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# Fighting off the Virus: Cut-Ups, Composition, and the Inoculation of Student Writers

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**Fighting off the Virus: Cut-Ups, Composition, and the Inoculation of Student Writers**

by

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## Chapter 1: Detecting the Virus

While researching various issues for this project, I stumbled upon a claim that struck me as absurd. It was a claim made on a wiki about topics in composition studies. More specifically, it was on a page about the history of expressivist rhetoric. The claim flew in the face of everything I had learned about the history of the field. James Berlin, the page's author explained, "can be argued as the founder of expressivism as an actual composition theory, and consequently the culprit for constituting expressivism as a way to teach writing" ("History of Expressivism"). I read over the sentence two more times to make sure I read it right, chuckled, and then tapped the back button on my web browser. I was looking for true information, something written by a person with a more authoritative grasp of the realities of the discipline I was writing about. I do not refer to this statement to ridicule the person who wrote it. I bring it up because something about the claim bothered me long after thought I had moved on. I finally realized that what bothered me about the idea of Berlin as founder of expressivism was that something about the idea rang true.

The wiki author never called Berlin a proponent of expressivism but a founder, and those are two very different terms. I knew that Berlin was never a proponent of expressivism—that he never celebrated it or called on composition teachers to adopt its practices. But he did have a big part in *naming* it. In *Rhetoric and Reality* and in various other writings, Berlin breaks expressivism down and dissects its origins. He examines its epistemological foundations and its roots in surrealism, in Romanticism, and even in Plato. He looks at how expressivism addresses concepts like reality and knowledge and selfhood, and he summarizes how expressivists' views on those concepts play out in the writing classroom. He also lists scholars and teachers whose theories and practices fit under the expressivist umbrella. In short, by categorizing and

classifying compositionists in a way (and to an extent) that it had never been done before, Berlin really *did* found expressivism. That is, he played a significant role in solidifying expressivism as a part of the discourse of composition studies.

In many ways, Berlin's effect on expressivism parallels Louis Althusser's demonstration of interpellation at work. In Althusser's example, a police officer shouts, "Hey, you there!" and a man on the street—the "hailed individual"—turns around and "becomes a subject" ("Ideological State Apparatuses 131). To look at Berlin's impact on expressivism, replace Althusser's man on the street with Peter Elbow. Before *Writing without Teachers*, the book Berlin likely draws from to categorize Elbow as an expressivist, Elbow didn't even consider himself a compositionist: "When I wrote the book, I didn't foresee that so many academics would read it. I had taught for almost twenty years, but had never been in an English department nor identified with the field of composition" (Elbow 24). Nevertheless, Elbow was hailed. Through Berlin's taxonomy of the field, Elbow became a subject, and he has defended himself and expressivism—a "picture" in which he "never recognized [him]self" (27)—ever since.

As I thought this all through, I realized that my own certainty about part of the field's history had prevented me from considering the topic from an alternate perspective. There was truth to the wiki author's words that I was blind to. If ideology is a system of values and beliefs that frames the way we see and interact with the world, and if one of the ways those values and beliefs are perpetuated is through grand narratives, then I had just experienced a struggle with my own ideological predispositions. I let what I thought I knew about a topic prevent me from understanding that topic in a new and meaningful way.

Fortunately, I had also experienced a jarring juxtaposition that made it possible to see past the effects of that ideology. In this case, two lines of thought—the "true" thought of Berlin

as a social-epistemic rhetorician and the “absurd” thought of him as an expressivist—were juxtaposed in my own mind. For hours they remained separate, clashing against each other, completely incapable of reconciliation. It’s a clichéd phrase, but in this case it’s true: eventually something just clicked. From the juxtaposition of those two incompatible thoughts arose a new understanding, a new way of thinking about the social-epistemic, expressivism, Berlin, and ideology.

The experience also gave me a better understanding of the word-virus. Developed in the writings of twentieth century novelist William Burroughs and his frequent collaborator, Brion Gysin, the word-virus is a model for the ideological function of language. I had long felt that the word-virus and the composition method closely tied to it, the “cut-up,” could help us understand something new about the field of composition studies, but I’ve always had trouble articulating that connection in a way that others could understand. But the wiki claim about Berlin as expressivist showed me that I was on to something. The word-virus is emblematic of own certainty about the history of the field—the ideological narrative I had adopted as truth. The cut-up is the juxtaposition of two disparate elements—the mashing together of two incompatible statements about the history of expressivism. In this case (and, as I’ll argue, in others), the cut-up revealed to me my own ideological predispositions and the way they were affecting me. It showed me that the reality I was so certain about was not as fixed as I had previously thought. In other words, the cut-up forced me to think critically about a prominent binary in the field: the supposed distinction between expressivism and social-epistemic rhetoric. In this thesis, I aim to show that the word-virus and cut-up can help us further break down that binary and show that, ultimately, it’s an illusion.

Last year, with *Critical Expressivism: Theory and Practice in the Composition Classroom*, Tara Roeder and Roseanne Gatto published what is perhaps the most comprehensive attempt to salvage the term “expressivism” and the composition pedagogies associated with it. The essays collected therein articulate a rhetoric grounded in an epistemology that locates reality in the interaction of the personal and the social. Specifically, the authors argue that “the best expressivist practices have always been about complex negotiations between the self and other” (Roeder and Gatto 8) and that those practices “can help students learn to situate their own experiences and personal narratives within larger social arenas and take responsibility” (Boyd 109). In other words, for the critical expressivists, writers can’t know the world around them—or act as agents of change within that world—unless they also know themselves.

It is that epistemological framework that separates critical expressivism from social-epistemic pedagogy, the collection’s authors argue. As such, many of the articles in *Critical Expressivism* use social-epistemic theory as a point of departure, specifically the writings of prominent social-epistemic proponent, Berlin. A frequent criticism of Berlin found in the collection is that he often maligned the expressivists of the 1960s and ’70s without fairly characterizing the pedagogies they practiced.

For his part, Berlin, too, was concerned with the epistemology and its implications for writers. At the center of his two-volume examination of the history of nineteenth and twentieth century writing instruction were questions about reality and how we characterize its relationship to the act of writing. The answer to the last question depends on the answer to the first. As Berlin puts it, “[E]very rhetorical system is based on epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality, the nature of the knower, and the rules of governing the discovery and communication of the known.... A particular rhetoric thus instructs students about the nature of genuine

knowledge, or truth” (*Rhetoric and Reality* 4). If reality is an objective truth, and if it is possible for humans to know objective truth, then writing is mere transcription, and writing instruction is the pursuit of accuracy and efficiency. If reality is not objective—or, at least, if it’s impossible to know reality in an absolute sense—then reality is located either in the individual or in the social. Writing becomes not a way of reporting what is known but a *way of knowing* in and of itself.

Distinctions between the critical expressivists and Berlin, however, are not as clear as either group seems to argue. The critical expressivists locate reality in the *interaction* between the self and the social, but so does Berlin. In “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” for example, Berlin argues that the social-epistemic regards the self “as the product of a dialectical relationship between the individual and the social, each given significance by the other” (491). Statements such as Berlin’s suggest that the epistemological differences between critical expressivism and social-epistemic are less pronounced than those purported in Roeder and Gatto’s *Critical Expressivism*. Both acknowledge reality as part individual and part social but differ in which part their classroom practices focus on—critical expressivism on the former and social-epistemic on the latter.

Ideology is another subject on which critical expressivists and social-epistemic pedagogies have much in common. In one of the essays in *Critical Expressivism*, for example, Maja Wilson writes, “None of the expressivists [Berlin] critiques would oppose several of his main assertions: that language is social; that different teaching practices express different ideologies; that one of the goals of writing instruction is liberation” (182). And in “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” Berlin argues that social-epistemic rhetoric *explicitly* critiques what expressivism critiques *implicitly*: namely, dominant ideology (490).

It is on the point of ideology that I will argue that distinctions between critical expressivist and social-epistemic rhetorics are more semantic than substantive. Because of the always-already ideological nature of language and the self, any difference between the public and private is, essentially, moot. There may be an individual reality, but, since it's impossible to separate ourselves from discourses that exist before we are born into them, it is equally impossible to know where the personal ends and the social begins, and vice versa. In short, ascribing to *either* the critical expressivist *or* social-epistemic paradigms is, for composition teachers, a false dichotomy.

To build the connection between these two camps, I explore the Burroughs's and Gysin's concept of the *word-virus*. Through the word-virus and the cut-up, Burroughs and Gysin demonstrate that composition never is comprised of a singular activity, occurring in either a public or private state. Neither exclusively social nor individual, composition always occurs in both realms. In essence, the divide between social and individual is revealed to be an illusory binary—one with potential implications for anyone who teaches composition, particularly those in the early stages of their career who may feel (or are actually) pressured to identify with one epistemology or the other. The reification of these two “separate” camps may also affect the ability of composition teachers to help students navigate the very thing both critical expressivist and social-epistemic theorists seek to empower those students with—composition as a means to explore, learn about, and engage with the world.

By drawing from rhetorical perspectives on ideology, social epistemic pedagogy, and Burkean dramatism, my culminating project is built to answer four primary research questions. First, how does Burroughs-Gysin theory<sup>1</sup> of the word-virus position language as a vehicle for

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<sup>1</sup> It is sometimes unclear whether Burroughs and Gysin thought of the “virus” metaphorically or literally. In some metatexts, Burroughs writes of the virus biological terms. And, in at least one essay, Burroughs is clear that the

ideological transmission? Second, how are the cut-up and word-virus posited as a means of destabilizing fixed meaning through a composition performance? Third, how does the didactic nature of the cut-up, and of associated metatexts, illuminate a traditional, but unnecessary, ideological struggle of FYC teachers' identity? It is the answer to that last question, I believe, that will make way for the answer to a final question: How can the cut-up/word-virus inform a composition pedagogy that unifies instruction in how language shapes reality rather than dividing discourse and meaning making between social and individual, public and private realms?

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word-virus is no metaphor. As he explains in "Ten Years and a Billion Dollars": "My general theory since 1971 has been that the Word is literally a virus," says Burroughs ("Ten Years" 59). For that reason, and to avoid confusion, I will refer to the word-virus as a theory throughout this essay.

## Chapter 2: Dissecting the Specimen

A revival of interest in Burroughs's work has taken place in recent years among academics from various disciplines. Fiona Paton situates Burroughs's breakthrough novel, *Naked Lunch*, as a gothic commentary on the conservative culture of the 1950s, calling the book "a monster of appalling proportions, deviant on all levels from its unstable syntax to its misshapen narrative form" that was ultimately unable to escape the "schizophrenic" discourse it satirized (52, 64). In his ecocritical analysis of Burroughs's early cut-up writings, Chad Weidner argues that Burroughs developed the method because "he found existing narrative structures incapable of representing how he saw the real world, which, in many of his narratives is shown as gravitating toward irrevocable ecological ruin" (324). Paul Ardoin, writing about Burroughs's *Blade Runner (a movie)*, calls the latter's fiction "a move from a single, authoritarian, and Author-itarian literature to a democratic literature of the masses and the margins" (111). If scholars agree about anything when it comes to William Burroughs, it is that his work is critical and subversive.

In the field of composition, one of the most compelling mentions of Burroughs comes in the form of Jeff Rice's 2008 book, *The Rhetoric of Cool: Composition Studies and New Media*. Here, Rice is primarily interested in Burroughs's cut-up writings—and for good reason: The parallels between the cut-up method and the cut-and-paste practices so inherent to the contemporary digital landscape are undeniable.

Starting in late 1950s, Burroughs and Gysin began to experiment with and publish works produced via the cut-up method of composition. With roots in the collage paintings and poems of Cubism and Dada-Surrealism (Cran 302), the technique consists of physically cutting a written

text<sup>2</sup>, rearranging its fragments (sometimes combined with those of other texts), and presenting the resulting text as a new composition.

In addition to the cut-ups themselves, the authors wrote often *about* the cut-up, leaving behind a number of metatexts that comment on the word-virus. The word-virus theory frames language as a perpetuator of ideology. These metatexts were often included in published collections of the cut-up, so readers have access not only to individual cut-ups but also to the authors' commentary on what the method seeks to achieve. In both the cut-up and its surrounding metatexts, Burroughs and Gysin frequently assume a didactic role, addressing the reader directly and providing not only instruction but also a rationale for the practice.

The critical and subversive act of physically “cutting” up text reveals the word-virus as a written performance of ideology functioning at multiple levels. Physically cutting apart the words and sentences of a piece demonstrates what writing does in the creation of fixed meaning in language at both denotative and syntactical levels. The social aspects of language and its use mark author, authorship in general, as well as the message encoded in writing. In other words, the performance of a word-virus may be present without the reader (or the cutter-upper) knowingly engaging (and perhaps fighting off) the Word-virus.

Returning to *The Rhetoric of Cool*, Rice outlines the potential for incorporation of the cut-up into the twenty-first century composition classroom. He argues that the cut-up provides a model for compositionists to reframe the acts of appropriation and juxtaposition as rhetorical

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<sup>2</sup> Both Burroughs and Gysin cut-up various different kinds of texts, including images, video, and audio recordings. My focus here will be on their work with alphabetic, ink-and-paper compositions, including both public texts (books, newspapers, etc.) and personal (letters).

moves ideal for writing in electronic environments. What Rice doesn't do—not in *The Rhetoric of Cool*, at least—is address the central exigency for the, the word-virus<sup>3</sup>.

Rice acknowledges the relationship between the cut-up, similar composition styles (e.g. the remix and hip-hop sampling practices), and ideology. But the ideology he is most concerned with is a disciplinary one: The “established belief systems regarding authorial production” and “fixation on theft (represented in the general fear of plagiarism—whether that fear is posed as an economic one or a pedagogical one)” (68, 69). Indeed, the cut-up poses important questions about the nature of authorship and, as Rice proposes, it offers writing students an innovative strategy for rhetorical invention. But when considered in tandem with the word-virus, the cut-up offers more than a practical application; it also offers a way to think about the relationships between writing and thought and between reality and ideology.

Keeping with Burroughs' word-virus metaphor, it could be argued that the cut-up is viral because it is made up of language. But, when considered alongside the Word-virus, the cut-up may also be seen as a method of resistance aimed at more than just a single, discipline-specific ideology. It becomes a *vaccine* against the ideologies embedded in all language use. A vaccine *does* contain parts of the virus it is created to defend against, but they are dead parts; no immunologist would call a vaccine and a virus one and the same. Rather than perpetuating the word-virus, the cut-up is designed to re-neutralize the word and thus inoculate the reader-writer to the virus's ideological function.

In other words, the cut-up performs and comments on the ideologic-icity of all texts and, when considered as part of a larger theory of language, comments on both the nature and location of knowledge. As Burroughs and Gysin cull passages, lines, and even individual words

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<sup>3</sup> In *Writing About Cool*, a textbook for New Media Composition classes, Rice mentions the concept of the word-virus, but he refers to it as “media viruses” (112).

from sources that range from William Shakespeare and Arthur Rimbaud to medical pamphlets, newspapers, and religious texts, they challenge the authority of those sources and sound the alarm on their ideological dispositions. The hope, for Burroughs and Gysin, is that readers who accept their invitation to participate in the cut-up performance—that is, those who don't merely read cut-ups, but who create them, as well—will see how ideology is inscribed in every utterance and how subjects construct meaning through interaction with these utterances.

To briefly summarize a concept which I more thoroughly explore throughout this thesis, the cut-up offers inoculation by casting suspicion upon *all* language use—including its own. Burroughs and Gysin are not merely critical, but also self-critical. In the various metatexts in which they provide instruction on how to “write” a cut-up, Burroughs and Gysin invite their readers to begin with the very pages that make up the instructions. In other words, they position writing as a way to critique ideology and offer their own writing as the first ideology to attack.

In that way, the Burroughs-Gysin project parallels the theories of Berlin and other social constructivists. Berlin describes social-epistemic rhetoric as

self-reflexive, acknowledging its own rhetoricity, its own discursive constitution and limitations. This means that it does not deny its inescapable ideological predispositions, its politically situated condition. It does not claim to be above ideology, a transcendent discourse that objectively adjudicates competing ideological claims, it knows that it is itself ideologically situated, itself an intervention in the political process, as are all rhetorics. (*Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* 81)

Throughout the metatexts and in various individual cut-ups, Burroughs and Gysin both attack ideology and lay bare their own “inescapable ideological predispositions.” They challenge the reader to question not only the ideologies present in the texts of others, but in their own. As such, they seem to be aligned with Berlin's views on ideology and its relationship to composition.

Other aspects of the cut-up, however, seem to engage with other schools of composition theory. The cut-up method of Burroughs and Gysin appears to be influenced by a number of methods, primarily those found in the Romantic and surrealist literary movements. Because of those influences, which I will explore in next section, the cut-up has much in common with expressivist pedagogies.

In the remainder of the thesis, I argue that the two-pronged rhetoric of the cut-up and Word-virus is *both* expressivist and epistemic. To do so, I will first trace the history of the cut-up and its connections to similar methods from nineteenth and twentieth century literary and art movements. Next, I will explore representations of language and ideology in the word-virus. I will then look at social-epistemic and expressivist pedagogy in an effort to show that the artificial binary between the two rhetorics is an example of the word-virus at work.

### **Heating up *The Rhetoric of Cool***

By the time I entered my first year of graduate school, I had been a longtime fan of Burroughs's fiction. So, I was excited to read Rice's *The Rhetoric of Cool* early on in my program. I was just starting to learn about the field of composition, and I had just finished my first semester of teaching. Rice draws heavily from Burroughs, and I was excited that someone had paved the way for me to apply one of my longtime literary interests to the teaching of writing.

What I found in reading Rice's book, however, was that his use of Burroughs centered primarily on positioning appropriation as a legitimate composition strategy, particularly in digital environments. I was intrigued; there was something rebellious and more than a little tempting about an argument that claims plagiarism isn't as black and white as my K-12 and postsecondary educations had led me to believe it was—that literally and figuratively “mixing things up” could

result in good writing. I also worried, however, that I couldn't use much of what Rice was talking about—not immediately, anyway—since I wasn't teaching in a computer-based classroom.

Throughout *The Rhetoric of Cool*, Rice places the cut-up squarely in the domain of new media composition. That cut-up and other sources of influence on *The Rhetoric of Cool* might have implications for composition studies, but those implications were specifically linked to the discipline's integration of new composition textual mediums. Rice acknowledges as much when he writes, “[T]his book will define a rhetorical practice conducive and generalizable to digital culture. The rhetorical moves I identify as belonging to the rhetoric of cool are possible only because of digital culture; they challenge and disrupt print-oriented conventions and structural logic” (21). That sounded interesting, but there were two problems. First, as I mentioned earlier, I wasn't teaching in a wired classroom. Second, I was a graduate student in his second semester, which means I yet comfortable with testing department- or university-wide boundaries on plagiarism. I also thought it would be irresponsible to do so with students who would leave my class after a few months to join disciplines with their own ideas on the allowable level of appropriation.

But there was something else: I wasn't sure that Rice addressed what I always found most interesting about Burroughs's writing. Burroughs was always subversive, and he wrote about things that I considered rebellious and anti-authoritarian. He wrote about being a heroin addict and a gay man in the 1940s and '50s. He wrote about dystopian futures, but it was never clear if he was actually writing about the future or if what he really addressed was the dystopian *present*. It was also never clear where he drew the line between fiction and reality, or whether I was reading William Burroughs or William Lee (which he used as penname in his early years,

but which he also used for a character appearing in some of his novels). There was always something strange and subversive about him, and I suspected that carried over to his cut-ups, as well. I doubted that plagiarism was the Big Statement of his cut-up project, but that it was the vehicle for whatever that Big Statement really was. Rice's use of Burroughs showed me that rhetoric, itself, liked to figuratively cut and paste ideas and practices from various sources, but I suspected there was more to it—that Burroughs could offer more to composition studies.

It is worth noting that, in *The Rhetoric of Cool*, Rice draws from a specific kind of cut-up. Throughout his discussions of Burroughs, Rice references parts of *The Nova Trilogy*, which is made up of *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket that Exploded*, and *Nova Express*. They are novel-length, deliberately constructed, and edited. They have characters and relatively discernable narratives. With these projects, Burroughs admits to a significant amount of authorial control over the composition process:

I make a number of cut-ups and select the ones that seem to me most successful. The selection and arrangement of materials is quite conscious but there is a random factor by which I obtain the material which I use then, select and work over into acceptable form.... You control what you put into our montages; you don't fully control what comes out. That is, I select a page to cut up and I have control over what I put in. I simply fit what comes out of the cut-ups back into a narrative structure. (Odie 30-1)

The kind of cut-up method described here by Burroughs produces, by far, the most accessible, reader friendly, and commercially viable text when compared with other versions. This is perhaps why Rice sees so much more potential than I can for *practical* application of the cut-up in the composition classroom.

A second kind of cut-up—the kind I am most concerned with this study—is a method over which the author exerts less control. Examples of this kind of cut-up can be found in Burroughs and Gysin's first published book of cut-ups, *Minutes to Go*, which included

contributions from poets Sinclair Beiles and Gregory Corso. Chance and randomness are far more central to these early cut-up experiments, and, as a reader, there is really no way around it: the result is often nonsense. To be sure, there are examples of cut-ups that “work” as literature, at least on some level. Usually, these pieces are short, poem-like texts that stumble upon unique juxtapositions of words and odd phrasings. For me, this kind of cut-up works because it is absurd, haunting, and, sometimes, funny. I find these cut-ups pleasurable because I happen to enjoy those qualities, but they aren’t the kind of poem I often share with other people.

When I share poems with my friends, family members, and students—and I suspect this is the case for other people, as well—it’s because I hope or even assume that to some extent that they will “get” something out of it that’s similar to whatever I got out of it. We can share an enjoyment of something—something beautiful or meaningful. With these early cut-ups, however, I’m never sure that I get the meaning at all, or that one even exists.

Consider, for example, the following artifact, “Cancer Men... These Individuals are Marked Foe...” (see figure 1):

CANCER MEN... THESE INDIVIDUALS  
ARE MARKED FOE...

at land coccus germs  
by a bacilmouth Jersey phenicol bitoies  
the um vast and varied that  
specific target was the vast popul . . . .

the vast  
cancers that surgery and Xrays C  
In the United States the Americi  
is considered well worth our feet...

Ociety racks up the score like  
sons will become new cancer pee  
a third of them...

Surgery & Radiation be saved  
this leaves 225 000  
resistant o rso widely  
surgeons and radiologists....

These individuals are marked foe...

"For these the  
the opinion of Dr. Robert P  
Dushinski with £ fluoro

he helped synthesize  
cancer men  
growth in some cases  
is worth 12,000 dollars \$\$\$\$

cancer men. \$

...these individuals are marked foe...

*Cut up New Clues To Cancer Cures*  
The Saturday Evening Post  
Oct. 31, 1959 Past Time

Figure 1: "Cancer Men... These Individuals are Marked Foe..."

“Cancer Men... These Individuals are Marked for...,” is as typical an example of the early-cut up as can be found. The poem touches on themes that would be explored in Burroughs’s later work, as well as his best-known novel, *Naked Lunch*, which was a work-in-progress when Burroughs and Gysin began experimenting with cut-ups. The title, for example, hints ambiguously at Burroughs’s fascination with diseases and the people who contract—or, in fact, are—those diseases. Paranoia, another motif common to the author’s work, is hinted in lines like the ominous refrain, “these individuals are marked for foe.” And “Dr. Robert P Dushinski” who “helped synthesize/ cancer men” resembles the unethical physician Dr. Benway, who appears in books like *Naked Lunch* and *Nova Express*.

In other words, if “Cancer Men” “works” as a poem, it is because it fits well with Burroughs’s other work. As a reader, it echoes the other stories I have read (and enjoyed) from Burroughs. I enjoy “Cancer Men” because my own subjective experience foregrounds and informs my experience of reading it—not because there’s an inherent literary value to it. For “Cancer Men” to be successful, I have to help write it.

Only a few years after *Minutes to Go* was published, Roland Barthes declared that the author was dead in modern literature. Gone was the time when the meaning of a text was to be found in the person who wrote it. Instead, Barthes argues, meaning is to be found in the text’s plurality and the reader’s active participation in the construction of it. In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes writes,

We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture. (4)

In “Cancer Men...” (and other, though not all, poems from *Minutes to Go*), Burroughs lays bare his “tissue of citations.” The sources from which Burroughs culled the individual fragments are included at the end of the poem itself: “Cut up *New Clues to Cancer Cures*/ The Saturday Evening Post/ Oct. 31, 1958 Past Time.” It is possible to read these citations as part of the poem, itself; nothing about the text directs us to do otherwise—no special font or formatting indicating a distinction from the body of the poem. In other words, in many early examples of the cut-up, the citations are as integral as any other line; traces of voices outside the text are simultaneously *part of the text*.

Whether Burroughs intended for his citations to be part of the text or separate from it is, in fact, beside the point. Any meaning that comes out of “Cancer Men...” is the result of that very ambiguity. As Barthes argues,

The more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it.... To read, in fact, is a labor of language. To read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept toward other names; names call to each other reassemble, and their grouping calls for further naming; I name I un-name, I rename: so the text passes: it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor. (*S/Z* 10-11)

The cut-up is, perhaps more than any other kind of text, one that requires real work on the part of the reader. Burroughs does not tell us what to make of the text; in fact, it’s not entirely clear that *he* knows what to make it. As an author, his role is minimal. He selects the source materials and isolates the fragments—in this case, from medical pamphlets and magazines—and arranges them. But in these roles he is a middle man, at most. Even if Barthes was wrong, even if the author figure *does* still hold a monopoly on meaning, Burroughs himself can make no claim to it. After all, he was not the originator of the words on the page; he’s merely a reader with a pair of scissors.

In that way, the cut-up is the ultimate *writerly* text, to borrow another concept from Barthes. Readerly texts, whose claim of single authorship and prescribed meaning makes interpretation a matter of deciphering authorial intent, are “characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader” (*S/Z* 4). By contrast, writerly texts encourage and, in fact, demand active participation from their readers; they “make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4).

As a writerly text, the cut-up obliterates the distinction between producer and consumer altogether. The reader of the cut-up must produce it by drawing from personal experiences, linguistic connotations, and previous readings; and, the “author” must produce it by locating and arranging the source material. For their part, the authors of the source material were stripped of their command over the text from the very moment their words were combined with the words of other authors. With the cut-up, the author isn’t dead—he never existed in the first place.

At least one of the cut-up’s early practitioners understood the project’s implications for the role of the author, and he didn’t approve. Arranged more or less chronologically, *Minutes to Go* starts with a grouping called “First Cut-ups” and ends with “Post-Script from Gregory Corso.” In that final entry, Corso dismisses the cut-up as “uninspired machine-poetry,” arguing that, “Word poetry is for everyman, but soul poetry—alas, is not heavily distributed” (Beiles et al. 63). That kind of elitist dismissal—the idea that poetry is meant to be difficult and should therefore remain inaccessible to the masses—is in many ways the very line of thinking that Burroughs and Gysin sought to combat. As Gysin writes in “Cut-Ups Self-Explained,”

The poets are supposed to liberate the words—not to chain them in phrases. Who told poets they were supposed to think? Poets are meant to sing and to make words sing. Poets have no words “of their own.” Writers don’t own their words. Since when do words belong to anybody? “Your very own words,” indeed! And who are you? (Burroughs and Gysin 34)

For Burroughs and Gysin, the implication that authors occupy a privileged position in their relationship to readers is a cultural warrant which the cut-up can (and should) resist. That is to say, the idea that poets, journalists, politicians (or any other person writing), possess objective knowledge about a text by the simple fact of their having written it, is an inherently flawed ideology. By advocating a physical assault on the product of that ideology (i.e., the published book, the transcribed political speech), Burroughs and Gysin challenge the implied cultural understanding that people in a position to publish books and make political speeches are in that position because they know something beyond what their audience does.

While Beiles and Corso, through their contributions to *Minutes to Go*, helped develop the cut-up method early on, it was Burroughs and Gysin who continued to expand the technique. Both worked to apply the cut-up to audio and visual media, and Burroughs continued to publish cut-ups for decades, including a series of novels known as the *Nova Trilogy*. In addition, both authors published essays about the cut-up, which I contend are essentially arguments about how language functions as an instrument of power.

### **Genealogy of the Cut-Up**

In their earliest metatextual writings about the cut-up, Burroughs and Gysin acknowledge that they were not the first to apply collage techniques to writing. By looking at early examples of collage and similar composition methods, I hope to show that some of the cut-up/word-virus project’s epistemological roots share a common ancestor with expressivist pedagogies.

Perhaps the most obvious and direct link between the cut-up and similar methods can be found in the work of Dada poet Tristan Tzara (see figure 2):

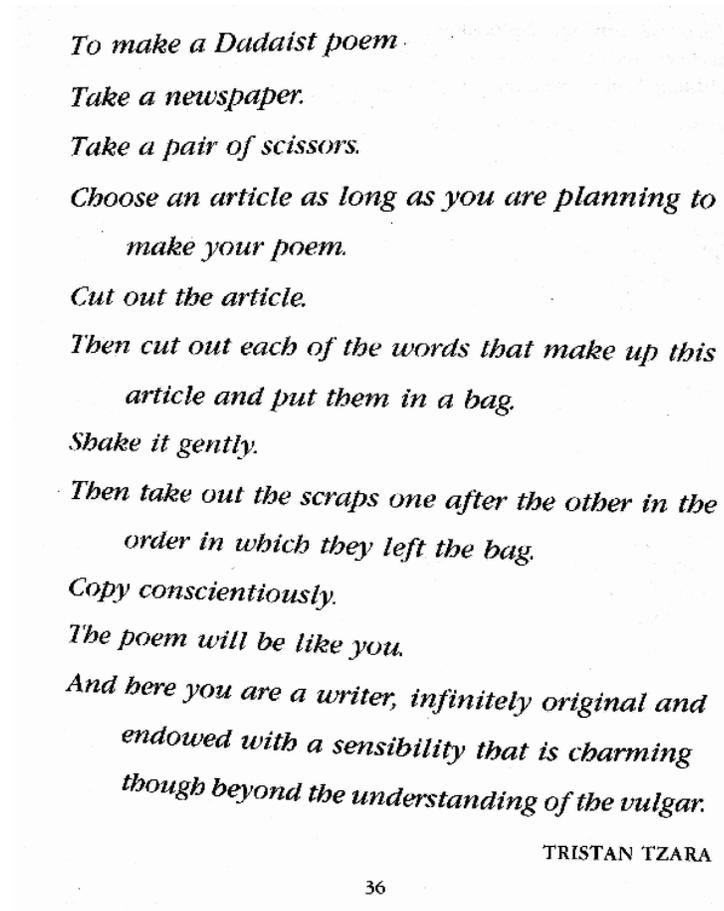


Figure. 2: “To Make a Dadaist Poem”

Tzara’s poem/how-to-manual hybrid in some ways foreshadows works by Burroughs and Gysin, though there are subtle differences in the process Tzara recommends. Tzara’s instructions are slightly more prescriptive; the composer is told to cut out individual words, and the process of arrangement is left up entirely to chance. In Burroughs and Gysin’s instructions, however, the cut-up composer is told to cut the text into sections and then rearrange the fragments (Burroughs and Gysin 34). The arrangement can be left up to chance, or the composer can take a more active approach, choosing which fragments to juxtapose based on whatever criteria they decide upon.

The title-poem from *Minutes to Go*<sup>4</sup>, for instance, provides the reader with both instructions for the creation of the cut-up and commentary on the method.

In his early metatextual essay, “The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin,” Burroughs himself acknowledges the influence of Tzara on the cut-up. In fact, he seems to believe that Tzara himself would have further developed the method, had it not been for in-fighting within the group of artists that comprised the Dada and Surrealist movements. Burroughs writes, “Andre Breton expelled<sup>5</sup> Tristan Tzara from the movement and grounded the cut-ups on the Freudian couch” (Burroughs and Gysin 29). It’s interesting to note that Burroughs names Tzara’s method “the cut-up” and not something else—something that acknowledges it as a predecessor while maintaining the two methods’ distinctions. It is yet another example of Burroughs refusing to acknowledge the author as an authority figure. In this case, it is Burroughs himself who is author of the method as text. Yet, if it were not for the outside influence of Breton, Burroughs suggests, the cut-up would have come into being without him.

In fact, Burroughs’s willingness to credit Tzara for the invention of the cut-up might make more of the shared connection between the two methods than actually exists. In “Burroughs is a Poet Too, Really,” Oliver Harris argues that Burroughs himself is at least partially responsible for the frequent conflation of the cut-up and Dadaist’s poetic instructions:

What’s immediately apparent is how little Burroughs’ texts have in common with that of Tzara’s. In fact, the relation of theory to textual practice in *Minutes to Go* is precisely the reverse of that found in his “To Make a Dadaist Poem,” a set of instructions that actually *preceded* (by two months) publication of his own exemplary text – an example that would remain the only one he ever produced according to his method. (Harris)

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<sup>4</sup> Further analysis of the poem, “Minutes to Go,” appears later in this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> In 1934, a few years after his scuffle with Tzara, Breton would feud with another cut-up innovator, this time kicking 19-year old Gysin out of Breton’s circle of surrealists (Finnegan).

Indeed, Tzara's poem is comprised almost entirely of a set of instructions, with only the two final lines offering any sort of theory or criticism. Even those aren't particularly profound statements about the state of poetry, but rather about the author's own disaffected attitude toward the world around him: "The poem will resemble you/ And there you are—an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd" (Brotchie 36). While "Minutes to Go," the most comparable poem in the cut-up collection it shares a title with, can be vague at times, it nevertheless offers more—both in sheer length and in substantive content.

Besides the Dadaists, Burroughs points directly to at least one other key influence in "The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin": late nineteenth century teenage poet Arthur Rimbaud. Specifically, Burroughs is interested in Rimbaud's view of what the role of a poet should be, and how that poet should go about the business of actually being a poet. He proposes that a poet is a "visionary," and that "A Poet makes himself a visionary through a long, boundless, and systematic *disorganization of all the senses*" (Rimbaud 276; emphasis in original). The cut-up, Burroughs claims, simulates the "systematic derangement" Rimbaud sought to achieve with his writing (Burroughs and Gysin 32).

Other influences on the cut-up are less direct (and less frequently cited by Burroughs), but are nevertheless significant. In the early 1930s, during his time as an undergraduate at Harvard, Burroughs attended a lecture given by T.S. Eliot. The similarities between Eliot's poem, "The Waste Land," and the cut-up, are striking. The poem features a plurality of voices, lines composed in numerous languages; it echoes Shakespearean dialogue and the popular music of Eliot's time; it is fragmentary and disjointed at all levels ("Waste Land"). But it is another work by Eliot—a piece of criticism, not poetry—that seems to have most in common with the cut-up and with Burroughs's and Gysin's views on composition.

In some ways, Burroughs and Eliot are polar opposites. Eliot revered classic literature and the people who wrote it; while Burroughs may have appreciated and enjoyed those same works, it is doubtful that he *respected* the authors in the same way that Eliot did. After all, Eliot dedicates the introduction to his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” to rescuing the word “traditional” from its more pejorative uses (“So-and-so is ‘traditional’ or even ‘too traditional,’” are the examples Eliot gives (“Tradition” 1588)). Given his negative stance on authority, and on social structures like the family unit and the nation (Odier 119-21), it is hard to imagine that Burroughs would assign tradition the same level of importance that Eliot does.

Still, in other ways, Burroughs’s views on authorship and the author’s role in texts have much in common with the ideas expressed in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In the essay, Eliot argues that authors are at their best when their writing is in conversation with the authors who came before them:

No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. ...The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not onesided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. (Eliot 1589)

In Burroughs’s hands, the cut-up is both an extension and a subversion of Eliot’s ideas. He does not merely put his own work into conversation with “the dead poets”; he reanimates their work as well. His cutting, rearranging, and gluing (in other words, his self-limited authorial agency) mean that Burroughs is interacting with past texts the way that Eliot envisioned. But the very words that Burroughs uses to do so are not his own. When Burroughs strips a classic author’s words from their context, he adds them to new contexts and warps their meanings. He isn’t

conversing with the dead poets so much as he is digging up their graves, propping them up like dolls, and ventriloquizing them.

In *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs*, biographer Ted Morgan provides what is perhaps the most comprehensive account of the author's life to date. Of the young Burroughs's experiences in and reception of Eliot's lectures, Morgan writes:

[The lecture] was on the Romantic poets, whose excesses Eliot found deplorable. Using the Romantics as an example, he questioned the idea that people should be taught to think for themselves, and quoted someone who had said, "For God's sake, teach them to think like everybody else." Although disagreeing with his thesis, Billy found Eliot's talk humorous and well presented. (62)

Burroughs's own excesses—particularly, his decades-long battle with opiate addition—have been well documented, and, in fact, are thoroughly explored in Burroughs's novels. And, according to Morgan, Burroughs "absorbed" information about the relationship between opiate use and creativity in another lecture—one specifically on Coleridge. But Morgan seems to be misplacing Coleridge's influence on Burroughs. The prospect of a link between drugs and artistic productivity may have been appealing to Burroughs as a college student, but, later, he was far more dismissive. When asked in an interview about the "results" that can come of writing under the influence, Burroughs was skeptical:

To put writing done under the influence of drugs into a special category is absurd. Writing is good, bad, successful, unsuccessful . . . Under morphine one can edit, type, and organize material effectively but since the drug acts to decrease awareness the creative factor is dimmed. *Junkie* is the only one of my books written under the influence of opiates. The other books could never have been written if I had been addicted to morphine at the time. (Odiar 159)

Burroughs may have been influenced by Coleridge, but the link goes beyond the fact that both were writers who had a taste for mind-altering substances. While it would be difficult to overstate the significant role drugs played in Burroughs's life and work, those drugs were not central to—or even part of—the ideas that later led to the word-virus and cut-up project.

Instead, what Burroughs took from those lectures on Coleridge and the Romantics had far more to do with their views on the act of composing, the self, and with Eliot's questioning of whether "people should be taught to think for themselves." Much like Burroughs and Gysin often published their cut-ups and metatexts together, Coleridge frequently published commentaries on his method alongside the poems they commented on. In his preface to "Kubla Khan," for instance, Coleridge describes writing at least parts of the poem in a "profound sleep, at least from the external senses," during which "all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort" (460). While "Kubla Khan," itself, takes up a little more than one page of space, Coleridge's contextualization of the poem (and the *Norton* footnotes detailing Coleridge's process), take up approximately the same amount of space. It seems that, for Coleridge, his art and his theories of composition were best left unseparated.

Coleridge's thoughts on the relationship between poetry and rhetoric are part of the reason his relevance for composition studies was, for a time, a matter of dispute. In "The Rhetoric of Romanticism: The Case for Coleridge," Berlin argues that compositionists have long disagreed about Coleridge's usefulness to the discipline—a disagreement based, primarily, on a misreading of the hierarchical relationship he assigns to poetry and rhetoric. For Coleridge, both represent a truth-seeking exercise. Because poetry is pleasurable, it lives on beyond its exigency. Rhetoric, on the other hand, "is perforce not pleasurable in itself, being designed to correct error, to unsettle the reader, as it leads to personal discovery. As such, it is to be discarded once it has achieved its purpose, not to be returned to for consolation or joy" ("Rhetoric of Romanticism" 71). Despite the distinction, Berlin argues, Coleridge "does not demean rhetorical activity in

favor of the poetic. For Coleridge, rhetoric and poetic have meaning only in terms of each other, and . . . are much more closely related than is commonly thought” (72).

Much like with Coleridge, it is difficult (and I would argue, unadvisable) to distinguish between the cut-up as poetry, and the cut-up as rhetoric. The epistemological concept at the heart of Coleridge’s method of composition also holds true for Burroughs and Gysin. For Coleridge, truth found via both poetry and rhetoric is always personal, Berlin argues:

Convinced that truth could be learned but not directly taught, Coleridge argued that all that can be shared in communication is the process whereby truth has been discovered. This sharing of the process may lead the auditor to engage in the same activity on his or her own, ridding the self of error, and discovering the truth. In other words, even though we cannot communicate truth directly, we can express the form it always assumes. (“Rhetoric of Romanticism” 63).

Truth, to Coleridge, is found through the dialectical process of composing. But the composition itself does not contain, or even represent, that truth; instead, it merely records the method by which the composer found said truth.

The same is true for Burroughs and Gysin in their cut-ups and in the surrounding metatexts. Individual cut-ups are not meant to represent truth for the reader, but instead for the person who did the cutting. In “Minutes to Go,” the first poem in the collection of the same name, we can see that Gysin only considered the cut-up effective when the reader engages in the cutting process:

soon see                    just what they really are  
saying                    this is the terminal method for  
finding the truth. (“Minutes to Go”)

The truth is not in the poem, but in the *method* for constructing the poem, which explains why Burroughs and Gysin repeatedly recommend making cut-ups and not merely reading them.

Burroughs and Gysin are clear that the primary beneficiary of the cut-up is the composer of the cut-up. In “Cut-Ups: A Project for Disastrous Success,” Gysin writes about both pleasure and truth. Describing the time when he discovered the cut-up method, Gysin writes:

At the time I thought them hilariously funny and hysterically meaningful. I laughed so hard my neighbors thought I’d flipped. I hope you may discover this unusual pleasure for yourselves—this short-lived but unique intoxication. Cut up this page you are reading and see what happens. See what I say as well as hear it.

I can tell you nothing you do not know. I can show you nothing you have not seen. Anything I say about Cut-Ups must sound like special pleading unless you try it for yourself. (Gysin, Burroughs, and Sommerville 4).

Here, again, we see Gysin hinting at some hidden truth that the cut-up can reveal, urging readers to try it for themselves. Any relationship between the cut-up and meaning is something forged in the process of *doing*—in the *act* of composing.

Given the commonalities between Burroughs and Coleridge, I think we should consider Burroughs much in the same way that scholars trace the influence of Coleridge in the practice of composition. In “Coleridge’s Philosophy of Composition: An Overview of a Romantic Rhetorician,” Rex Veeder argues that “it is time to see if there is a Coleridge worth claiming for rhetoric and composition” (20). Ultimately, Veeder concludes that there is a Coleridge to claim, despite likely challenges in translating Coleridge’s theory into classroom-appropriate practice:

Burke’s comment that Coleridge is “useful” may be a perplexing assertion for most rhetoricians or compositionists. We would not want, for example, to have our students model their writing style after Coleridge. (I doubt very much that Coleridge would either.) . . . On the other hand, we can admit that Coleridge might be useful in composition and rhetorical *study* . . . He wrote as a critic dedicated to finding better ways of writing, and the majority of his prose works explicitly discuss the art of composition. (21; emphasis added)

Similarly, it is hard to imagine a way of applying the cut-up in the composition classroom, particularly if that means asking students to follow Burroughs and Gysin’s directions exactly. Our students are much more likely to successfully imitate Burroughs and Gysin than they are

Coleridge, yet what will they have gained, and how will we know if they gained it? Like with Coleridge, whose Truth is internal, we should not ask students to *write* like Burroughs. We should, however, help them to make meaning like Burroughs. If Burroughs, Gysin, and Coleridge are right in arguing that the acts of writing/composing/cutting helps the writer/composer/cutter to make meaning, then we should look for ways that our pedagogies can do the same.

The surrealists were another group for whom art and the methods used to make that art were inseparable. While its immediate roots are in—and many of its members are from—the Dada movement, surrealism in many ways continues and extends Romantic approaches to art, composition, and truth. In his book of prose on poetry, *The Art of Recklessness: Poetry as Assertive Force and Contradiction*, Dean Young traces the Romantic-Surrealist connection:

Romanticism begins an investigation of the imagination that will reach full, monstrous results with Surrealism. Central to Romanticism is the power of the imagination, and many poems trace the process by which it is imperiled, found, revived, and released. As such, like much surrealist work, these poems function both as results of investigative methods and instruction manuals to those methods, very much a learn-by-doing system, the record of what happens serving as means to achieve imaginative liberation and wholeness of being.... (103)

Here, again, we see an artistic movement whose central focus is not necessarily the products of their creation but the very process of creation. As Young explains, surrealist compositions were “records” of “investigative methods”—poems whose value comes less from their aesthetic qualities than from the subjects they sought to examine and the process by which they were examined. They were travelogues written to document journeys, not to lands far from home but into the depths of the composer’s mind. As with Coleridge, who saw both rhetoric and poetry a way of seeking Truth for the composer alone, the surrealists saw composition as a way for composers to access their own, personal realities.

Also like Coleridge—as well as Burroughs and Gysin—the surrealists often wrote about their views on art and writing almost as much as they produced said art and writing. Among the targets of surrealism was the dominance of reason and science as pillars of Western ideology. As a post-World War I movement, surrealists blamed the culture of reason for the widespread destruction they had witnessed. In his “Manifesto of Surrealism,” Andre Breton rails against what he calls “the reign of logic”:

Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind of everything that may rightly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance or accepted practices. It was, apparently, by pure chance that a part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer—and, in my opinion by far the most important part—has been brought back to life. (Breton 7-8)

Breton goes on to celebrate Sigmund Freud for providing the “human explorer” with way to conduct their exploration. In other words, the surrealists adapted various methods from psychoanalysis into writing exercises. These exercises were designed to subvert logic and rational thought in an effort to gain entry to less easily-accessed parts of the composer’s consciousness.

In *A Book of Surrealist Games*, Alastair Brotchie compiles dozens of invention techniques used by Dada and surrealist figures in both writing and visual arts. Many of the prompts resemble, in both content and style, the instructions Burroughs and Gysin provide for the cut-up. Take, for example, the composition method of the French poet, Raymond Roussel (Brotchie 40). Roussel instructs writers to develop a phrase made up of words with two distinct denotative meanings. Per the prompt, the same phrase begins and ends the story, with one exception: the writer is allowed to change one letter in one of the words. The composer’s job is to fill in the gap between the pre-determined first and last sentences. One of Roussel’s stories,

“The Greenish Skin,” starts and ends with the same phrase, but as a result of narrative context, reads in two entirely different ways. The beginning paragraph, in English, reads:

The greenish skin of the ripening plumb [*La peau verdâtre de la **prune** un peu mûre...*] looked as appetizing a anyone might wish. (40)

The final line reads:

One thing was visible, only one...  
The sallow complexion of the brunette past her prime... [*La peau verdâtre de la **brune** un peu mûre...*] (42)

Between the two phrases is a short and strange tale of love, betrayal, and murder between a picador and his love interest. It is, of course, impossible to know what Roussel, the “strangest and most eccentric personality on the fringes of Surrealism” (Brotchie 148) would have written without the constraints he imposed on his writing. But, by developing a systematic method composition made up of seemingly arbitrary rules, Roussel is able undermine his own authorial intention. Whereas a story outlined and drafted with more traditional methods might develop in a “logical” way—a story that “makes sense”—Roussel’s predetermined starts and stops force himself fill in the gaps with unexpected leaps. The result, Michel Foucault argues in his study of Roussel’s work, is writing situated at “the very edge of consciousness” (Foucault 41).

But it was another writing method utilized by the Surrealists that bridges Romantic methods and modern composition studies: automatic writing. Kenneth Burke argues that there is a “strict line of literary tradition” starting with Coleridge and the Romantics, going through Rimbaud and the Symbolists, and ending with the Surrealists (“Why Coleridge?” 163). Burke’s argument hinges, at least in part, on both movements’ use of automatic writing, which he calls “Kubla Khan” the “perfect example” of.

When composing with automatic writing, composers are to put pen to paper and begin writing without thinking about what they’re putting on the page. The faster the better, as the goal

is for the hand to record leaps in logic— “unpremeditated free-association” (Brotchie 17)—made by subconscious mind before the writer’s conscious mind has a chance to self-edit. The result of automatic writing, according to Breton, who rediscovered it for the Surrealists, is “the illusion of an extraordinary verve, a great deal of emotion, a considerable choice of images of a quality such that we would not have been capable of preparing a single one in longhand” (qtd. in Brotchie 140). For the Surrealists, automatic writing is a method of invention capable of helping writers access creative depths of the mind that are otherwise obscured by rational thought.

Not long after the Surrealists re-popularized the method, writing instructors began to bring automatic writing into university classrooms. In his historiography of composition studies in the twentieth century, Berlin traces the influence of Surrealist writing methods and epistemology to expressivist pedagogy. Viewing writing as “the attempt to record the truths discoverable within the inner depths of the psyche,” expressivist rhetoricians like S.I. Hayakawa reworked automatic writing into freewriting and began to use it in writing classrooms (*Rhetoric and Reality* 147). Much like Coleridge believed that “truth could be learned but not directly taught” (“Rhetoric of Romanticism 63), the view that “writing is art, and, as such, can be learned but not taught” (152) is central to expressivist rhetoric.

In many ways, the cut-up appears to be the perfect example of an expressivist genre. It is composed via a method that subverts the composer’s authorial intention. It locates Truth not in the composition, but in the act of composing, and any Truth contained therein is revealed only to the composer—not the reader of any individual text. It is, at its core, writing-as-art. When considered in conjunction with the word-virus, a concept that rarely goes unmentioned in some form or another within the metatextual documents surrounding the cut-up, however, the cut-up is both art and rhetoric.

By tracing the cut-up to its historical roots in nineteenth and twentieth century art and literary movements, we have seen that, as an artistic project, the cut-up places much focus on the importance of the self. The cut-up relies on a cutter and the reader who are one and the same and on a meaning-making process that is centered on the individual. Yet, the cut-up relies equally on source material that are entirely social; the cut-up is always made up of a plurality of voices. Like Coleridge, who sees rhetoric and poetic as “having meaning only in terms of each other” Burroughs and Gysin frame the cut-up as dialectical (Berlin, “Rhetoric of Romanticism” 72)—as a method that requires its participants to maintain co-occurring identities that have meaning in terms of each other. The cutter is both reader and writer, poet and rhetor, individual and social being. In the next chapter, we will look at the word-virus and how it comments on the last binary listed—the individual vs. the social being—and how it breaks that binary down by showing that its two components are always-already one and the same.

### **Ideology and the Word-Virus**

While both Burroughs and Gysin wrote about the cut-up, it was Burroughs who, after the publication of *Minutes to Go*, wrote most extensively about the theory of the word as virus. It is in these metatextual writings that Burroughs most thoroughly articulates his view of the word-virus as model for how language and ideology intersects. Throughout his essays and other nonfiction publications, Burroughs is very clear about his suspicion (if not, outright distrust) of language. In *The Job*, Burroughs refers to the word as “a virus” whose symbiotic relationship with its host “is now breaking down” (Odier 12). Further, he views the word as a kind of *weaponized* virus, and the cut-up as a way of combatting that virus:

The word of course is one of the most powerful instruments of control as exercised by the newspaper and images as well, there are both words and images in newspapers... Now if you start cutting these up and rearranging them you are breaking down the control system. Fear and prejudice are always dictated by the control system just as the church built up prejudice against heretics; it wasn't inherent in the population, it was dictated by the church which was in control at that time. This is something that threatens the position of the establishment, and therefore they will oppose it, will condition people to fear and reject or ridicule it. (34).

It is sometimes unclear whether Burroughs views the word-virus as literal or metaphorical. When considered as a metaphor, however, the virus is more appropriate comparison for the kind of cultural transmission Burroughs is concerned with than other models he might have used. The meme, for instance, describes how bits of cultural information pass from person to person, in a process that resembles that of the gene, and in many ways appears similar to the word-virus model. Memes replicate, mutate, and either survive or go extinct. While the virus operates in much the same way, one distinction should be made: the virus is destructive. The virus harms and in many cases kills its host.

The word, for Burroughs, is destructive, and poses a very real threat to its host—the human who reads, hears, writes and speaks it. While not put in the same terms, various Marxist theorists have written about the word as a vehicle for the transmission of ideology, a concept that has much in common with Burroughs's word-virus theory. Mikhail Bakhtin, for instance, argues in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* that the word and ideology are inseparable. After establishing that “the domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs” (1211), Bakhtin argues that the word differs from other signs in that it is ideologically neutral:

Every other kind of semiotic material is specialized for some field of ideological creativity. Each field possesses its own ideological material and formulates signs and symbols specific to itself and not applicable in other fields. In these instances, a sign is created by some specific ideological function and remains inseparable from it. A word, in contrast, is neutral with respect to any specific ideological function. It can carry out ideological functions of *any* kind—scientific, aesthetic, ethical, religious. (1213)

As *neutral* signs, words can be used by human agents on any side of the ideological spectrum.

They can serve any master.

For Burroughs, it is precisely that neutral, shift-able nature of the word—combined with its semiotic function—that makes it so dangerous. In the biological sense of the word, a “virus” is a pathogen that reproduces inside the cells of its host. The cell of the host, alone, is not inherently destructive. In other words, it is neutral—at least, in regards to the well-being of its host. When infected with a pathogen, however, the host’s cells can pose a threat to the cells of other potential hosts with whom it comes into contact. Similarly, the word is not the pathogen. Instead, it is the cell through which the pathogen replicates. Words—as linguistic signs internalized by the host (all symbol-using beings) as a way to know the world—are the cells through which the pathogen (ideology) replicates.

The problem, for Burroughs, is that the word cannot be spread or used without that pathogen. Since “individuals are always-already ideological” (Althusser 97), and since language is a symbol system used for communication by those already-ideological individuals, then there is no context in which words are ever not attached to ideology. As Burroughs writes in, “Ten Years and a Billion Dollars”:

[T]he Word Virus ... has established itself so firmly as an accepted part of the human organism that it can now sneer at gangster viruses like smallpox and turn them in to the Pasteur Institute. But the Word clearly bears the single identifying feature of virus: it is an organism with no internal function other than to replicate itself. (59)

Every time a word is spoken or written, it is sent from one ideological being to another ideological being. Any linguistic interaction between two subjects, therefore, represents an instance of ideological transmission. The virus is always on the move; it is forever spreading.

Burroughs's views on language and ideology parallel those of Althusser in other ways, as well. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser draws a distinction between institutions that support and benefit the dominant class by means of violence—the Repressive State Apparatus—and institutions within a society that function via ideology. The RSA, he argues, consists of institutions like the prison system, the police and military, and the government. The Ideological State Apparatus is made up of several specialized institutions, such as religion, family, and the media, among others.

In his metatextual writings, Burroughs expresses disdain for many of the same institutions that Althusser identifies as ISAs. Of journalism, he says, "Image and word are instruments of control used by the daily press and by such news magazines as *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, and their English and Continental Counterparts" (Odier 59). Advertisements are constantly interpellating subjects, and often in contradictory ways: "Stop. Go. Wait here. Go there. Come in. Stay Out. Be a man. Be a woman. Be white. Be black. Be your real self. Be somebody else" (45). And on the family: "If any formula is really holding the world back, it's the formula of nations, countries, which, as I say, is merely an extension of the biological family. We aren't going anywhere at all until this ridiculous unit is disbanded" (119). Throughout his works, Burroughs attacks all forms of control and the institutions that wield it. The instrument of control he returns to repeatedly is language.

### Finding Motive in “Minutes to Go”

While much of the writing that ties the word-virus to the cut-up appears in essays and other supplemental documents, Burroughs and Gysin occasionally address ideology and power using the cut-up itself. Often, in such cases, the authors assume the role of writing teacher, addressing the reader directly and providing instruction on both the method and the reasoning behind it. One of these cut-ups is Gysin’s poem<sup>6</sup>, “Minutes to Go.” The poem is the first cut-up in the very first publication of cut-ups, and it reads as a disjointed “how-to” manual. Depicted in the poem are three distinct agents and acts committed by those agents. Using Burke’s pentad in seeking to reveal motive behind each depicted act, I will attempt to understand why Burroughs and Gysin take that didactic approach, and what they hope it will achieve for the cutter, who is both reader and writer.

The first act Gysin depicts in “Minutes to Go” is one committed by the ambiguous but ominous holders of power. Referred to in the first line as “the hallucinated” (**agent**), they have come to inform the reader that “yr utilities/ are being shut off dreams monitored thoughts directed” (lines 1-2). The speaker even calls these holders of power, “agents,” who are “everywhere” (**scene**) (4). They are “marking down the live ones to exterminate/ they are turning out the lights” (**act**). That is, they are cutting off the reader’s power (electricity). Gysin points out that “they are not evil nor the devil but men/ on a mission with a spot of work to do” (**purpose**)(7-8). **Agency**, one of two pentadic element common to each of the depicted acts, is the word. At the beginning of the poem, when the focus is on the power holders who “monitor” dreams, “direct” thoughts, and “shut down sex,” the speaker says that “all words are taped” (4).

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<sup>6</sup> The full text for “Minutes to Go” is included in Appendix A.

“Taped,” here could mean that the words are recorded (a reference to surveillance) or that they are held in place—on the page or in the minds of those who use them.

The second act is committed by “we [who] are out” (**agent**) which I take to mean Burroughs and Gysin, at least, with the possible (but doubtful, given Corso’s views on the cut-up by the end of the book) addition of Beiles and Corso. It is often irresponsible to conflate the author of a poem with the speaker of a poem, but “Minutes to Go” not only shares the title of the book in which it appears, but it is also the first poem in that book and appears just before a section titled, “First Cut-Ups.” Because of its placement, tone, content, and title, “Minutes to Go,” appears as an introduction to the project more than it does as it does as a standalone cut-up. In any case, the speaker and his co-conspirators “have come to let you out” (22) of the word. The word has maintained its symbiotic relationship with its host, the reader, for too long: “the word has been in for a too long time/ you in the word and the word in you” (**purpose**) (18-19). Again, the **scene** is wherever the reader is—presumably the reader’s home, since that’s where one’s utilities are. The speaker has come to “show you what you can do” (**act**) to and with “words” (**agency**).

Finally, there is the **act** of cutting up texts. The speaker instructs the reader how to do so and does so in a way that predicts or anticipates the action of the reader (**agent**). The reader is told to “Pick up a book any book cut it up” (29), complete with a list of suggestions. Many of the texts the reader is to cut up are texts representative of authority in one form or another: religious and philosophical texts like the bible, the Koran, the Book of Moroni, the Bhagavad Gita, La-Tzu, Confucius; capitalist texts like business correspondence and advertisements; and, media texts like newspapers and magazines; cultural texts like poems and prose (31-45). These texts and others—finally, the speaker says, cut up “anything ... all the words” (42, 46)—constitute the

agency in this pentad. Cutting them up is what allows the reader to “see just what they really are/saying” (purpose) (55-56). The cut-up technique, the speaker explains, is “the terminal method for/ finding the truth” (56-57).

Perhaps the most significant shift in pentadic elements is the shift that occurs with agent. In the beginning of the poem, as previously mentioned, the speaker refers to the power holders, specifically, as agents (4). By the end of the poem, the reader is told to “be your own agent” (61). As portrayed in “Minutes to Go,” the act of cutting up authoritative texts in an effort to “find the truth” is a way for the reader to assert—to realize, even—their own capacity to act, their own agency. The motive behind “Minutes to Go” for Gysin as author, then, is in positioning the cut-up as a tool for helping readers recognize and assume their roles as agents— as active participants in the meaning-making process, rather than mere receptacles of ideology.

### **The Thief as Critical Reader**

But how, exactly, does the cut-up help the reader realize their own agency, their own ability to act in the face of ideology and the forces of power? The answer to that question, I believe, can be found in “Les Voleurs,” an essay in the Burroughs book, *The Adding Machine*. In the essay, which Burroughs names after a manifesto of the same name written by himself and Gysin, Burroughs explains how he came to understand appropriation via the cut-up to be little more than a deliberate and blatant version of the kind of appropriation all writers commit naturally:

Writers work with words and voices just as painters work with colors; and where do these words and voices come from? Many sources: conversations heard and overheard, movies and radio broadcasts, newspapers, magazines, yes, and other writers; a phrase comes into the mind from an old western story in a pulp magazine read years ago, can't remember where or when: “He looked at her. Trying to read her mind—but her eyes were old, unbluffed, unreadable.” There's one I lifted. (23)

Writers, and, in fact, all symbol using beings, are born into a world where language is already well-established as a system of communication. The words already exist when the subject is born and will exist long after the subject is dead. What happens in between those two points is a constant interchange of words, connotations, and ideological associations that come along with those words. For Burroughs, our thoughts and ideas are made up of words; those words only become ours when we take them from someone else; we and everyone we share language with are always-already ideological; therefore, we cannot read or hear language without being exposed to and influenced by that ideology, and we cannot write or speak that language without passing along that ideology.

In “Les Voleurs,” which, in many ways, reads as a history of Burroughs’s introduction to the cut-up and the word-virus, the author explains that even he was initially skeptical of blatant appropriation. Because of his education, he “had been conditioned to the idea of words as *property* ... and consequently to a deep repugnance for the black sin of plagiarism” (25; emphasis in original) and recalled a young classmate who was caught and shunned for turning in work that he copied from a magazine. In Burroughs’s experience, the educational ISA had done its job: it had set the stage for a lifelong belief in the sanctity of “original” thought and the ownership of language.

It wasn’t until Gysin wrote a largely cut-up novel that Burroughs was forced to reconsider his ideological training. After Burroughs read Gysin’s work and was “shocked by such overt and *traceable* plagiarism,” the future cut-up collaborators had a conversation in which Gysin “pointed out to me that I had been stealing for years” and called Burroughs “*Vous êtes un*

*voleur honteux* ... a closet thief” (25). Following that conversation, together, they wrote the manifesto<sup>7</sup>, “Les Voleurs.”

Given Burroughs’s and Gysin’s theory of the word-virus as the function of language that transmits ideology, it is possible to see how the controlling metaphor of “the thief” in “Les Voleurs” positions the cut-up as a means of resistance for writers. Early in the manifesto, which reads as a third-person narration of the relationship between artists and the thief, Burroughs and Gysin declare that “everything belongs to the uninspired thief.” They list various kinds of artists from literature to visual mediums to architecture, who “offer their wares” to the thief:

They supplicate him from the bored minds of school children, from the prisons of uncritical veneration, from dead museums and dusty archives. Sculptors stretch forth their limestone arms to receive the life giving transfusion of flesh as their severed limbs are grafted onto Mister America. *Mais le voleur n’est pas pressé*—the thief is in no hurry. He must assure himself of the quality of the merchandise and its suitability for his purpose before he conveys the supreme honor and benediction of his theft. (25-26)

Here, we can see that, for Burroughs and Gysin, the artists from whom the thief “steals” are not victims. In the line before the quoted passage, the artists are “like street vendors” extending their work for the thief’s use. Why? Without the thief’s appropriation, the artist’s legacy is relegated to “dead museums and dusty archives.”

In that way, Rice is right about the parallels between the cut-up and New Media literacy. As Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, argue in *Spreadable Media: Creating Value in a Networked Culture*, the appropriation and re-contextualization of digital content should be viewed not as mere copyright infringement, but as participation in the transmission of content: “Critics and curators generate value for those who are creating material and perhaps for one another. Critics provide ideas about which content to value, and curators provide critics with

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<sup>7</sup> The full text of “Les Voleurs,” is included in Appendix B.

easy access to the texts being examined” (157-158). Similarly, in “Les Voleurs,” Burroughs and Gysin argue that appropriation is not simply theft for the sake of quick and easy work, and it is not for the sole benefit of the appropriator. Instead, the thief is a curator, selecting content worth stealing and saving that content from obscurity.

But the cut-up artist is not *only* a curator. As Burroughs and Gysin say in “Les Voleurs,” the thief is “in no hurry” and “must assure himself of the quality of the merchandise and its suitability for his purpose before he conveys the supreme honor and benediction of his theft” (25-26). In other words, the thief is slow and meticulous in selecting content worth stealing. The artist whose work the cutter appropriates, before the cut-up, has been stuck in the “bored minds of school children” and the “prisons of uncritical veneration.” That is, the artist’s work has been read and appreciated for so long that it is read as a chore, or it is accepted for its greatness without question—much like the Gregory Corso’s view of “soul poetry,” (Beiles et al. 63). Rather than reading the text in that bored or uncritical way, the cutter is acting as both curator and critic.

By cutting up a text and using its fragments for a new composition, the cutter is engaging in a critical practice. In the cut-up method, there is no line between reader and writer, since to do one (write/cut/appropriate), one must do the other (read/select/assess). As Cran explains in “Everything is Permitted”:

Burroughs, in his attempts to eradicate passive reading, portrayed the written word as a dangerous virus. He turned to collage techniques because, as his cut-ups demonstrate, the method simultaneously assaults the reader or viewer, and extends to them an invitation to engage with the artwork or text’s plastic and conceptual process, rather than merely to look or read in passivity. (Cran 305)

If the Word-virus is a model for how ideology spreads through language, and if passive reading is what allows that ideology to pass undetected, then the cut-up is a practice that urges readers to

actively engage with the texts they encounter as a way of identifying the virus of ideology—or, at least, recognizing that it exists. While words, on their own, are ideologically neutral, they contain a very particular ideology when strung together—the ideology of the author who put them into sentences, paragraphs, and entire texts. When grouped together, words lose their neutrality. In removing the word from its author-prescribed context, the reader-writer of the cut-up is restoring the word’s neutrality. The cut-up is the vaccine to the pathogen of ideology.

By echoing Althusser, Burroughs’s and Gysin’s word-virus is a theory that accounts for the divide between the individual and the social. Since the virus “has established itself so firmly as an accepted part of the human organism” (“Ten Years” 59), distinguishing between individual and social is, ultimately, futile. The virus—that is, ideology—has a hold on us long before we are born into it because it is inseparable from a language that has also existed prior to our individual existence. And, by arguing that the cutter, or “thief,” is an active and critical role, an open-eyed curator of ideological messages, they pose the cut-up as a legitimate way to defend against—or, at least, recognize—that always-already ideological nature of language and of ourselves.

### Chapter 3: The Virus in the Classroom

What, if anything, then, can the word-virus/cut up project, tell us about the field of composition studies? As Rice argues, the cut-up helps us re-think what writing looks like and re-think the kinds of rhetorical moves we should ask our students to perform. In other words, the cut-up's offerings are practical. But, by considering the cut-up alongside the word-virus, however, Burroughs and Gysin can help us rethink other aspects of our field. Specifically, it can help us rethink ideology in our classrooms and we're just as susceptible to binary thought as our students, and how we can help students to reconcile their existence both individuals and social beings. In this chapter, I will look the recent history of composition studies and at the epistemological foundations of various—admittedly broad—pedagogies as a way of examining the binaries and ideologies contained within them.

Writing instruction—like all language use—is inherently ideological. Berlin argues as much in his various histories and taxonomies of the field. Cognitive school and current-traditional rhetorics, in particular, function to support dominant culture, Berlin arg. Cognitive rhetoric does so by approaching writing as a problem-solving activity that “parallels the pursuit of self-evident and unquestioned profit-making goals in the corporate marketplace” and turns the primary goal of writing into the creation of “a commodified text” (“Rhetoric and Ideology” 673).

In *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges*, Berlin traces how current-traditional rhetoric became the dominant pedagogy English departments by the beginning of the twentieth century. Following the Civil War, American colleges began “moving increasingly toward commitment to serving all citizens of a society—not just an aristocratic elite—and toward an encouragement of learning and free inquiry” (58). More and more, colleges were being run by people outside the clergy, and with that shift came changes in curriculum. The

new goal was “an education that prepared students for work in this life, not for rewards in the next” (58-59). To attract retain and attract new students, universities emphasized the practicality of their programs, a move that was meant to ensure that would “serve the middle class” and “become an agent of upward social mobility” (60).

In writing classrooms, that new focus meant a more business-oriented pedagogy. As a result of the increase in student enrollment, writing instructors were in need of a more efficient and manageable way to teach. Additionally, those new students and most everyone else involved in higher education sought a curriculum that would facilitate that upward mobility. As Berlin explains, “Most schools, both private and public, began to view themselves as serving the needs of business and industry. Citizens demanded it, students demanded it, and, most importantly, business leaders—the keepers of the funds—demanded it” (60). Since all of those parties agreed that writing skills were an important aspect to the professional success of students, writing courses were kept, in many cases, as the only required courses. At the same time, Berlin states, “The teaching of writing was, as always, a cost-inefficient system when compared with other under graduate courses” (60).

In response to the problem of a highly sought-after but expensive course, administrators at Harvard University convened a three person committee. The committee, who were from outside the university and who were not writing instructors themselves, would reach conclusions with far-reaching and long-lasting implications for English departments:

Knowing nothing about writing instruction, the Committee members focused on the most obvious features they read, the errors in spelling grammar, usage, and even handwriting. They thus gave support to the view that has haunted writing classes ever since: learning to write is learning matters of superficial correctness. They encouraged a conception of the composing process that found its way into the textbooks of two of the most influential figures in composition instruction in the late nineteenth century. (61-62)

Those “influential figures”—Adams Sherman Hill and Barret Wendell, in addition to John Franklin Genung—would become key current-traditionalist rhetoricians whose work would lead to what Berlin calls “the assembly line in education” (62).

Expressivism, Berlin argues, positions itself as opposed to dominant ideology. In that way, expressivism and social-epistemic are, essentially, on the same “side.” For Berlin, the problem with expressivism is a matter of focus. Because of expressivism’s focus on the individual—as opposed to focus on ideology and on the social aspects of writing—any potential for resistance is fragmented and therefore non-threatening. Worse, expressionistic rhetoric is “easily co-opted by the very capitalist forces it opposes” (677). By his own admission, social-epistemic rhetoric—the pedagogical approach Berlin advocates—is ideological. It is “self-critical” (682) of that fact, however, and is therefore better able to counteract the unavoidable presence of ideology. While no pedagogy can never fully counteract the presence of ideology, the emphasis on awareness and critical reflection in social-epistemic rhetoric means that ideology is less able to pass through the classroom unnoticed.

Similarly, self-criticism is a central component to Burroughs’s and Gysin’s word-virus and cut-up. Time and again, Burroughs and Gysin tell their reader how to compose a cut-up, urging that reader to try it first on “this page” (Burroughs and Gysin 31). That is, Burroughs and Gysin invite readers to “cut up” the very text that teaches them to make a cut-up. By asking readers to essentially destroy their text, Burroughs and Gysin do not position themselves as above ideology. Instead, they out themselves as ideological beings and subjects engaged in power relations. As such, Burroughs and Gysin open themselves to the same resistance they offer others. While the cut-up is an artistic genre that puts the individual at the center of the project (as explored in Chapter 2) and, in that way resembles expressivist rhetoric, when considered in

conjunction with the word-virus, the cut-up keeps ideology in its crosshairs and emphasizes critical reflection like social-epistemic.

### **Composition Studies in the Twenty-First Century**

Much like Rice characterizes the years surrounding the 1963 CCCC convention as a field-defining moment in composition studies, I want to argue that the first decade of the twenty-first century was equally significant. The post-World War II milieu that spawned both the cut-up and composition studies' coming-of-age has much in common with the disciplinary identity crisis that started a little over decade ago and that, arguably, hasn't yet ended. And much like the cut-up project of Burroughs and Gysin is as much a part of its zeitgeist as it was a commentary on it, *The Rhetoric of Cool* is emblematic paradigmatic changes within composition studies.

One of Rice's stated purposes in *The Rhetoric of Cool* is to "[undermine] the accepted history (and thus the consequences of that history)" of composition studies and "to disrupt composition's commonplace assumptions regarding cultural studies, technology, and writing, how they fit into a given curriculum, and how they mesh with one another" (18). Rice is particularly interested in the field's approach to electronic writing—which he finds lacking in the early 2000s—and places the blame on "the absence in the 1963 [grand] narrative of any significant mentioning of a change in how writers interact with a respond to cultural or technological moments" (21). By drawing on figures like Burroughs and McLuhuan, Rice poses an alternative disciplinary history—one that frames composition studies as always-already technological and, therefore, poised to meet the demands of twenty-first century life and culture.

In the same decade that Rice theorized "cool" writing as a way to navigate the shift from composition's focus on ink-and-paper texts to broader conceptions of what constitutes "writing" (and how to teach it), other scholars engaged in similar projects, rewriting the field's history and

even challenging its reason to exist in the future. One particular point of contention for many of these authors was the idea that knowledge is socially constructed—or, at least, that the composition pedagogies and classroom practices should be grounded in social constructivist theories.

One such work is David W. Smit's *The End of Composition Studies*, published in 2004—three years before *The Rhetoric of Cool*. Although Smit admits that the book's title is “designed to be provocative,” it only slightly exaggerates Smit's actual argument (1). What the author proposes for the field is a restructuring of curricular objectives and practices at both the undergraduate and graduate levels:

If all writing at some level, even literature traditionally understood, is always the writing of particular genres in particular contexts, if writing always involves particular discipline-, domain-, and context-specific knowledge, if writing teachers have to know not just about writing in general but about how to write particular genres in particular contexts, then it is not at all clear in what sense or in what degree composition studies can be a field with a form of expertise separate or distinct from the expertise inherent in being a member of particular discourse communities with their own unique forms of knowledge a their own distinctive discourse practices. (202)

Smit's solution to the problem writing teachers with no particular expertise, to writing classrooms with no designated subject matter, is to eliminate the writing classroom as we now know it.

In Smit's plan for twenty-first century composition pedagogy, all writing instruction would be based on a Writing in the Disciplines model. Undergraduate lowerclassmen would learn “the genres, patterns of reasoning and kinds of evidence” appropriate for their chosen discourse community, while upperclassmen would be taught “advanced courses in the discourse practices of their disciplines and the public forms associated with them” (209). These changes would be even more profound at the graduate and professoriate levels. Since they would be

expected to teach students specific discursive conventions, all “tenure-track faculty in composition...will have dual-degrees in both composition studies and other disciplines” (205).

Since the stated purpose of Smit’s plan is to “justify writing instruction entirely on the grounds of its social and economic utility” (208), it is not at all surprising that the compositionists with whom he disagrees most starkly are social constructivists. In particular, he takes issue with Marilyn Cooper and Michael Holzman, whose views he calls “quite problematic” (78), and with Berlin, whose “ideology of social-epistemic rhetoric” is “a matter of some dispute” (79):

Theories of writing as social practice are opaque, first of all, because they suggest that we learn to write the way we do through a process of socialization, by internalizing certain aspects of our environment...[but] are notoriously unclear about what these environmental influences are...[and] they do not adequately account for how people learn from environmental influences. (81)

Additionally, Smit challenges the way Berlin proposes to teach writing. Citing a heuristic outlined in one of Berlin’s articles, Smit admits that Berlin’s students are likely to leave the classroom better able to think about and analyze the texts they encounter there, he questions whether Berlin’s teachings taught them what “to *do* with writing” (113; emphasis in original).

Smit’s work is far from the only text from last decade to take issue with the social-epistemic pedagogy. Another book that has much in common with *The Rhetoric of Cool*—in tone and in its characterization of problems in the framing of disciplinary history—is Byron Hawk’s *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity*. Hawk, whose book was published in the same year as Rice’s, takes issue with Berlin and social-epistemic rhetoric in both theory and practice:

Basing social-epistemic rhetoric on a socialist ideology, Berlin wants to replace current-traditional and expressivist pedagogies with a heuristics that focuses on enlightening students and bringing them out of consciousness.... Here Berlin exposes his desire to interpellate students into his own ideology. He wants to replace narratives of cynicism with narratives with narratives that position the students to *believe* they can change the world. However, his blanket belief in consciousness over history creates problems. Berlin has yet to explain how this change is possible. (79)

Hawk's comments on Berlin and social-epistemic are part of a larger critique on heuristic-based pedagogies, or perhaps more accurately, scholarship that frames writing instruction as either heuristic-based (and teachable) or chance-based (and unteachable). The problem, for Hawk, is that the binary excludes vitalism as teachable. To salvage vitalism from the critics, Hawk seeks to "disconnect vitalism from its placement with romanticism and expressivism and examine its relevance to contemporary pedagogies of invention" (4). In so doing, as the title suggests, he hopes to pave way for "a new paradigm built around complexity" that would resist "the opposition between expressivism and social-epistemic rhetoric ... social and personal" (7). Like Rice, Hawk points to a shifting wind in composition studies and to a disciplinary need to revisit its own history. And, like, Smit, he prompts us to be ever-critical, even when it comes to critical pedagogies.

### **"i" Instead of "I"—How I Minimized the Self in My Students' Writing**

If there is one thing I enjoy about grading papers from my first-year composition class, it is that grading often provides some much-needed relief from working on this thesis. But, as the final semester in my current program draws to a close, and as the deadline for this culminating project inches closer, I'm starting to realize that those two things—that is, my teaching and my research—are never truly distinct from each other. Not only do they inform each other, but more and more I'm starting to realize that they *must* inform each other.

This morning, as I prepare for a weekly meeting with my thesis advisor, I'm clicking my computer's mouse back and forth between my thesis file and a half-dozen final papers I've yet to return to my students. And, if I'm being honest with myself, the latter (and probably the former) are not very good. The arguments are poorly conceived and lacking in support, and the writing itself is sloppy.

I am only being slightly hyperbolic when I say that after *every* sentence I read, I find myself asking, so what? Who cares? (And that is more than a little coincidental, considering that I know my thesis advisor will be asking me the same question a few hours from now). Some of the responsibility for these papers rests on the shoulders of the writers themselves. After all, much of the problem in the papers at-issue here could have been fixed by simply reading the assignment sheet. But I'd be dishonest with myself if I didn't admit that I'm even more responsible—that a large part of any blame for my students' papers belongs to me.

Before my first day teaching, I assumed that part of my job would be ego-management—that most of my students would enter the classroom thinking they were better writers than they really were. This was, after all, their “thirteenth year of English” (Heiman 109). And, to be sure, there was some of that sentiment. Over time, however, I became most frustrated, not with the students whose apathy came from over-confidence, but with the students who gave up on their own abilities before I even had a chance to help them. These were students who just “knew” they were bad writers—students who, before ever stepping foot in a college classroom, had become convinced that writing ability was an innate talent, something a person either had or didn't have.

As I progressed through my own coursework, I began to understand where my students' attitudes about writing may have come from. I was frustrated with my students, but even more so with the cultural views on literacy and literacy education—with the culture of red ink and snarky

marginal comments. It went beyond high schools and into my own personal life. Every once in a while, well-meaning family members would post grammar memes to my Facebook page. These family members thought they were making a joke that I, the designated English nerd of the family, would appreciate. All I wanted to do, however, was scream at the person who created the meme in the first place: “How dare you shame my students for comma splices! You know what they meant to say, and anyway, you’re probably terrible at math like I am, so consider it even!”

My mind began to develop a caricaturized mash-up, an imagined English department Big Other: a knuckle-rapping, elbow patch wearing current-traditionalist who bled red ink and fueled himself with the rage that only the wrong “to/too/two” can induce. At the same time, I started to engage with an idea that would become the basis of this project: the word-virus. The virus, as I understood it then and still think of it now, was a way of accounting for how ideology seeps into—and is reproduced by— language use. At the time, the concept of ideology was pure abstraction. I could see examples of it at work and in the news, and I had an idea that it was at work in the composition classroom, but I had a hard time showing precisely how it affected—and manifested in—student writing. The one example that felt concrete—therefore, latched onto—was the ideology of proper English.

In what I now recognize as a knee-jerk reaction, I emphasized the wrong things. I now cringe when I think of how clichéd I became in my overcorrections: “I don’t care about grammar and spelling, I care about your ideas,” I repeatedly told them. That, of course, is true—to an extent. I’ve always been more concerned with what my students are saying than I am in how they go about saying it. I wanted them to tackle important issues, controversial issues, issues that would make power uncomfortable. I was trying teach—in a naïve, haphazard sort of way—with

a Berlinian social-epistemic approach. In doing so, I became exactly the kind of teacher Berlin's critics warned against.

What kind of writing teacher explicitly says—in a *thesis*, no less—that he doesn't care about *how* students are saying what they're saying? Isn't that what the writing instruction is—helping students find a voice with which they can most effectively communicate, express themselves, and argue for change?

In the last chapter of *The End of Composition Studies*, Smit echoes his earlier critique of Berlin, this time pointing out how similar pedagogies often fall flat in the classroom:

Many critics have pointed out that those who promote critical pedagogy and cultural critique in writing classes teach a very narrow range of writing. . . . It is writing designed to help students learn various theoretical frameworks and forms of analysis; it is writing designed to promote strategies for thinking “metacognitively” about such matters as race, class, gender, and power; it is writing designed to help students ponder and reflect on their own positions on these issues. These are perfectly legitimate goals for a writing pedagogy, but *they are very generic and generally do not give students sufficient context* to truly ponder the implications of their positions. (207; emphasis mine)

I would not go so far as to say Smit's statement is true for all writing instructors who teach writing that way, or even that it's true for most of the time. As I grade these papers, however, I realize that, at least in my case, Smit is right.

By emphasizing how little I cared about things like grammar, I failed to give them “sufficient context.” I failed to help them understand that *they* themselves are part of the context of any subject they write about; that *who* they are and *what* they say are inextricably linked with *how* they say it.

Sure, the grammar for grammar's sake mentality still gets under my skin, and I'll forever be aggravated when I see an argument on social media and one commenter dismisses another's

argument because the latter used “their” instead of “there.” But, my students’ grammar mistakes felt different. In fact, they didn’t feel like mistakes at all.

The “mistake” I’m most bothered by is the repeated uses of “i” when what should have been written was “I.” These are first-year college students, not first-graders. Admittedly, this occurred in only two students’ papers, but those two students are native speaking, neurotypical (as far as I know) students whose previous papers were free of similar missteps. As far as I can tell, there is really no excuse. Actually, there might be—for them—but not for me. The mistake, I think, is symbolic of how my current pedagogy has failed.

A mistake as simple as using “i” instead of “I” when writing in the first-person is not an example of not knowing about or not understanding a particular writing convention. What it signifies—to me, at least, in this moment and context—is a lack of care for the writing itself. What I realize now is that *I’m* to blame for that lack of care, at least in part. When I reacted against current-traditionalist values that perceived as equating grammar with intelligence, and “proper English” with “having something important to say,” I excluded the possibility that grammar and proper English can also represent a *personal* investment in the writing in which it appears. To borrow from Burke, I had unintentionally set up a kind of terministic screen and “direct[ed] the attention into some channels rather than others” (“Terministic Screens” 1340).

By repeatedly de-emphasizing grammar, I encouraged recklessness. Process writing might be a debated topic in composition, but at least it encourages students to read and re-read their writing up until the moment they turn it in to their instructors. When I removed the need for students to check their spelling, their use of commas, and so forth, I also removed any incentive for them to engage repeatedly with their work. I made the “I” in my students’ writing smaller, and in turn, they did the same.

## Chapter 4: Cutting up Composition

In *A Counter-History of Composition*, Byron Hawk calls attention to the tendency of composition scholars to discard old theories and practices as a way of carving out new disciplinary identities. As he explains it, “The situational need to delineate a territory for rhetoric and composition (to define a *them* to exclude and an *us* to identify with) fed into a narrative of retreat and return” (14). In my own teaching, I had repeated that narrative. In my haste to *retreat* from current-traditional rhetoric to social-epistemic rhetoric, I removed from my classroom a key part of expressivist-based pedagogy: the self.

I had consigned both current-traditionalism and expressivism to what Lizbeth Bryant, quoting James J. Sosnoski, refers to as the “theory junkyard” (Bryant 5). It’s a dangerous practice, and one that composition has a bad habit of engaging in:

[I]f we stay with the theory junkyard, we trash many theories that explain how, why, when, and where writing happens. Each of the expressive, cognitive, and social-epistemic rhetorics, as well as Thomas Kent’s theory of hermeneutic guessing that moved us into the post process movement, explains just one aspect of producing texts. The theories build to give us more insight into what humans do as they compose and what teachers do to build writers. (5).

Bryant’s remarks appear in her preface to *Critical Expressivism: Theory and Practice in the Composition Classroom*. Like Hawk and Smit, many of the writers in *Critical Expressivism* use Berlin and social-epistemic rhetoric as a starting point for their reappropriation of expressivism from its critics. In “‘Personal Writing’ and ‘Expressivism’ as Problematic Terms,” for instance, Peter Elbow takes issue with Berlin for “call[ing] me a poster boy for expressivism in the 1980s” (23). Elbow says he was “hurt and angry” at Berlin’s misreading of his work, and adding that “Berlin’s characterization of expressivism was harmful for the field” (27). What Elbow—and other scholars who argued for an injection of the personal into academic writing—were *really* interested in, he says, was “helping people take more authority over themselves as writers by

writing more from the self—but not necessarily about the self” (30). Ultimately, Elbow admits, the term “expressivism” has been too-well “infected by narrow and usually perjorative connotations” and may impossible rescue (30), but other writers in *Critical Expressivism* are not so sure.

While she, too, uses Berlin as a springboard (in the very first sentence, no less), Patricia Webb Boyd is clear that social-epistemic rhetoric and critical expressivism are not as opposed as theorists on both sides sometimes make it out to be. In “Communication as Social Action: Critical Expressivist Pedagogies in the Writing Classroom,” Webb Boyd argues that critical expressivism helps students achieve the aims of social-epistemic rhetoric:

Too often students see discussions and writing as empty practices that have no ability to change social situations. Critical expressivist practices can help us challenge these views of communication. Instead of seeing communication as empty exercises or tools to only analyze social texts rather than change society, students can learn to see writing—and social discussions—as social action—i.e., a way of being an agent in public discourses. When students realize their words matter and can have an impact on social action (and can even be social action), then they become more aware of how important it is to take responsibility for their words and the work those words do in the communities and the lives of people. (108)

For critical expressivists, students can only use their writing to enact change if they are first able to locate themselves within the structures that insure that reproduction of social conditions. In short, the self must be at the center—or, at least, acknowledged as a part—of the social.

For his part, Berlin seems to agree that the overall objectives of the two pedagogies are in agreement. In “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” Berlin writes:

Most proponents of expressionistic rhetoric during the sixties and seventies were unsparingly critical of the dominant social, political, and cultural practices of the time. The most extreme of these critics demanded that the writing classroom work explicitly toward liberating students from the shackles of a corrupt society. (675)

And in *Rhetoric and Reality*, Berlin doesn’t seem nearly as disparaging about expressivists in general, and Elbow in particular, as Elbow seems to think he is. Berlin calls Elbow’s *Writing*

*without Teachers* “one of the most articulate and pedagogically resourceful of the expressionistic textbooks” (153). And Berlin doesn’t say that expressivism *can’t* be epistemic, only that it hasn’t yet. In fact, in his breakdown of expressivist rhetoric, he acknowledges that there are “varieties,” including a “few that are close... to epistemic rhetoric” (145-6). Berlin may have found expressivism problematic in practice—at least, in the ways it had been put into practice so far—but he seemed to respect the anti-authoritarian values at its core and remained open to the possibility that expressivist pedagogy *could* offer something useful for student writers.

By asking students to situate themselves within the larger social contexts in which they write, critical expressivists hope to help student writers find better positions from which to critique those contexts. It is a pedagogy that makes room for the rhetorical, the poetic (as in Coleridge), the artistic (as in Surrealism), the social (as in Berlin), and the personal (as in Elbow). In other words, critical expressivism attempts to break down the binaries at work in the field of composition studies. What Burroughs’s and Gysin’s word-virus and cut-up show is that those binaries were an illusion from the start. When Burroughs argues that “all writing is in fact cut ups” (Burroughs and Gysin 29), he is commenting on the always-already ideological/social/personal/artistic/rhetorical aspects of *all* composition.

### **A Pedagogy of the Cut-Up**

On its own, the cut-up is an artistic project. With the exception of Corso, who abandoned the project almost immediately, none of its creators called it “poetry,” but that is nevertheless the literary genre with which the *Minutes to Go*-era cut-up best fits. When considered in tandem with Burroughs’ and Gysin’s metatextual commentaries on the Word-virus, however, the cut-up becomes something else. It may be art, but it is art that is undeniably dialogic in the Bakhtinian

sense, with individual words and phrases that constantly point elsewhere. It's an unavoidable feature in a genre based on the appropriation of those outside sources.

It is by that very principle—the fact that the cut-up as an artistic genre is inherently and explicitly multivocal—that the method performs a rhetoric that is equally individual and social. By inverting and subverting the literary and artistic movements from which it descends (Romantic, surrealist, modernist), the cut-up anticipates and responds epistemological distinctions between to expressivist and social-epistemic rhetorics.

One of Berlin's primary critiques of expressivism, one of the reasons it approaches but never quite becomes epistemic, is that it locates meaning in the writer as an individual. In expressivism, as in surrealism, writing is an *art* that seeks to “record the truths discoverable within the inner depths of the psyche” (*Rhetoric and Reality* 147). And, for Coleridge, writing (both poetry and rhetoric) are mere *records* of the truth-seeking process undergone by the composer.

In some ways, that is true of the cut-up as well. Any truth found in the cut-up—or, more accurately, in the process of composing a cut-up—is realized only by the writer. The difference is that the *art* of the cut-up does not “arise from within the writer,” as Berlin says of the art of writing in the Romantic/expressivist/surrealist approach (*Rhetoric and Reality* 147). It's just the opposite, in fact: the art of the cut-up depends on source texts. In the cut-up, *meaning* is individual, but *meaning-making* is social.

Critical expressivism evolved out of a gap, a perceived separation between two of the dominant pedagogies of the twentieth century—one holding that meaning arises from the individual, the other holding that meaning arises from social interaction. In “Rereading Romanticism, Rereading Expressivism: Revising “Voice” through Wordsworth's Prefaces,”

Hannah Rule draws on Berlin, Hawk, Elbow, and other compositionists while working to salvage terms like “expressivism” and “Romanticism”—to rescue them from the “theory junkyard”

they’ve been consigned to:

If language can be conceived as neither the domain of the individual or purely the social group, then some of the deepest divisions between constructionism and expressivism are eased. Especially as constructionism has branched off in our current moment to a focus on networks, location, situatedness, and material systems in ecological, post-process, and spatial theories, a revised sense of romantic-expressive language as material and embodied draws attention to a writer’s always shifting physical location and relation with the world. (Rule 213)

By devising a method with which composers find meaning by interacting with the words and ideas of others, Burroughs and Gysin demonstrate what many of us would want for our students, that they leave our classrooms knowing a little more about themselves and the world around them, and more importantly, how those two things are *never* separable. Our subjectivities are formed through social and material conditions—but they are still *our* subjectivities.

Throughout this project, I’ve learned that, regardless of how aware I am of my own ideological leanings and those of the people I interact with, I can never fully eliminate ideology from any classroom I’m a part of. I can react to the current-traditionalist values I see by de-emphasizing those values in my own class, but doing so is means that I’m still stuck in a binary—that such an approach is just as ideological and perhaps just as damaging to my students as the very approach I’m reacting against. To appropriate the cliché, I’m prone to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. When I respond to the ideolgicity “proper” English and minimize its importance in my students’ writing, I encourage them to adopt my own ideology and discourage them from mastering the conventions of academic discourse. In short, if I’m not careful, I privilege my own views on composition over my students’ ability to participate in the discourse communities they aspire to. If my hope for students is that they discover a way to use

composition in a way that helps them negotiate and struggle with the world—to use writing as a way to change the material conditions of their existence—then any part of my pedagogy that diminishes their ability to participate in discourse is self-defeating.

In any other aspect of our lives, the “real” answer is rarely one of two options, and the same is true for writing instruction. It is important for us to continue the work of understanding how writers write. And one effective way to advance that work can be seen in the disciplinary historiographies written by people like Berlin, Rice, Hawk, and countless others. But, if the goal of such narratives is merely to discredit old epistemologies in favor of new ones, then we’re basing our pedagogies on a false dichotomy—the same reductive and uncritical way of thinking we seek to challenge in our students.

In the *Minutes to Go*-era cut-up, Burroughs and Gysin complicate that dichotomy and others. Is truth socially or individually constructed? Is meaning made by the writer of a text or by its reader? Is the ideology of “they” any different than the ideology of “I”? Is good writing entirely original or stolen? The cut-up blurs the distinctions the options of each of those questions, and in doing so, asks us to challenge our assumptions about composition and the act of composing—to think critically about thinking critically.

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## Appendix A

### “Minutes to Go”

the hallucinated have come to tell you that yr utilities  
are being shut off      dreams monitored      thought directed  
sex is shutting down everywhere      you are being sent

all words are taped      agents everywhere  
marking down the live ones      to exterminate

they are turning out the lights

no      they are not evil      nor the devil      but men  
on a mission      with a spot of work to do

this      dear friends      they intend to do to you

you have been offered a choice      between liberty and  
freedom      and      No!      you can not have both

the next step      is everyone into space      but it has been  
a long dull wait      since the last tower of babel  
that first derisive visit of the      paraclete

let's not ear that noise again      and again

that may well be      the last word      anywhere

this is not the beginning      in the beginning was the word  
the word has been in for a too long time  
you in the word and      the word in you

we are out  
you are in  
we have come to let you out

here and now we will show you      what you can do  
with and to  
the word  
the words  
any words  
all the words

Pick a book      any book      cut it up  
cut up

prose  
 poems  
 newspapers magazines  
 the bible  
 the koran  
 the book of moroni  
 la-tzu  
 confucius  
 the bhagavad gita  
 anything  
 letters  
 business correspondence  
 ads  
 all the words

slice down the middle      dice into sections  
 according to taste  
 chop in some bible      pour on some Madison Avenue  
 prose  
 shuffle like cards      toss like confetti  
 taste it like piping hot      alphabet soup

pass yr friends' letter      yr office carbons  
 through any such sieve      as you may find or invent

you will soon see      just what they really are  
 saying      this is the terminal method for  
 finding the truth

piece together a masterpiece      a week  
 the better materials      more highly charged words

there is no longer a need      to drum up a season of  
 geniuses      be your own agent      until we deliver  
 the machine      in commercially reasonable quantities

we wish to announce      that while we esteem  
 this to be truly      the American Way  
 we have no commitments      with any government groups

the writing machine      is for everybody  
 do it yourself      until the machine comes  
 here is the system      according to us

Brion Gysin

## Appendix B

### “Les Voleurs”

Out of the closet and into the museums, libraries, architectural monuments, concert halls, bookstores, recording studios and film studios of the world. Everything belongs to the inspired and dedicated thief. All the artist of history, from cave painters to Picasso, all the poets and writers, the musicians and architects, offer their wares, importuning him like street vendors. They supplicate him from the bored minds of school children, from the prisons of uncritical veneration, from dead museums and dusty archives. Sculptors stretch forth their limestone arms to receive the life-giving transfusion of flesh as their severed limbs are grafted onto Mister America. *Mais le voleur n'est pas pressé*—the thief is in no hurry. He must assure himself of the quality of the merchandise and its suitability for his purpose before he conveys the supreme honor and benediction of his theft.

Words, colors, light, sounds, stone, wood, bronze belong to the living artist. They belong to anyone who can use them. Loot the Louvre! *A bas l'originalité*, the sterile and assertive ego that imprisons as it creates. *Vive le vol*—pure, shameless, total. We are not responsible. Steal anything in site.