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Ginsberg, Burroughs and the Ghosts of the Avant-Garde

blind poets deep in lone
Apollonic radiance on hillsides
littered with empty tombs

Allen Ginsberg, "Europe! Europe!"

In mid-September 1957, Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky arrived in Paris for the first time, having travelled by train from Venice, via Vienna and Munich. Ginsberg had insisted on visiting Dachau on the way, in order to see the ovens in which the Nazis had cremated their victims. The dead bodies that were absent there found their way, in displaced form, to the Parisian meat market of Les Halles, which he visited on arrival, noting in his journal "Corpses identical hanging in hundred perspective under the staring light bulb."¹ The Paris of Ginsberg's imagination was a vast graveyard, and he imagined the butcher's carts "rumbling empty over Rimbaud's grave."² Two months later on 13 November, settled at the "Beat Hotel" at 9 rue Gît-le-Cœur with Orlovsky and Gregory Corso, he wrote to Jack Kerouac: "Not yet explored Paris, just inches, still to make solemn visits to cemeteries Père Lachaise and visit Apollinaire's menhir [...] and Montparnasse to Baudelaire." He added: "I sat weeping in Café Select, once haunted by Gide and Picasso and well dresst [sic] Jacob, last week writing first lines of great formal elegy for my mother."³ That poem became one of his most famous, "Kaddish," written in memory of his unmourned mother Naomi, who had died in his absence two years earlier. However, it is not Naomi's ghost that I wish to pursue in this chapter but those of the Parisian avant-garde, whose hauntings of Café Select corresponded obliquely in Ginsberg's mind with his impulse to write her elegy.⁴

There is a slippage between two senses of “haunt” in operation here, between haunting as the frequenting of a certain space during life (Café Select became Ginsberg’s haunt just as it had been Picasso’s), and haunting as the disembodied trace that the absent dead leave for the living in the present. Ginsberg, I want to suggest, was interested in the interference of these two senses, and in the particular space-time produced by that interference as it took place in Paris between autumn 1957 and early summer 1958, when he returned to New York. In order to grasp this production of haunted space-time by Ginsberg’s writing, we need to understand how his poems crystallized out of a field of multiple spatialities and temporalities.⁵ Some of these are obvious enough, such as the space of Parisian topography, which he crossed and re-crossed in search of particular places – Le Père Lachaise, Montparnasse, Café Select – and the relative time between his own life and those of his heroes in the French avant-garde. Others operate on larger scales and relationalities, but are no less important. Here I have in mind the spatial regimes of US imperialism, which implicated Ginsberg’s European trip in patterns of Cold War military and economic power across the globe, as well as the historical and existential temporalities of twentieth-century catastrophe – of two World Wars, of genocide and nuclear holocaust, and of capital itself. There is a transnational politics in the ghosts of the avant-garde that emerge from the haunted space-time of Ginsberg’s Paris work, discernible in ways suggested by Fredric Jameson’s comments about spectrality’s special ability to critique “‘the unmixed:’ i.e. what is somehow pure and self-sufficient or autonomous, what is able to be disengaged from the general mess of mixed, hybrid phenomena all around it and named with the satisfaction of a single conceptual proper name.”⁶ As we will see, Paris was the site at which Ginsberg relieved himself of the Cold War myth of absolute presence by which the

United States had appeared to him, and began instead to relativize it through a transnational hauntology that would prepare the way towards his mature poetics.

In the second part of the chapter, the haunted space-time of Ginsberg's Paris poetry will be thrown into relief by the work of his friend and collaborator William S. Burroughs from roughly the same period. Burroughs had been the ostensible reason for Ginsberg's transatlantic journey, for he had been living in Tangiers, Morocco since 1954 and Ginsberg had traveled there first in order to help him to edit his manuscript-in-progress, *Naked Lunch*, between March and June 1957. By the time Burroughs followed Ginsberg to Paris in January 1958, Ginsberg had already passed on the manuscript to Maurice Girodias at Olympia Press and *Naked Lunch* would be published later that year. Burroughs remained in Paris longer than Ginsberg, residing there through much of the early 1960s. It was a crucial time for his aesthetic development, marked in particular by his discovery, via the British surrealist Brion Gysin, of the cut-up technique, which led to the collaborative experimental works *Minutes to Go* and *The Exterminator* as well as to his "Nova Trilogy" of cut-up novels.⁷ It is sometimes argued that Burroughs and Ginsberg, despite sharing a milieu, had little in common in their literary practices, but I want to show how Burroughs' understood cut-ups as a means to ventriloquize the historical avant-garde in a way that might be compared to Ginsberg's own mediumship. And just as we cannot grasp Ginsberg's work without taking into account the spatial regimes of the Cold War, neither can the distinctive and idiosyncratic practice of Burroughs' cut-ups be understood without examining the larger fields of geopolitical tension and conflict that they internalize.

Ginsberg, Wilson and the Transnational Community

Ginsberg's European trip provided the occasion for him to develop and explore his relationship with European literature, and with the French avant-garde in particular. As such it participated in a much larger phenomenon, the cosmopolitanization of American letters in the early Cold War, which saw American literary culture consciously distance itself from the spatial concerns of nation and region that Warren Susman influentially described as the "domestication of the idea of culture" in the 1930s.⁸ The *locus classicus* of this cosmopolitanization was of course New York, where a set of intellectuals had already set out to recreate the cultural environment of interwar Paris through institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art and the highbrow journal *Partisan Review*. Delmore Schwartz described this New York of the mid-to-late 1940s as "the last outpost of Europe," which gives us a sense of its relative position in both time and space.⁹ It was the city in which Ginsberg spent his cultural adolescence, educated at Columbia University by Lionel Trilling among others, but also exposed to waves of French art and literature. The first of these came with the surrealist periodicals *View* and *VVV*, sustained by French exiles in New York during World War Two, the second with his encounters with the work of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Antonin Artaud, and Jean Cocteau, as well as Roger Shattuck's groundbreaking 1950 translation of Guillaume Apollinaire.¹⁰

If this was the moment at which, to use Serge Guilbaut's famous phrase, "New York stole the idea of modern art" from Paris, and replaced the French capital as the home of modernist culture, then it may seem an inauspicious moment for Ginsberg to have traveled in the opposite direction across the Atlantic Ocean and backwards in time,

against the grain of cultural history, as it were.¹¹ Nevertheless, he felt like a pioneer. He wrote to Kerouac of browsing the bookshops of the Latin Quarter and becoming “all hung up on French poetry,” from Léon-Paul Fargue and Blaise Cendrars to Jacques Prevert and Apollinaire. His first thought was of translations for American readers: “What sad treasuries for *Grove* or *City Lights* if ever anybody were to have time and intelligence enough to organize and edit and transliterate them all, would be marvelous to read in US – most of it almost unknown really.”¹²

We can see the first glimmers here of Ginsberg’s utopian vision for a transnational avant-garde for the postwar era, especially when we take into account that Paris was also where, as he describes in the same letter, he discovered and read the Russian poets Vladimir Mayakovsky and Sergei Esenin in French translation. Paris was the site of Ginsberg’s literary transnationalization, but it was a ghostly coterie he formed, since all the writers he explored, with the exception of Céline, were dead. In this sense, the reverse direction of cultural travel produced for him a distinctively structured cosmopolitan experience:

I’d walk the left bank streets, thinking that Apollinaire or Rimbaud or Baudelaire had walked down these same streets. It was both spooky and thrilling [...] You can’t escape the past in Paris, and yet what’s so wonderful about it is that the past and present intermingle so intangibly that it doesn’t seem a burden.¹³

The structure of this cosmopolitanism differed significantly from the one being developed on the other side of the Atlantic by the New York intellectuals, in the sense that it was always oriented towards absent haunted space, its spookiness contrasting implicitly with the pervasive discourse of formal evolution and futurity that accompanied the discussion of modernism in New York by critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg.

Ginsberg's removal from New York brought about not only new encounters with the European avant-garde, but also a newly estranged perspective on the United States itself. This position was articulated severally in the lengthy letters he sent back to his father Louis Ginsberg, Gary Snyder and others. The socio-political environment of Europe in general and Paris in particular led Ginsberg towards a reframed geopolitical consciousness that gave more rigorous purchase to the critique of the United States that he had begun to articulate in *Howl*, the poem he had written before he left, and which would make him famous on return. "America from here," he told Snyder, "after year and a half seems like your 'This Tokyo' poem only worse."¹⁴ The comparison is significant, in that Snyder's poem had lamented the state of postwar Tokyo specifically in terms of its relation to the United States. It is constructed around a central image of a sex show performed for American men by Japanese women needing money to feed their families. For both Snyder and Ginsberg, foreign travel had made the US empire and the capital that made it possible visible for the first time. Ginsberg wrote to his father in March 1958 that American loans had enabled France to cling onto its own empire by fighting the Algerian and Moroccan independence movements.¹⁵ His long letters to Louis from Paris are full of his analyses of global politics, from France's dependence on Algerian natural resources to John Dulles' failure to recognize the legitimacy of Mao's China, and culminate in an indictment of American moral failure:

I had in US always taken it for granted that the US could basically do no wrong and might blunder but was on the right track – but one thing I do feel (I'll try explain later) is that we have to understand that we are capable of awful deeds . . . have done some really horrible things & have to be responsible for our own salvation's sake – and there isn't much time. (*FB* 87)

Ginsberg repeatedly insisted on the importance of relative space in grasping the nature and direction of American imperialism, rendered alien by European experience. At certain particularly suggestive moments he allowed his reading of French poetry to

bleed into these claims, telling Louis for example of how “the position of America seen from Europe, in light of recent events, seems really unlike what I imagine it must seem in America – the normal order of things, a new crisis or two, etc. Seems more like it appears in surrealist poetry” (*FB* 78). It is this confluence of the discourses of avant-garde aesthetics and Cold War geopolitics that I want to explore further in reading a selection of Ginsberg’s Paris poetry.

The place to begin is with the poem he wrote in his journal entitled “The Fall of America.” Although this was eventually to become the title of a collection of poems he published much later in 1971, Ginsberg’s notion of America’s “fall” first developed in Paris in autumn 1957, prompted by the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik I on 5 October and then Sputnik II on 3 November. He wrote to his father on 7 November: “Sputnik I and II greatest story since discovery of fire, has everybody here delighted. The side issue of America taking the Fall finally is too bad but seems inevitable, like the future is not ours, American, any more, as we used to think. At least so it appears from this side of the Atlantic” (*FB* 77). In his poem, however, Ginsberg traced a longer history of America’s fall dating back to the failures of Woodrow Wilson’s presidency, and in particular Wilson’s utopian vision for the League of Nations:

Wilson watched in secret mansion across the street from the White House,
dreaming
 in paralysis of the Fall of America –
and the battle over the League of Nations, the clamor of politicians, apathy of the
 Mob – ¹⁶

At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, Wilson had fought for his “Fourteen Points” for an enduring world peace in which “all the peoples of the world are in effect partners.”¹⁷ In the year that followed, however, Wilson failed to convince either a Republican-dominated Congress or the American people of the merits of the League of Nations and

he eventually suffered a stroke on 2 October. The “paralysis” that Ginsberg alludes to is of Wilson’s body as well that of the body politic.

What makes “The Fall of America” an important poem for our purposes here is the way in which it proposes the “fall” of the United States in the late 1950s to be a crisis of cosmopolitan vision. In the second stanza, Ginsberg offers his own list of demands for a world community to rival Wilson’s fourteen points, in which races are to be mixed, wealth shared, and government to be international. Additionally, he envisages an end to boundaries, tariffs and passports, in a vision that now resembles (with the exception of shared wealth) the neoliberal utopia of the European Union. In the midst of the Cold War, however, with US panic at Soviet technical advances and fears of a growing “missile gap,” such demands seemed hopelessly anachronistic. From this point, Ginsberg turns from international relations on a geopolitical scale to “scenes of Paris 1910” and

The Bateau Lavoir old rheumy and dark studios where you walked like a dandy
to

Picasso, Jacob, Cendrars, Cocteau . . .

Did Andre Billy invent a new chic raincoat for your eyes?

Apollinaire Paris has changed over your body her wars sordid & desperate
battles

with Algerian beggars

Poetry dead only the flame of Artaud blows fitfully from the Charnel lighthouse of
Rodez

It’s to us where America falls into the same early century frightened drunkenness
as

France

That poetry passes with its sane compassion for the vast pink pig of politics¹⁸

This transition into early twentieth-century cultural history in search of models for cosmopolitanism stands in contrast to Frank O’Hara’s trip with Barbara Guest just over two years later in 1960 to the same site of the Bateau Lavoir, where Picasso, Jacob, Apollinaire and others met and worked. In Guest’s anecdote, having discovered the site she was disappointed at O’Hara’s indifference: “that was their history and it doesn’t

interest me. What does interest me is ours, and we are making it now.”¹⁹ We can see here once again how Ginsberg’s backwards-oriented temporality runs against the grain of American futurity, conjuring the historical avant-garde in search of alternative models for cosmopolitanism across time as well as space, models that might provide a ghostly counterhistory to the dominant narratives of Cold War American imperialism.

Ginsberg and Eisenhower at Apollinaire’s Grave

In Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock’s suggestive words, the ghost is “that which interrupts the presentness of the present, and its haunting indicates that, beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events.”²⁰ As his Paris letters show, Ginsberg was well informed on the authorized version of Cold War history, not least from the pronouncements of John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower’s Secretary of State, to whose hawkish rhetoric Ginsberg frequently objected.²¹ In another of the poems he wrote at this time, “Death to Van Gogh’s Ear!,” he began to fantasize about a shadow government made up of writers, a comic literalization of Shelley’s assertion in “A Defence of Poetry” that poets were “the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”²² Good governments, he wrote, “have to begin existing / they exist in my poems.” Vachel Lindsay becomes “Secretary of the Interior / Poe Secretary of Imagination / Pound Secty. Economics.”²³ Whatever the wisdom of making Pound Secretary of Economics from his incarceration in St Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington D.C., “Death to Van Gogh’s Ear!” clarifies for us how Ginsberg began during this period to understand literary figures of the past to be *shadowing* contemporary geopolitics.

“Death to Van Gogh’s Ear!” and its attack on Eisenhower’s “War machine” was at least in part inspired by Antonin Artaud’s polemic against American imperialism in his

final work, the 1948 radio play *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*, in which he wrote of the American need “to make and manufacture soldiers / with a view to all the planetary wars which might later take place.”²⁴ Artaud’s diatribe resonated with the Cold War concerns of late 1957, as Eisenhower came under pressure both from his own government and from Dulles to increase spending on the military and to close the so-called “missile gap” between the United States and the Soviet Union following the Sputnik launches. However, when the American President flew into Paris on 16 December to meet with NATO Heads of State in a discussion of bilateral responses to perceived Soviet escalation, it was Guillaume Apollinaire who was most on Ginsberg’s mind. His poem “At Apollinaire’s Grave” begins,

I visited Père Lachaise to look for the remains of Apollinaire
 the day the U.S. President appeared in France for the grand conference of heads
 of
 state
 so let it be the airport at blue Orly a springtime clarity in the air over Paris
 Eisenhower winging in from his American graveyard (CP 180)

Ginsberg’s imagery of flight here echoes a key passage from Apollinaire’s poem “Zone,” in which an airplane crossing the sky becomes an image for Christ, followed by hosts of birds from around the world, flamingoes from Africa and a humming bird from America.²⁵ In his opening address that day, Eisenhower spoke to the assembled leaders of NATO countries of how a “special responsibility does [...] rest upon the Atlantic community,” and of the “reconciling and joining of wills” to advance peace, freedom and prosperity across the globe.²⁶ In his poem, Ginsberg stages his own great conference in Père Lachaise simultaneously to that of the parodic Christ figure of Eisenhower, summoning dead poets and artists from a range of European nations, including Tzara from Romania, Picasso from Spain, Cendrars from Switzerland, and presided over by

Guillaume Apollinaire, born Wilhelm Kostrowitzky in Rome of Polish parentage. “Come out of the grave,” he urges Apollinaire, “and talk thru the door of my mind” (CP 181).

“At Apollinaire’s Grave” has not received the same critical and scholarly scrutiny that has been devoted to Ginsberg’s better-known poems from the mid-to-late 1950s, most notably “Howl” and “Kaddish.” Nevertheless, it marks an important moment in his development in the way that it engages Apollinaire as an overlooked influence on his poetics.²⁷ Ginsberg himself was frustrated that his conscious appropriation of Apollinaire’s poetic voice went unnoticed in the United States, where “there was no notion of the European tradition. The montage, free association, nonpunctuated *Zone* style that I used in the poem was largely missed.”²⁸ Ginsberg’s early style, and in particular his long, breathy lines, is rightly associated with his great hero Walt Whitman, whose ghost he had encountered in a Californian supermarket several years earlier in 1955, and whose long lines echo through “At Apollinaire’s Grave.” What is new about the later poem, however, is the explicit move towards mediumship. While in “A Supermarket in California” Whitman is overheard asking the price of bananas (CP 136), the Apollinaire of Ginsberg’s poem speaks “thru the door of [his] mind,” to the extent that, at certain points, their voices become conflicting components of the same “I”: “I am buried here, and sit by my grave beneath a tree” (CP 182).

In performing the role of medium, Ginsberg was participating in a long history of modernist engagement with spiritualism, including such canonical figures as W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot. Helen Sword argued in *Ghostwriting Modernism* that what attracted modernist writers to spiritualism was its “ontological shiftiness [...] its tendency to privilege form over content, medium over message.”²⁹ In Ginsberg’s mediumship, accordingly, special attention is paid to the disembodiment of Apollinaire’s voice and its communication across time via the technology of the

phonograph. Ginsberg's decision to seek out Apollinaire's grave was first prompted by hearing a recording of him reading "Le Pont Mirabeau," an event which finds its way into the poem itself: "pray for me on the phonograph record of your former existence / with a long sad voice and strophes of deep sweet music sad and scratchy as World War I" (*CP* 181).³⁰ The recording and replaying of the voice here enacts a process of dispossession and repossession, the human voice divested of its organic materiality as bodily breath and then recomposed through the technology of the phonograph.³¹ Ironically, however, the exteriorization of the voice brings with it its own deep historicity in the interference of the technology's own material imperfections. In the process of recording and replaying, historical time becomes audible, the scratches on the record evoking the violence of World War One, in which Apollinaire had fought and received terrible injury.³² The poem thus exemplifies the formal sense in which, as in Derrida's well-known remark, "haunting is historical, to be sure."³³

Apollinaire too had been interested in the technical transmission of the disembodied voice across time and space, and in particular across the Atlantic Ocean. In his poem "Tree," collected in *Calligrammes*, he wrote:

I haven't forgotten the long-ago sound of a licorice-vendor's bell
 Already I hear the shrill sound of that future voice
 Of a friend who will walk with you in Europe
 While he remains in America³⁴

A sound from past memory is here juxtaposed with a sound from the future. At the time the poem was written there was a transatlantic cable in existence, but it was used exclusively for telegraphing. In their notes to the translated edition of *Calligrammes*, Lockerbie and Greet speculate that the "shrill" ("*aigue*") sound of the transatlantic voice was inspired by the "technical difficulties then being experienced in setting up an underwater cable telephone system," since "the wide range of frequencies in the human

voice were impossible to transmit over a long distance.”³⁵ The vocal distortion evoked in this ghost from the future is the inverted temporal double of Apollinaire’s scratchy voice from the past in Ginsberg’s poem. In both cases, the poets create a space-time that connects disembodied transatlantic communities across history and geography, which are marked nevertheless by material interferences. These distortions imposed by the limitations of communications technology are perhaps the most urgent way in which history itself, rather than death, emerges within the symbolic order of the poems as their ultimate and ever-receding horizon. The launch of the Sputnik satellites, after all, was for Ginsberg “the greatest story since the discovery of fire.” There is something touchingly naïve about his enthusiasm in autumn 1957 that echoes the excitement of the historical avant-garde, including Apollinaire, at the technological revolutions of the early-twentieth century. What divided him from that moment, however, was the knowledge that the disembodied communications of the new satellite technology formed part of a seemingly infinite war machine, underpinned by the threat of complete and mutually assured destruction. He may have described Apollinaire as a “notable Frenchman of the void,” but the existential threat that nuclear weapons posed in the late 1950s was historically unprecedented. Eisenhower left Paris on 19 December having persuaded his NATO allies, with the exception of France, to accept American intermediate-range ballistic missiles on their territory. Seven months later, in the last poem Ginsberg wrote in his journal before leaving Paris to return to New York, he had a vision:

I’ll arrive in America
and find no New York
The blasted rock of Manhattan
smoking on the horizon.³⁶

Table Tapping: Burroughs and Rimbaud

William Burroughs's time in Paris is best known for his discovery, through the British surrealist Brion Gysin, of the cut-up technique for composing text through the physical cutting and rearrangement of printed matter. Gysin accidentally happened upon the technique after cutting through newspaper with a Stanley knife and noting the potential revealed by the resultantly realigned text.³⁷ Burroughs took up cut-ups enthusiastically and experimented with them relentlessly for the first half of the 1960s, first in Paris, then later in London and New York. Burroughs's writings from this period can be understood as experimental in at least two senses, which when considered relationally might help to clarify what is at stake in approaching his cut-up work critically. On one hand, Burroughs came to consider himself as an explorer and innovator. The ironic, pseudo-colonial persona that he adopted in Mexico and then Tangiers during most of the 1950s came to be displaced by what he called in 1964 the "cosmonaut of inner space," who must "develop techniques quite as new and definite as the techniques of space travel."³⁸ This self-consciously avant-garde persona styled Burroughs as a formal frontiersman concerned with creating the future of writing, borrowing metaphors from the Cold War space race.³⁹ On the other hand, as he explained in an essay collected in *The Third Mind*, cut-ups were "experimental in the sense of being *something to do*. Right here write now. Not something to talk and argue about."⁴⁰ Here we see experimentalism conceived through its privileging of urgent praxis over theory.⁴¹ Burroughs expended much energy during the early 1960s not only on practicing and developing various types of cut-ups but on urging others to do the same. He wrote to Ginsberg in 1960 from the Beat Hotel in rue Gît-le-Cœur: "I mean Allen pick up the action. Minutes to go."⁴²

Minutes to Go became the title of the collection of cut-up material that Burroughs created with Sinclair Beiles, Gregory Corso and Brion Gysin later that year, and it gestures towards the same atmosphere of millenarianism that Ginsberg had also felt as he left Paris the previous year. Cut-ups were to be conceived as a spatial response to a temporal problem. Burroughs was fond of quoting a Soviet scientist he had read declaring the ambition to “travel not only in space but in time as well,” which suggests that he used cut-up practice as a way of working through this question of literary space-time in explicit terms, but it remains a complex task to grasp the relationship between space and time that both produced Burroughs’s cut-ups and *was produced* by them. In answer to the simple question “where is Burroughs’s cut-up practice located?” we might answer first with the absolute space of Paris, since that is the location where he met Gysin, and where cut-ups were named and practiced. Yet his cut-up practice also inheres in the space of the page itself, where sentences and lines are dislocated, severed and rearranged to form new meanings. In this sense, cut-ups are located in the proximity of several material fragments of printed text. It is only when we begin to consider both of these answers together that we can see how the praxis of cut-ups “right here write now,” produces its own idiosyncratic space-time, one haunted by the ghosts of the avant-garde.

Burroughs’s self-fashioning as avant-garde innovator, his appropriation of space-age metaphors and science fiction motifs, and the sheer difficulty of negotiating his formally rebarbative cut-ups have tended to encourage the idea that any time-travel undertaken in and by his work is into the future. However, the cut-up, as he acknowledged, bears close relation to the Dadaist practices of Tristan Tzara, as well as to Eliot’s poetics of *The Waste Land* and Dos Passos’s “Camera Eye” technique.⁴³ Cut-ups in the 1960s were both old and new at the same time, a resuscitation of modernist

practices buried in the international crises of the 1930s and 40s (Gysin himself provided a living link between the two moments, having participated as a young man in the first wave of Surrealism in 1920s Paris). But one of the ways in which Burroughs's method differed from those of his modernist and avant-garde precursors was in the importance that he accorded to the source text, which, because of the size of the cut units, often emerged in the produced work as recognizable and legible on its own terms as well as across the rupture of the cut. The relationship of the source to the cut-up tended to work in one of two ways. Sometimes, the cut-ups worked against the grain of the source(s) by forcing words to yield up meanings concealed beneath the text's rational surface, a process that is described in *The Ticket that Exploded* as one by which "words themselves were called into question and forced to give up their hidden meanings."⁴⁴ In other cases, the source itself was already an irrational, avant-garde poem. Throughout the period of his cut-up experiments in the first half of the 1960s, Rimbaud provided the most popular source-texts for Burroughs's cut-ups. He implored Ginsberg to cut up Rimbaud's poems with *Howl*, Gysin to "set up Shakespeare, Conrad and Rimbaud in newspaper format," and sent his son Billy an edition of Rimbaud's poetry to experiment on himself.⁴⁵ He told Ginsberg that cut-ups were "most immediately workable on poetic prose image writing like Rimbaud, St. Perse, and your correspondent."⁴⁶ It is evident enough how Rimbaud's imagery might lend itself to the technique, providing pungent and suggestive units for juxtaposition, and Burroughs himself explained how, after being subjected to cutting, "images shift sense under the scissors [...] this is where Rimbaud was going with his color of vowels. And his 'systematic derangement of the senses.'"⁴⁷ To make a cut-up of Rimbaud's work, then, was in a paradoxical way to remain faithful to his intentions, to continue his aesthetic project beyond his death. It is in this respect that Burroughs came closest to Ginsberg's own homage to the avant-garde. Both were communing with the

spirits of the dead in Paris, and ventriloquizing their voices in the Cold War era, with an American accent. Just as Ginsberg invited Apollinaire to “speak thru the door of my mind,” so Burroughs’ cut-ups became the medium through which Rimbaud could speak again.

The extent to which Burroughs conceived of cut-ups as a radical alternative to the traditional séance during the early 1960s is shown by his essay “On the Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin,” which is collected in *The Third Mind* (1979) but probably originated in a talk Burroughs gave to the Heretics Society at Cambridge University on Thanksgiving Day, 1960:⁴⁸

Shakespeare Rimbaud live in their words. Cut the word lines and you will hear voices. Cut-ups often come through as code messages with special meaning for the cutter. Table tapping? Perhaps. Certainly an improvement on the usual deplorable performance of contacting poets through a medium. Rimbaud announces himself, to be followed by some excruciatingly bad poetry. Cut Rimbaud’s words and you are assured of good poetry at least, if not personal appearance.⁴⁹

In 1922, André Breton had performed a similar maneuver in evoking the form of the séance for the purposes of art while simultaneously distancing himself from its discreditable reputation, writing that “we flatly denied the tenets of spiritualism (no possible communication between the living and the dead), all the while maintaining a keen interest in some of the phenomena it helped bring to light.”⁵⁰ In Burroughs’s case, he went as far as to transform the cut-up poem itself into a form of table tapping in which Rimbaud spoke with a voice at once old and new. The poem “Everywhere March Your Head,” collected in *Minutes to Go*, is a spiritualist performance of “À une raison,” beginning with “A rap of / sound / A.” as Rimbaud makes contact with the arrangers, Burroughs and Corso:

turns
Urns back O
Our lots con

the time to you

change

no mat

desires

Arrival of / / /⁵¹

The question of voice is raised emphatically in this poem by the oscillations or “turns” between Rimbaud, whose words we read, and the arrangers, whose “desires” for his “Arrival” are seemingly expressed. By making the table tapping dimension of cut-ups explicit, the arrangers clarify for us the sense in which the technique becomes, as Burroughs called it, “a collaboration between writers [...] both living and dead,” but also disclose a desire to conjure the European avant-garde and hear them arrive in their work.⁵² To be an American Beat writer in Paris at this moment was for Burroughs and Corso to invoke unceasingly the arrival of the past, a form of mourning less explicit than Ginsberg’s, but no less urgent. After all, there were only minutes to go.

“Poetry is a place and it is free to all to cut up Rimbaud and you are in Rimbaud’s place,” explained Burroughs in his talk to the Heretics Society.⁵³ The cut-ups emerge from this dialectic between the absolute space of Paris and the relative space of the poem to crystallize their own transatlantic spacetime infused with literary historical desire. In the case of Ginsberg, we saw some of the ways in which the poem engages the spatial regimes of Cold War geopolitics by offering alternative models for cosmopolitanism, and there are possible readings of Burroughs’ cut-ups as they developed into the “Nova Trilogy” that might show how the method itself came to internalize a kind of American imperialist imaginary, even if in ironic or disrupted forms.⁵⁴ This interpretation is particularly invited by the “Writing Machine” episode of *The Ticket the Exploded*, which offers a travesty of the staged cosmopolitanism of International Exhibitions or World’s Fairs, in which concealed cameras and tape

recorders transform the spectators themselves into cut-up exhibits. The vision presented here gradually deteriorates under the pressure of the cut-up method into images of decay, rotting and death:

spectral smell of naked ghost people – A maze of penny arcades and mirrors reflect masturbating afternoons – Colors and image bloom out of an old dream in the odor of outdoor restaurants – Outside East St Louis in the dominion of aging roots, ten-year-old keeping watch – Cracked pool hall and vaudeville voices made this dream – distant coffin between the mirrors of time that meanwhile i had forgotten – in a deserted cemetery the body of a God bending his knees⁵⁵

This episode discloses the dystopian afterimage of the cut-ups' cosmopolitan promise, transforming the exhibition from a display of future possibility into one of loss. Its biggest attraction, a writing machine, mechanically churns out made-to-order cut-up texts for willing spectators who want their own writing cut up with Rimbaud or Shakespeare, thereby robbing them of the experience of cutting, and transforming avant-garde praxis into commodity. Later in the 1960s Burroughs came increasingly to associate cut-ups with their potential for guerilla sabotage, subversion and public disorder in ways that, as Andrew Hussey has suggested, place him on a similar terrain to that of situationist *détournement*.⁵⁶ Suggestive though such arguments are, they should not be made at the cost of recognizing the haunted space-time of his cut-ups, together with the historical mourning and nostalgia they produce.

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- ¹ See Bill Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg* (London: Penguin, 2006), 253. Allen Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties: 1954–1958*, ed. Gordon Ball (New York: Viking, 1995), 375.
- ² Ginsberg, *Journals*, 275.
- ³ *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Bill Morgan (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2008), 169.
- ⁴ For a reading of Ginsberg's poetic treatment of Naomi in relation to the Cold War, see Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War: 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 74–106.
- ⁵ In both my terminology and conceptual framework I am borrowing here from David Harvey's work and in particular from his *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 136–143.
- ⁶ Fredric Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter," in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Spinker (London: Verso, 2007), 44–45.
- ⁷ *Minutes to Go* (1960), with Sinclair Beiles, Gregory Corso and Brion Gysin; *The Exterminator* (1960) with Brion Gysin; *The Soft Machine* (1961, revised 1966); *The Ticket that Exploded* (1962, revised 1967); *Nova Express* (1964).
- ⁸ Warren I. Susman, "The Culture of the Thirties," in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 157.
- ⁹ William Barratt, *The Truants* (New York: Anchor, 1982), 58.
- ¹⁰ Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno, *The Continual Pilgrimage: American Writers in Paris, 1944–1960* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 263–4.
- ¹¹ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983).
- ¹² *Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, 169.
- ¹³ Quoted in Sawyer-Lauçanno, *Continual Pilgrimage*, 264.
- ¹⁴ *Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, 180.
- ¹⁵ Allen Ginsberg and Louis Ginsberg, *Family Business: Selected Letters between a Father and Son*, ed. Michael Schumacher (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), 89. Henceforth abbreviated as *FB*, citations given in parentheses.
- ¹⁶ Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties*, 406.
- ¹⁷ "President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points," in *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy* (Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale University). http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp. Accessed 29 March 2015. [Online].
- ¹⁸ Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties*, 407.
- ¹⁹ Barbara Guest, "Frank and I happened to be in Paris . . .," in *Homage to Frank O'Hara*, ed. Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur (Bolinas, CA: Big Sky, 1978), 77.
- ²⁰ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "Introduction: The Spectral Turn," in *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2004), 5.
- ²¹ See for example his letter to Gary Snyder in *Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, 180; letter to Louis Ginsberg in *Family Business*, 93.
- ²² Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in *Shelley's Prose*, ed. David Lee Clark (London: Fourth Estate, 1988), 297.
- ²³ Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems: 1947–1980* (New York: Viking, 1985), 168–9. Henceforth abbreviated as *CP*, citations given in parentheses.

²⁴ Antonin Artaud, "To Have Done with the Judgement of God," in *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 555.

²⁵ See Guillaume Apollinaire, *Zone*, trans. Samuel Beckett (London: Calder and Boyars, 1972), 13.

²⁶ Dwight Eisenhower, "Remarks at the Opening of the NATO meetings in Paris, December 16, 1957," in *The American Presidency Project* (University of California) <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=10962>. Accessed 29 March, 2015. [Online]

²⁷ On this point, and for related analysis of the influence of Apollinaire on the Beats, see Richard Swope, "Allen Ginsberg and the Beats in Literary Paris, or Apollinaire through the Door of Ginsberg's Mind," in *American Writers in Europe: 1850 to the Present*, ed. Ferdâ Asya (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 187–206.

²⁸ Quoted in Sawyer-Lauçanno, *Continual Pilgrimage*, 265.

²⁹ Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 8–9.

³⁰ The hearing of the record is documented in Sawyer-Lauçanno, *Continual Pilgrimage*, 264–5.

³¹ On this process of exteriorization, see Allen S. Weiss, *Phantasmic Radio* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 32.

³² In 1916 Apollinaire received a shrapnel wound in his skull, which affected his health for the remaining two years of his life.

³³ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006), 3.

³⁴ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Caligrammes: Poems of Peace and War (1913–1916)*, trans. Anne Hyde Greet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 49.

³⁵ Anne Hyde Greet and S. I. Lockerbie, "Notes," in *Caligrammes*, 374.

³⁶ Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties*, 468.

³⁷ This is Gysin's own account, as recounted in Barry Miles, *The Beat Hotel: Ginsberg, Burroughs and Corso in Paris, 1957-1963* (London: Atlantic Books, 2001), 194.

³⁸ William Burroughs, "The Future of the Novel," in *Word Virus: The William Burroughs Reader*, ed. James Grauerholz and Ira Silverberg (London: Flamingo, 1999), 272.

³⁹ On Burroughs and the space race, see Alex Houen, "Writing Outer Space for 'Potential America': William Burroughs," in *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing Since in the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 103–144.

⁴⁰ William Burroughs, "The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin," in William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (London: John Calder, 1979), 31.

⁴¹ On the importance of cut-up as method, see Oliver Harris, "Cutting Up Politics," in *Retaking the Universe: William Burroughs in the Age of Globalization*, ed. David Schneiderman and Philip Walsh (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 182–3.

⁴² *Rub Out the Words: The Letters of William S. Burroughs, 1959–1974*, ed. Bill Morgan (London: Penguin, 2012), 59.

⁴³ On Tzara, Eliot and Dos Passos as anticipating cut-ups, see Burroughs and Gysin, *The Third Mind*, 3, 29.

⁴⁴ William Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001), 15.

⁴⁵ Burroughs, *Rub Out the Words*, 59, 140, 49.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁷ Burroughs, "Cut-up Method," 32.

⁴⁸ In a letter to Ginsberg on 9 March 1961 he discusses having given a talk with this title to the Heretics Society on Thanksgiving Day, “feeling rather like Gertrude Stein.” Burroughs, *Rub Out the Words*, 67.

⁴⁹ Burroughs, “Cut-up Method,” 32.

⁵⁰ André Breton, “Entrée des Mediums,” in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Marguerite Bonnet (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 274. Cited in English translation in Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism*, 85.

⁵¹ William Burroughs, Sinclair Beiles et al. *Minutes to Go* (Paris: Two Cities, 1960), 23.

⁵² Burroughs, “The Future of the Novel,” 273.

⁵³ Burroughs, “Cut-up Method,” 31.

⁵⁴ On Burroughs’s ambivalent relationship to imperialism, see Allen Hibbard, “William S. Burroughs and the U.S. Empire,” in *The Transnational Beat Generation*, ed. Nancy M. Grace and Jennie Skerl (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 15–30.

⁵⁵ Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded*, 52.

⁵⁶ Andrew Hussey, “‘Paris is about the last place...’ William Burroughs in and out of Paris and Tangier,” in *Naked Lunch at 50*, ed. Oliver Harris and Ian Macfadyen (Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 73–84. Burroughs’s clearest development of cut-ups’ potential as counter-subversive guerilla strategy is in his essay “Electronic Revolution,” in *Word Virus*, 294–312.