

07. [Introduction]

The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin

There is nothing new under the sun. Here, William Burroughs—adding machine fortune heir, junkie, killer of his wife, most challenging and complex of the Beat writers—describes a technique itself based on earlier experiments of the surrealists, which in turn had their origins centuries before, in techniques of very literal “cut and paste” editing. It is quite fitting that Burroughs invoked computing pioneer John von Neumann in tracing the uses of the cut-up method, for these techniques have been employed in many aspects of new media, in computer literary practice as well as game theory. That they are not novel should not deter writers from use of these techniques. Although drawing words out of a hat to form a poem may be old hat, it can still be an effective technique for textual production. It can also suggest different techniques which are genuinely new.

There have been plenty of “surrealist” poetry generators available on the Web for years. Their invocation of surrealism is misleading. Generating texts directly for readers by means of computer-approximated randomness is not what the Surrealists or Burroughs meant to suggest. Burroughs indicates, rather, that randomness and recombination can be used by an author as an intermediate step in composition. The surrealists were uninterested in tossing dice unless the throw might help to coax something up from the unconscious. It is only in juxtaposition with our personal and social ghosts, as Italo Calvino writes, that randomly-retrieved words resonate.

Those using the cut-up method should note that it is hardly incompatible with the process of revision. In fact, this very article was substantially revised and expanded by Burroughs between its first appearance in 1961 and its publication in a 1978 book that he and Brion Gysin edited. In the much shorter original article, Burroughs wrote that “The cut-up method was used in *Naked Lunch* without the author’s full awareness of the method he was using. . . . Subsequently I used the method with awareness scissors in *Minutes to Go* and *The Exterminator*.” He encouraged cut-up creators to “Cut paper cut film cut tape” and to employ “Scissors or switch blade as preferred.”

Although the claim was made that a book, *The Policeman’s Beard is Half Constructed*, has been generated by computer alone, few who have studied the text (and the program that purportedly generated it, *Racter*) believe this claim. Rather, it seems certain that *Racter* was loaded with special, additional templates to generate a draft, which was then edited into its published shape by a human editor. A similar method was used without dissimulation by Charles O. Hartman, who has written computer programs, had them programmatically mangle texts, and then has gone on to use the texts in creating poems. More recently, free software has been used to generate metrical, rhymed sonnets. These are descendants of the traditional poetic cut-up form, the cento, cross-bred with Burroughs’s cut-up technique and the combinatorial and procedural methods of the Oulipo (♢12).
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Further Reading

Beiles, Sinclair, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and Brion Gysin. *Minutes to Go*. Paris: Two Cities Editions, 1960.

Burroughs, William S. “The Invisible Generation.” *The Ticket That Exploded*, 205–217. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

Calvino, Italo. “Cybernetics and Ghosts.” *The Uses of Literature*, 3–27. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986.

Gnoetry. <<http://www.beardofbees.com/gnoetry.html>>

Hartman, Charles O. *The Virtual Muse: Experiments in Computer Poetry*. Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996.

Odier, Daniel. *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs*. New York: Penguin, 1989.

Burroughs’s article was published just before Ted Nelson (♢11) coined the term “hypertext” in a famous piece which also imagined decomposing and rearranging the traditional hierarchical text.

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Italo Calvino, “Cybernetics and Ghosts” (20,22):

The relationship between combinatorial play and the unconscious in artistic activity lies at the heart of one of the most convincing aesthetic theories currently in circulation, a formula that draws upon both psychoanalysis and the practical experience of arts and letters. . . . Literature is a combinatorial game that pursues the possibilities implicit in its own material, independent of the personality of the poet, but it is a game that at a certain point is invested with an unexpected meaning, a meaning that is not patent on the linguistic plane on which we were working but has slipped in from another level, activating something that on that second level is of great concern to the author or his society. The literature machine can perform all the permutations possible on a given material, but the poetic result will be the particular effect of one of these on a man endowed with consciousness and an unconscious, that is, an empirical and historical man. It will be the shock that occurs only if the writing machine is surrounded by the hidden ghosts of the individual and his society.

Original Publication

A Casebook on the Beat, 105-106. Ed. Thomas Parkinson. New York, Crowell: 1961. This text is from William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind*, 29-33. New York, Viking: 1978. This text was revised and enlarged by Burroughs from his six paragraphs in *A Casebook on the Beat*.

Ellipses are from the text as published in *The Third Mind*.

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The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin William S. Burroughs

At a surrealist rally in the 1920s Tristan Tzara the man from nowhere proposed to create a poem on the spot by pulling words out of a hat. A riot ensued wrecked the theater. André Breton expelled Tristan Tzara from the movement and grounded the cut-ups on the Freudian couch.

In the summer of 1959 Brion Gysin painter and writer cut newspaper articles into sections and rearranged the sections *at random*. *Minutes to Go* resulted from this initial cut-up experiment. *Minutes to Go* contains unedited unchanged cut ups emerging as quite coherent and meaningful prose.

The cut-up method brings to writers the collage, which has been used by painters for fifty years. And used by the moving and still camera. In fact all street shots from movie or still cameras are by the unpredictable factors of passers by and juxtaposition cut-ups. And photographers will tell you that often their best shots are accidents . . . writers will tell you the same. The best writing seems to be done almost by accident but writers until the cut-up method was made explicit— all writing is in fact cut ups. I will return to this point—had no way to produce the accident of spontaneity. You can not *will* spontaneity. But you can introduce the unpredictable spontaneous factor with a pair of scissors.

The method is simple. Here is one way to do it. Take a page. Like this page. Now cut down the middle and cross the middle. You have four sections: 1 2 3 4 . . . one two three four. Now rearrange the sections placing section four with section one and section two with section three. And

you have a new page. Sometimes it says much the same thing. Sometimes something quite different—cutting up political speeches is an interesting exercise—in any case you will find that it says something and something quite definite. Take any poet or writer you fancy. Here, say, or poems you have read over many times. The words have lost meaning and life through years of repetition. Now take the poem and type out selected passages. Fill a page with excerpts. Now cut the page. You have a new poem. As many poems as you like. As many Shakespeare Rimbaud poems as you like. Tristan Tzara said: “Poetry is for everyone.” And André Breton called him a cop and expelled him from the movement. Say it again: “Poetry is for everyone.” Poetry is a place and it is free to all cut up Rimbaud and you are in Rimbaud’s place. Here is a Rimbaud poem cut up.

Visit of memories. Only your dance and your voice
house. On the suburban air improbable desertsions ...
all harmonic pine for strife.

The great skies are open. Candor of vapor and tent
spitting blood laugh and drunken penance.

Promenade of wine perfume opens slow bottle.

The great skies are open. Supreme bugle burning
flesh children to mist.

Cut-ups are for everyone. Anybody can make cut ups. It is experimental in the sense of being *something to do*. Right here write now. Not something to talk and argue about. Greek philosophers assumed logically that an object twice as heavy as another object would fall twice as fast. It did not occur to them to push the two objects off the table and see how they fall. Cut the words and see how they fall.

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

All writing is in fact cut-ups. A collage of words read heard overhead. What else? Use of scissors renders the process explicit and subject to extension and variation. Clear classical prose can be composed entirely of rearranged cut-ups. Cutting and rearranging a page of written words introduces a new dimension into writing enabling the writer to turn images in cinematic variation. Images shift sense under the scissors smell images to sound sight to sound sound to kinesthetic. This is where Rimbaud was going with his color of vowels. And his “systematic derangement of the senses.” The place of mescaline hallucination: seeing colors tasting sounds smelling forms.

The cut-ups can be applied to other fields than writing. Dr Neumann in his *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* introduces the cut-up method of random action into game and military strategy: assume that the worst has happened and act accordingly. If your strategy is at some point determined . . . by random factor your opponent will gain no advantage from knowing your strategy since he can not predict the move. The cut-up method could be used to advantage in processing scientific data. How many discoveries have been made by accident? We can not produce accidents to order. The cut-ups could add new dimension to films. Cut gambling scene in with a thousand gambling scenes all times and places. Cut back. Cut streets of the world. Cut and rearrange the word and image in films. There is no reason to accept a second-rate product when you can have the best. And the best is there for all. “Poetry is for everyone” . . .

Now here are the preceding two paragraphs cut into four sections and rearranged:

ALL WRITING IS IN FACT CUT-UPS OF GAMES AND ECONOMIC BEHAVIOR OVERHEARD? WHAT ELSE? ASSUME THAT THE WORST HAS HAPPENED EXPLICIT AND SUBJECT TO STRATEGY IS AT SOME POINT CLASSICAL PROSE. CUTTING AND REARRANGING FACTOR YOUR OPPONENT WILL GAIN INTRODUCES A NEW DIMENSION YOUR STRATEGY. HOW MANY DISCOVERIES SOUND TO KINESTHETIC? WE CAN NOW PRODUCE ACCIDENT TO HIS COLOR OF VOWELS. AND NEW DIMENSION TO FILMS CUT THE SENSES. THE PLACE OF SAND. GAMBLING SCENES ALL TIMES COLORS TASTING SOUNDS SMELL STREETS OF THE WORLD. WHEN YOU CAN HAVE THE BEST ALL: “POETRY IS FOR EVERYONE” DR NEUMANN IN A COLLAGE OF WORDS READ HEARD INTRODUCED THE CUT-UP SCISSORS RENDERS THE PROCESS GAME AND MILITARY STRATEGY, VARIATION CLEAR AND ACT ACCORDINGLY. IF YOU POSED ENTIRELY OF REARRANGED CUT DETERMINED BY RANDOM A PAGE OF WRITTEN WORDS NO ADVANTAGE FROM KNOWING INTO WRITER PREDICT THE MOVE. THE CUT VARIATION IMAGES SHIFT SENSE ADVANTAGE IN PROCESSING TO SOUND SIGHT TO SOUND. HAVE BEEN MADE BY ACCIDENT IS WHERE RIMBAUD WAS GOING WITH ORDER THE CUT-UPS COULD “SYSTEMATIC DERANGEMENT” OF THE GAMBLING SCENE IN WITH A TEA HALLUCINATION: SEEING AND PLACES. CUT BACK. CUT FORMS. REARRANGE THE WORD AND IMAGE TO OTHER FIELDS THAN WRITING.

