edition, prompted in part by “a scandalous trial about that time, the graceless and pitiful downfall of a man of genius.”<sup>33</sup> As Wells scholar Simon J. James notes, this “man of genius” is “usually presumed to be Oscar Wilde.”<sup>34</sup> It's far from obvious why Wells's nightmarish Darwinian fable should have been inspired by Wilde's trials, though James suggests a reading of the “Victor Hugo-quoting” Dr Moreau himself as an “irresponsible aesthete [...] who describes the human vivisection that was the Spanish inquisition as ‘aesthetic torture.’”<sup>35</sup> I think the key lies in “vivisection” itself as a figure for decadent self-investigation. As *Dorian Gray* puts it of Henry Wotton, the supreme dandy, “[He] had always been enthralled by the methods of natural science, but the ordinary subject-matter of that science had seemed to him trivial and of no import. And so he had begun by vivisectioning himself, and he had ended by vivisectioning others.”<sup>36</sup> Wells recasts the auto-vivisection preoccupying *Dorian Gray* and the decadent novel more generally by returning it to its origins in physical medicine.

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<sup>32</sup> John Guillory, “Genesis of the Media Concept,” *Critical Inquiry* 36.2 (2010): 321-62.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Simon J. James, *Maps of Utopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65.

<sup>34</sup> James, *Maps of Utopia*, 65.

<sup>35</sup> James, *Maps of Utopia*, 65.

<sup>36</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2001), 47.

Initially Prendick, the novel's narrator, mistakes Dr Moreau's scientific practice; he assumes that the bestial people of the island are the broken results of vivisected human beings, rather than recognizing them as animals who have been transformed into something human. "Could it be possible, I thought, that such a thing as the vivisection of men was carried on here?" Resolved to escape this grisly fate himself, Prendick runs away from Moreau's compound and plans to drown himself. He balks at the last minute, and in the process shifts the valence of a quite literal vivisection back to the figurative auto-vivisection absorbed from Wilde: "I had half a mind to drown myself then; but an odd wish to see the whole adventure out, a queer, impersonal, spectacular interest in myself, restrained me."<sup>37</sup> Prendick, faced with actual vivisection—a fate worse than death—finds refuge in the generic precursor to his story: he converts the scalpel and the bonesaw to the subtler tools of decadent self-investigation.

Once Prendick discovers what Moreau's actually up to—not vivisecting men into beasts but *vice versa*—he judges the work immoral but nevertheless credits him with having discovered nothing less than the foundational boundary between man and animal. "[T]he great difference," Moreau explains, "between man and monkey is in the larynx [...] in the incapacity to frame delicately different sound-symbols by which thought could be sustained."<sup>38</sup> Moreau has discovered how to turn beasts into men by manipulating the larynx, but he cannot quite get it right. Here's how Prendick describes some ritualistic chanting by three of Moreau's creatures, one "evidently a female; the other two were men [...] naked, save for swathings of scarlet cloth about the middle":

They were talking, or at least one of the men was talking to the other two, and all three had been too closely interested to heed the rustling of my approach. They swayed their heads and shoulders from side to side. The speaker's words came thick and sloppy, and though I could hear them distinctly I could not distinguish what he said. He seemed to me to be reciting some complicated gibberish. [...] Their eyes began to sparkle,

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<sup>37</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1896), 91, 98.

<sup>38</sup> Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, 133.

and their ugly faces to brighten, with an expression of strange pleasure. Saliva dripped from their lipless mouths.<sup>39</sup>

Moreau's naked creatures participate in an unintelligible chant with strong sexual overtones, perhaps a mating dance. Prendick doesn't wait to find out. Disgusted by "these foul beings" and their "grotesque and unaccountable gestures" in which he recognizes "the unmistakable mark of the beast," he turns and flees.

This scene, in which primitive proto-speech orchestrates some kind of ritual activity, rhymes uncannily with *The Soft Machine's* description of the foul acquisition of "the muttering sickness." In a passage of lyrical Beckettian abjection, Burroughs offers an origin myth:

In the pass the muttering sickness leaped into our throats, coughing and spitting in the silver morning. [...] beyond the pass, limestone slopes down into a high green savanna and the grass-wind on our genitals. came to a swamp fed by hot springs and mountain ice. and fell in flesh heaps. sick apes spitting blood laugh. sound bubbling in throats torn with the talk sickness. [...] fingers and tongues rubbing off the jelly-cover. body melting pleasure-sounds in the warm mud. till the sun went and a blue wind of silence touched human faces and hair. When we came out of the mud we had names.<sup>40</sup>

In this remarkable fable, the movement into and then out of the mud recalls pivotal moments in a longer evolutionary narrative, the transition from sea to land and the rise of the vertebrates. But the movement is precisely *into* and *then* out of the mud, as if symbolic communication and human individuation required first an immersion in the resolutely pre- or non-symbolic. The journey into the mud might be thought of as a head-first dive into one's own asshole, so that language acquisition depends on the undoing of the apparent opposition between mouth and anus, the obscene conjunction of which is the subject of *Naked Lunch's* "talking asshole" routine. Despite Burroughs's well-known obscenity,

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<sup>39</sup> Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, 74-5.

<sup>40</sup> William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (New York: Grove, 1992), 173-4.



the fantasy towards which all his writing tends is one of purity beyond the body. As an early cut-up has it, “Surgical dynamite this is else you don’t go, subject ape. Man, come float clean terms past hi-thing story.”<sup>41</sup> Burroughs’s innovative writing techniques are a kind of surgery meant to convert the simian subject into a higher being whose “clean terms”—uncontaminated by corrupting corporeality—permit him to transcend the kind of narrative (“hi-thing story”) still tethered to the animal body.

Robin Lydenberg has criticized others for “focus[ing] on Burroughs’s mythology” and ignoring Burroughs’s “repeated reminders that content is irrelevant, that what must be attended to in all linguistic formulations is the structure of the discourse itself.”<sup>42</sup> But Burroughs’s formal innovations are inseparable from his thematic preoccupations. Burroughs truly believed that “[w]ords—at least the way we use them—can stand in the way of what I call nonbody experience. It’s time we thought about leaving the body behind.”<sup>43</sup> This fantasy of disembodied post-humanity occupies both his fiction and his theoretical writings on medial experimentation.

When Burroughs adapted the cut-up method from his friend the painter Brion Gysin, chance procedures and varieties of randomized text-generation had been available to writers for forty years. There was, for instance, Tristan Tzara’s 1920 “Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love,” as Burroughs acknowledges in a 1960 letter: “The Possibility of literary creation by random? cutting and rearranging of material was indicated when Tzara at a Dada meeting in the 1920s proposed to create a poem on the spot by pulling words out of a hat.”<sup>44</sup> “The poem,” Tzara wrote in his list of instructions for producing a cut-up, “will

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<sup>41</sup> Williams S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: Viking, 1978), 131.

<sup>42</sup> Robin Lydenberg, *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs’ Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 55. Lydenberg, luckily, does not follow her own advice.

<sup>43</sup> Burroughs and Gysin, *Third Mind*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Rub Out the Words: The Letters of William S. Burroughs 1959-1974* (New York: Ecco, 2012), 22.

resemble you,” despite its aleatoric, foreign origins.<sup>45</sup> Tzara’s cut-up technique complements the Surrealists’ roughly contemporaneous exquisite corpse (“*cadavre exquis*”) games, which underlined, in name and often in result, the organic metaphor underpinning these avant-garde strategies. The scissor becomes a kind of surgical instrument, and the text a Frankenstein’s monster. The cut-up method emphasizes the materiality, indeed the organicity, of the text. As Tzara puts it earlier in the manifesto, “Must we no longer believe in words? Since when do they express the contrary of what the organ that utters them thinks and wants? Herein lies the great secret: thought is made in the mouth.”<sup>46</sup> The scissors are an instrument by which the words of others can be made in one’s own mouth. Like the collage, the cut-up brings media to the fore, in the process exposing the human body itself as medium. For Burroughs, the theory of the cut-up and the material conditions of its practice were inseparable—and the “scissors” involved become, according to the logic of the organic text, a scalpel. This equivalence crops up, for instance, in the postscript to a 1963 letter to Gysin: “Do you know that Anatole France ‘wrote with a pair of scissors’? cutting out sentences and pasting them together? That perhaps he rather than Tzara is the original cut up? Perhaps it is time to exhume this cadaver and perform the indicated autopsy.”<sup>47</sup> To deploy the cut-up method is to *be* the cut-up, to have a (textual) body upon which surgery can be performed. To “exhume” France’s “cadaver”—his *cadavre exquis*—is to cut up a cut-up.

In other words, the cut-up as poetic and textual strategy draws a lot of strength from the metaphors of embodiment articulated around it from Tzara onwards. In this, it is a direct descendent of *fin de siècle* theories of literary form which posit an analogy between the decadence (later, more scientistically, the degeneration) of the organism and the decadence of cultural products. The most famous pronouncement here is that of the French poet and novelist Paul Bourget (1852-1935):

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Pericles Lewis, “To Make a Dadaist Poem,” *Yale Modernism Lab*, [http://modernism.research.yale.edu/wiki/index.php/To\\_Make\\_a\\_Dadaist\\_Poem](http://modernism.research.yale.edu/wiki/index.php/To_Make_a_Dadaist_Poem).

<sup>46</sup> Tristan Tzara, “Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love” (1920), <http://www.391.org/manifestos/1920-dada-manifesto-feeble-love-bitter-love-tristan-tzara.html#.VCnbJVa4mII>.

<sup>47</sup> Burroughs, *Rub Out the Words*, 132.

The same law [as governs the animal organism] governs the development and decadence of that other organism, language. The style of decadence is one where the unity of the book decomposes to give way to the independence of the page, where the page decomposes to give way to the independence of the sentence, and where the sentence decomposes to give way to the independence of the word.<sup>48</sup>

The cut-up method, with its necessarily fetishistic decoupling of the sentence from the paragraph and the word from the sentence, achieves precisely the “decomposition” described by Bourget. Gérard-Georges Lemair seemed to recognize as much when, in his contribution to Burroughs and Gysin’s collaborative collection *The Third Mind*, he writes that “The main intention of Brion Burroughs and William Gysin has been to free the text from the page, to free the word from the surrounding matrix.”<sup>49</sup> Or, as Burroughs himself says, “Carried further we can break the page down into smaller and smaller units in altered sequence.”<sup>50</sup> This textual decomposition finds its organic expression as early as *Junky*, for instance when Lee, in an asylum taking the cure, describes a fellow patient thus: “He did not have the concentration of energy necessary to hold himself together and his organism was always on the point of disintegrating into its component parts.”<sup>51</sup>

While Burroughs’s cut-up practice can obviously be understood as a descendent of modernist collage, we should avoid reducing it to a late-modernist footnote. The modernist Burroughs didn’t simply impose his esoteric beliefs about possession and the de-materialization of the word onto modernist formal practice. Far more interestingly, Burroughs’s shamanic science fiction develops strands integral to “modernism” itself, which, as scholars have in recent years begun to demonstrate, depended on weird brews of mysticism and magical belief, on materially manifested spirit-worlds and ectoplasmic eruptions at

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 10.

<sup>49</sup> Gérard-Georges Lemair, “Introduction,” in Burroughs and Gysin, *The Third Mind*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> William S. Burroughs and Daniel Odier, *The Job* (New York: Grove, 1974), 178.

<sup>51</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, 99.

séances, on hauntings and ghosts and fairies and visitations from beyond. Lawrence Rainey has observed, for instance, that Marinetti's futurism depends on "mediums and automatic writing,"<sup>52</sup> a method of occult access famously favored by Yeats's wife, George Yeats. *Ghostwriting Modernism* (2002), Helen Sword's definitive study of the subject, shows that modernist fascination with posthumous mediumistic communication was hardly the exclusive preserve of such acknowledged mystics as Yeats; even professed skeptics like André Breton could offer at least "metaphorical approbation to spirit mediums." Breton, for instance, "recognized and even highlighted similarities between surrealist writers' 'automatisme physique' and the spiritualist phenomenon of automatic writing."<sup>53</sup> Modernist innovation, in other words, was surprisingly indebted to the popular spiritualism animating the mediumistic receipt of the words of the dead—in séances or before audiences of the public—common from the late Victorian period through to World War II. In this context, Burroughs's claim about *The Place of Dead Road's* stylistic borrowings from the English writer Denton Welch (1915-1948) takes on added force: "It's table tapping [... Welch is] writing beyond the grave."<sup>54</sup>

At the heart of modernist mediumism lies a contradiction that will be familiar to readers of Burroughs, what Sword calls "its paradoxical proclivity to materialize the spirit world even while trying to spiritualize the material one."<sup>55</sup> Sword locates spiritualism's most durable legacy in T. S. Eliot. As one of modernism's most important collage-poems, the bravura ventriloquism of *The Waste Land* (with its mediumistic *clairvoyante* Mme Sosostriis at the center) "validates the methods and forms, perhaps even the abject corporeality, of mediumistic discourse."<sup>56</sup> As Eliot's example suggests, the paradoxes of modernist spiritualism were formally very productive. And point for point, they have their analogue in the career of Burroughs. Not at all coincidentally, we might begin to trace Burroughs's mediumistic modernism in his relationship to Eliot, the

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<sup>52</sup> Lawrence Rainey, "Taking Dictation," *Modernism/modernity* 5.2 (1998): 123-53, 125.

<sup>53</sup> Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism*, 84-5.

<sup>54</sup> Sylvère Lotringer, ed., *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs* (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2000), 497.

<sup>55</sup> Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism*, 17-18.

<sup>56</sup> Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism*, 101.

literary precursor whose lines show up most frequently in Burroughs's cut-ups. Burroughs saw the cut-up as a means of absorbing prior poets into his own body, of, to recall Tzara's phrase, making their meaning in his mouth: "So forth anybody can be Rimbaud if he will cut up Rimbaud's words and learn Rimbaud language talk think Rimbaud ... And supply reasonably appropriate meat. All dead poets and writers can be reincarnate in different hosts."<sup>57</sup>

Like mediumistic spiritualism, the cut-up is constituted by a central paradox. On the one hand, the cut-up ushers in the de-materialization of the word. It facilitates the detachment of language from the physicality of speech. On the other hand, it roots poetic production in a body understood in terms of its "meat." Just as, for Eliot, the resources of the canon could be plundered for haunting fragments, so for Burroughs the "meat" of past poets might be re-animated on the page of the cut-up artist. But Burroughs's "meat" puts a heavy accent on the materiality of this "reincarnation." If modernism makes formal use of a metaphorized mediumistic logic, Burroughs puts pressure on the metaphor. The cut-up, for him, is less a question of the Eliotic collage's uncanny summoning of the ghostly traces of a poetic past than it is a disturbing eruption of the "ectoplasmic evulsions so popular in late-nineteenth-century mediumship."<sup>58</sup> In other words, *he might actually mean it*.

The first cut-up trilogy is an agonized encounter with the cut-up method's failure to decouple the word from the flesh ("In the beginning was the word [...] and the word was flesh ... human flesh ..." Burroughs says in *The Job*).<sup>59</sup> The reader is exhorted to resist the word-virus thus: "Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that *forces you to talk*."<sup>60</sup> Here, Burroughs enjoins the reader to discover the fact of laryngeal sub-vocalization for herself. In other words, the cut-up trilogy is something like a guide to practice, with textual illustrations. Burroughs's cult appeal has always depended on the possibility that he is more guru than novelist. And like any guru, his teachings might turn out to be

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<sup>57</sup> Burroughs and Gysin, *Third Mind*, 70.

<sup>58</sup> Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism*, 18.

<sup>59</sup> Burroughs and Odier, *The Job*, 11.

<sup>60</sup> William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* (New York: Grove, 1967), 49-50.

incoherent. It's "time to look beyond this animal body," Burroughs says in *The Job*,<sup>61</sup> but over and over again, his discussions of the cut-up return to the core fantasy of splicing together the animal and the human, of in fact rendering the human *even more* animal. In *Electronic Revolution*, Burroughs describes the cut-up as "the magic that turns men into swine. To be an animal: a lone pig grunts, shits, squeals, and slobbers down garbage." It's as if Prendick's initial suspicion were correct: Moreau's methods don't turn animals into humans but, like Circe's, make men beasts. The cut-up fails in its dematerializing mission—it fails to liberate man from the body and the word virus. Instead, like the researches of Dr Moreau, it produces composite, potentially obscene creatures. Not "a mold filled with light, a mold that will soon be empty,"<sup>62</sup> but textual monsters result.

The first trilogy, comprising *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*, was written between 1961 and 1964. Twenty years later, the second trilogy would abandon the cut-up as technique but re-absorb it, along with its attendant mythology, as plot material. In *The Place of Dead Roads*, for instance, the "resisting organism" prohibiting the suppression of laryngeal subvocalization would re-appear as part of a "missing link" narrative. Kim Carsons is sent by a certain Language Institute to "the highlands of Yemen [...] where the original link between ape and man that led to speech may still survive. These beings are called 'smouners.'" Smouners "use the larynx as a sexual organ" but can also use it as a weapon.<sup>63</sup> Kim's task is to penetrate the smouners' habitat and transcribe their primordial speech for the benefit of the linguists.

Burroughs borrows more from H. G. Wells than just the larynx as the focal point for the "missing link."<sup>64</sup> *The Place of Dead Roads*' rewriting of Moreau also rewrites the history of the cut-up as technique. With the Language Institute's focus on the larynx, Burroughs provides the generic lineage of a formal innovation: he roots the cut-up in nineteenth-century Darwinian sci-fi and its

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<sup>61</sup> Burroughs and Odier, *The Job*, 137.

<sup>62</sup> Burroughs and Odier, *The Job*, 96.

<sup>63</sup> Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads*, 187.

<sup>64</sup> For a concise history of the imaginative ramifications of the "missing link," see Gillian Beer, *Forging the Missing Link* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

fascinated anxiety about demented surgery—“vivisection”—run amok. Like Wells, Burroughs’s imaginative repertoire for describing primordial language draws on late Victorian degeneration theory as well as on a version of *fin de siècle* decadence crucially interested in the science of philology.<sup>65</sup> Burroughs’s “viral” theory of language extended and biologized the fragmentation of language into its material component parts seized on in decadent style.

### *Fading Out: Overcoming the Cut-Up*

In an introductory prologue at the beginning of *The Western Lands* (1987), the final novel of the second trilogy, Burroughs describes an “old writer” who “lived in a boxcar by the river.” Washed-up, no longer writing, this ex-author has succumbed to “a disgust for his words” that “choked him.”<sup>66</sup> A qualified inspiration continues to visit him:

Often in the morning he would lie in bed and watch grids of typewritten words in front of his eyes that moved and shifted as he tried to read the words, but he never could. He thought if he could just copy these words down, which were not his own words, he might be able to put together another book and then ... yes, and then what?<sup>67</sup>

The model of composition here described—a kind of alien inspiration that collapses the distinction between “writing” and “copying”—of course resembles the cut-up, and the grids are reminiscent of Gysin’s many grid-based visual and textual collages. The old writer’s visions suggest that another cut-up novel might be possible—but not necessarily worth it: “yes, and then what?”

*The Western Lands*, like the rest of the second trilogy, contains almost no actual cut-up writing, but the melancholy enshrinement of the technique in its opening depiction of an aging, indigent writer grants it a sort of compromised priority.

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<sup>65</sup> See Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) for a discussion of the resonance between Bourget’s influential definition of literary decadence and the new linguistic theories of the period (133).

<sup>66</sup> William S. Burroughs, *The Western Lands* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 1.

<sup>67</sup> Burroughs, *The Western Lands*, 1-2.

The technique is explicitly yoked to science fiction, via an allusion to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). One of the words appearing to the old writer is "2001," which he recalls "was the name of a movie about space travel and a computer called HAL that got out of control."<sup>68</sup> We learn that the old man is William Seward Hall, a Burroughs stand-in from earlier in the trilogy (Seward was Burroughs's middle name), and that he has vowed "to write his way out of death." The prologue ends with a Goethe couplet, in German and then in English: "When you don't have this dying and becoming, / You are only a sad guest on the dark Earth."<sup>69</sup> It is as if the cut-up has been wistfully replaced by the melancholic plenitude of these rhymed lines, with their Romantic-humanist resignation in the face of a vanishing myth.

Burroughs, as mentioned above, explains that he wrote much of *The Place of Dead Roads* "in the style of Denton Welch," although he did not actually cut up Welch's texts: "It's table tapping [...] He's writing beyond the grave."<sup>70</sup> If the cut-up had all along inherited the contradictions of mediumistic modernism, in this case Burroughs's explicit alignment of the late non-cut-up work with mediumism accents the dematerializing side of his practice. The shift from the surgical cut-up method to the spiritualized figure of the Ouija board suggests that Burroughs abandoned the cut-up because, finally, it was too rooted in metaphors of surgery and laryngeal grafting to overcome solidity, to "create [the] land of dreams"<sup>71</sup> that Burroughs's late program demanded. The cut-up could not alleviate the old writer's "disgust for words"—it may even have exacerbated that disgust. Michael Clune has written of postmodern experimentation as the "invent[ion of] virtual techniques, imaginary forms for arresting neurobiological time by overcoming the brain's stubborn boundaries."<sup>72</sup> The cut-up should be thought of as one such technique—a failed one.

The cut-up "fails" not because it could no longer produce interesting work but *in terms of the mythology in which it was always embedded*. What does it mean for

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<sup>68</sup> Burroughs, *The Western Lands*, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Burroughs, *The Western Lands*, 3, 4.

<sup>70</sup> Lotringer, ed., *Burroughs Live*, 497.

<sup>71</sup> Burroughs, *The Western Lands*, 165.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Clune, *Writing Against Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 20.



the cut-up to fail in terms of its own myth? In his recent study *Fictions of Autonomy* (2013), Goldstone has described how modernist claims to autonomy are always socially embedded, and often quite self-consciously so. For Goldstone, the articulation of this historicized autonomy involves “emphasizing a basic continuity between modernism and late-nineteenth-century aestheticism,” from which autonomy’s founding “fictions” are drawn.<sup>73</sup> Burroughs’s cut-up practice revolves around two of the signal pivots of modernist autonomy which Goldstone identifies: autonomy from the person (exemplified by Eliotic impersonality and objectivity) and autonomy from reference (exemplified in Goldstone’s account by Stevensian tautology, but one might also add Steinian play and Mallarmé’s ideal of “pure” poetry). In the escape it provides from the body, the cut-up literalizes modernist impersonality—or, to shuffle terms somewhat, it *mythologizes* what for modernism proper was merely a serviceable “fiction.” Goldstone’s reminder that autonomy was always rooted in nineteenth-century aestheticism and art-for-art’s-sake should alert us to the whole mythos of the dandy underlying the autonomy claims of the next century. From Carlyle’s “dandiacal body” through to Wilde and beyond, the dandy is always mythologically emplotted. Burroughs’s authorial persona takes up this myth wholesale by transforming its component parts—its aestheticist emphasis on autonomy and its decadent preoccupation with pathological psychology—into an elaborate, science-fictional myth-world.

In *The Western Lands*, though, with its lament for the failure of the cut-up, “modernism” as a period style will come to serve not as a spring to further experiment but as a nostalgic retreat from a “virtual technique” that has failed to produce the liberation it seemed to promise. (As always with nostalgia in Burroughs, a certain mawkishness is knowingly courted.) The old writer would like to believe that “we writers are tidier” than certain other, “slopp[ier]” ghosts still stalking the land. He finds “tidiness” not so much in the writers themselves, who may personally have quit this world with as little grace as the aging Beau Brummell, but with the echoes of their prose, floating on the air like strains of half-remembered music. If the cut-up was once thought capable of achieving freedom from the flesh by “dismember[ing] and explod[ing]” the “soft

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<sup>73</sup> Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy*, 26.

machine' of the body," as Lydenberg has it,<sup>74</sup> that particular technique for achieving immateriality has been found wanting in *The Western Lands*. A different, gentler form of fragmentation is preferred: the humanist fragmentation that results from an aging man of letters haphazardly recalling a life's reading, and, as the final passage of *The Western Lands* makes clear, the modernist fragmentation of Eliot, no longer radically disorienting but instead inspiring a comforting wistfulness. *The Western Lands* lovingly revisits that characteristically decadent stylistic territory dubbed by Vincent Sherry the "dying fall that goes on dying."<sup>75</sup> *The Waste Land*, always implicit in Burroughs's title, gets the last word:

The old writer couldn't write anymore because he had reached the end of words, the end of what can be done with words. And then? "British we are, British we stay." How long can one hang on in Gibraltar, with the tapestries where mustached riders with scimitars hunt tigers, the ivory balls one inside the other, bare seams showing, the long tearoom with mirrors on both sides and the tired fuchsia and rubber plants, the shops selling English marmalade and Fortnum & Mason's tea ... clinging to their Rock like the rock apes, clinging always to less and less.

In Tangier the Parade Bar is closed. Shadows are falling on the Mountain.

"Hurry up, please. It's time."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 71.

<sup>75</sup> Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 57.

<sup>76</sup> Burroughs, *Western Lands*, 258.