

TALKING WITH THE MAN WHO LET THE MICE IN



two visits with

BRION GYSIN

by Gregory Stephenson

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My first acquaintance with Brion Gysin

came through reading "The Poem of Poems." The title is not a boast but a literal description of Gysin's twelve-page text, which blends together disjointed fragments of a number of pre-existing poems, including "The Song of Solomon," Shakespeare's sonnets, and T.S. Eliot's translation of "Anabasis" by St. John Perse. The product of this process is a verbal collage, created not by physically cutting and re-arranging the source texts but by reading each text aloud into a tape recorder and then randomly mixing and re-mixing them again and again until they are thoroughly combined. This audacious act of literary sacrilege appeared in *The International Literary Annual* for 1961.¹ Gysin's poem is shot through with enchantment and terror, whimsy and enigma: "the laugh of the dead in her blood . . . my heart twittered with joy under the quicklime . . . He moved his treasure through their door and my bowels were moved for him . . . the stale smell of morning overlaid with sapphire . . . silver fountains in the smoke of dreams." Gysin had released a poetry latent in random, autonomous language, creating through incongruous juxtapositions of words new networks of conceptual correspondence.

Brion Gysin was also a painter, an inventor (of the Dream Machine, a device for flicker-induced hallucinations), an historian, a performance artist, the founder of a school of sound poetry, the originator of "the cut-up method" and of permuted poetry, a friend

and collaborator of William Burroughs, a friend of Paul Bowles, and something of a legendary figure in avant-garde circles. A short biographical note in *Contemporary Artists* states that Gysin was an American citizen, born in Taplow, Buckinghamshire, England in 1916. He had lived in Paris in the 1930s and was associated with the surrealist group there, but had been expelled from the Surrealist movement by the express command of André Breton himself. Gysin traveled extensively in Europe and North Africa, pursued various occupations, including those of welder and restaurateur, and during World War II had served in both the U.S. and Canadian armies.² An inspiring life: the poet Gregory Corso composed a short, cryptic, gnomic rhyme about him: “Brion Gysin let the mice in.”

In November of 1979 I wrote a letter to Brion Gysin at his home in Paris, asking if my wife and I might call on him during our coming visit to that city. In reply, I received from him a color postcard of the Georges Pompidou Center on which Gysin had drawn with a marker two red arrows pointing to his apartment. On the reverse he had graciously written, “Hope to see you here in Paris. The red arrows point the way.”

On the raw, wet evening of January 1st, 1980, Birgit and I took the small two-person elevator up to his 4th floor apartment and knocked on the door. Strange music came from within—horns braying, cymbals clashing. (This proved to be Tibetan ritual music.) We were admitted by Brion, shook hands and were introduced to his other guests that evening: a young English writer named Terry Wilson, and Roberto, a young man from Brazil.

The living room clearly doubled as Brion’s studio. There was an easel on which was mounted one of his calligraphic paintings and an improvised worktable with a desk lamp and a desk chair.

A Moroccan ceramic ashtray and a blue hyacinth flower in a small purple pot occupied the table. Canvasses were stacked against the walls. At both ends of the room, books, magazines, LPs, and North African objects of brass or fired clay crowded the shelves. The books included Brion's own works, periodicals with his contributions, books on Islam, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a book on Eleusis, *Raise Up Off Me* by Hampton Hawes, and novels by William S. Burroughs. A narrow hallway connecting the living room and bedroom was also stacked with canvasses and with Dream Machine cylinders. Brion's bed was just a mattress on the floor, surrounded by a gramophone, a tape recorder, tapes, and records. All through the evening music played: Tibetan, Moroccan, Spanish, Ornette Coleman.

Gysin himself was a tall man in his mid-sixties with thick gray hair and blue-green eyes. Light-complexion with a rosy flush, his face was merry and lively (reminding me somewhat of the actor Walter Pigeon), though at times his physiognomy took on a hollow, hungry, bony, woeful aspect (reminding me somewhat of certain later photographs of Antonin Artaud). He was dressed in brown, flared corduroy pants, brown boots, a brown Moroccan vest worn over a collarless white shirt, and a dark brown cardigan. His speech sounded North American with occasional English pronunciations and expressions. (He attended Downside College in England, 1932-34). In conversation he casually blended levels of discourse, mingling obscenities, hip argot and academic speech. When reading or doing close work with his hands (i.e. rolling joints), he put on a pair of narrow gold-rimmed reading glasses.

Brion served tea and at first the conversation centered upon his years living in Tangier. He spoke with affectionate disapproval of his friend Paul Bowles, whom he considered somewhat sly. In the early

1950s Bowles had invited Gysin to share a house with him in the medina of Tangier. Heretofore, Gysin explained to us, the medina had been inhabited exclusively by Moroccans while Europeans lived in the European quarter of the city. Gysin saw himself in this regard as having been used as Bowles's "patsy," in that Bowles had bought the house intending only to use it by day as a studio where he could compose music and had not intended to *live* there. Brion, however, proceeded to move into the house on a permanent basis, occupying it day and night. In this way, Bowles had calculated that he could observe and gage the reactions of the neighbors and other inhabitants of the medina to this intrusion without endangering himself. Bowles, Brion said, did not mix socially with the Moroccans, did not smoke kif with them or frequent their cafés, as he himself did.

Jane Bowles he had found consistently and continually exasperating. Never had he met a woman so proficient at disrupting plans, so adept at stalling, sabotaging, derailing all manner of movement or action. Ah well, he said, *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*. (Of the dead, speak nothing but good.)

Gysin believed that the final scenes in Bowles's novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, in which the female protagonist, Kit, is kidnapped and confined in a house by an Arab man, derived from Bowles's own experiences in Morocco during the 1930s when he was once locked up in a house by his hosts. Bowles's blond hair and light complexion were much admired by Moroccan women, Gysin said, who sent their husbands to Bowles to inquire how he achieved his appearance. To their question Bowles had replied: "Carrots. I eat lots of carrots."

Brion recalled with fondness Dean's Bar in Tangier. Anthony Blunt, who had only recently been revealed as having been a Soviet spy, one of the Cambridge group, had frequented Dean's, he said. He

surmised that at one time or another, "all that lot were there." It was a place, Gysin said, where spies, writers, underworld figures, exiles, expats and celebrities all mixed. Anyone might show up at any time. Strange to say, almost alone among all of the bar's many customers, William Burroughs had been unwelcome there. Dean had taken an immediate dislike to him and served him only with the greatest reluctance. As for Joseph Dean himself, the proprietor, he was something of a mystery. No one really knew him. He was rumored to be on the lam from some criminal act or scandal in his past. But then so, too, said Brion, were any number of other residents of Tangier.

Gysin spoke of his fascination with Moroccan trance cults and the ecstatic brotherhoods of Morocco. Their practices, he believed, went back to ancient tribal customs among the earliest inhabitants of the Tigris and Euphrates area, back perhaps all the way to the Biblical figure of Abraham, father of all Semites, an outcast to the marshlands of what is present day Iraq. He mentioned Flaubert's novel, *Salambo*, as an astonishingly accurate account of the trance cults of North Africa and the Middle East. He was puzzled, he said, to know how Flaubert had acquired this knowledge. Gysin's own acquaintance with the Master Musicians of Joujouka had made him aware of their remarkable knowledge of events and family relations of many centuries past. They possessed a kind of unwritten tribal memory. It was they who had persuaded him to remain in Morocco and who had given him the idea for the restaurant that they had run together in Tangier for some years. Ultimately, though, some among them must apparently have resented his inquiries into their history and secrets and had laid a curse upon him. Hidden in a ventilation duct in the restaurant, a magical bundle had been discovered, a collection of objects such as seeds and stones and pieces of broken

mirror together with a written spell designed to affect his departure. He had taken the hint, for on one previous occasion when he had been in a remote district of the Moroccan countryside in the company of two Moroccan men, exploring a cave, he had overheard one of them ask the other: "why don't we just kill this Rumi and take his shoes?" Accordingly, when the magic bundle had been discovered he had been inclined to act upon the warning. Gysin seemed to place a good deal of credence in the practice of magic, especially that of words and writing. He remarked that the Punic name of the god Pan was so powerful that it "would burn up the paper if written down."

At one point, perhaps at the request of Terry Wilson, our host produced a photo album containing photographs of Brion looking very fit in abbreviated bathing trunks, Brion in a djellaba, Brion wearing a fez, Brion shaved-headed, bearded, and clad in a kaftan, Brion with a round taqiyah cap on his head, Brion wearing a suit and tie. He seemed to be a man of many costumes, many faces. There were also photos of his friends John Latouche and Carl Van Vechten (and a fine photo of Brion taken by Van Vechten). Latouche, he said, had been a truly "mad cat," a highly talented song lyricist with a wild sense of humor. Gysin recalled that once he and Latouche and a few others had been riding together in a taxi cab in New York City collectively, spontaneously writing the lyrics to "Taking a Chance on Love." Gysin had provided the lines: "Here I slide again / about to take a ride again / starry-eyed again." Others in the taxi had contributed other lines. Latouche had had to buy from them their several contributions to the song or the copyrighting of the lyrics would have proven too complex. Carl Van Vechten had also been a good friend and an inspiration; a writer, critic and photographer instrumental in promoting black culture among white readers during

the 1920s and '30s. The title of his novel, *Nigger Heaven*, had however "caused a good deal of pain to some very dear friends of mine" in the black community, Gysin said. Brion shared Van Vechten's passion for all things black, immersing himself in the music and street life of 52nd Street in New York City, and later writing a study of Josiah Henson, the man who provided the original model for Harriet Beecher Stowe's fictional figure of Uncle Tom. Gysin had also written a history of slavery in Canada.³

Also in Gysin's photo album were photographs of the Moroccan painter Mohamed Hamri, on whom Gysin had based the character of Hamid in his novel, *The Process*. Hamri, Gysin said, had discovered his vocation as an artist by decorating the interior of a brothel in Rabat, covering the walls with portraits and murals that had excited the admiration of the prostitutes and their clients. He was completely self-taught, self-invented, a natural genius, Gysin said, a painter with an innocent eye and the most paradisiacal vision since Paul Gauguin. And, Hamri was completely unspoiled spiritually by his success, often using his earnings to benefit his village and his extended family. Once when Hamri was a guest in the luxurious New York apartment of a wealthy collector and patroness of the arts, he had gestured dismissively to all her expensive, exquisite furnishings and possessions and had remarked: "The trouble with you, Madam, is that you think all of this is real." Gysin clearly endorsed this view of the material world.

Gysin's album also contained photos of his friend and collaborator, William S. Burroughs. There had been, he said, an extraordinary photograph of Burroughs taken in his room at the Beat Hotel in which Burroughs stood under a bare light bulb smoking a cigarette with the smoke curling above his head forming shapes of demons,

fiends, and the faces of evil spirits. The photograph was alarming to Burroughs and, indeed, it was so frightful to look at that it had not appeared in print. The photographer, Nicolas Tikhomiroff, still kept the image among his contact sheets.

Gysin spoke of his childhood in a small frontier town in western Canada, living with his widowed mother, (his father was killed in the battle of the Somme just months after Brion was born) and his stepfather, who was an Indian agent, growing up there in a Wild West ambiance of brawls, knifings, and shootings. At the age of fifteen he was sent to a boarding school in England where he felt ashamed at coming from such an uncouth, provincial background. He felt himself to be something of an outsider among his English classmates, many of whom came from "better families," and he had avoided as much as possible any mention to the other boys of his personal history. His mother, he said, could not afford to pay his fare to return home to Canada during the summer holidays. Indeed, when he set off for England he had traveled across Canada by cattle train and then across the Atlantic by cattle boat.

At the earliest opportunity he moved to Paris to pursue a career in art, arriving in 1934, and living there on a pittance. He mixed in surrealist circles and had been on the verge of exhibiting some of his work in a show of surrealist drawings when, only a day before the opening of the exhibit, André Breton ordered that Gysin's drawings be taken down and removed from the gallery. Gysin believed that the reason for his exclusion from the exhibit was Breton's virulent dislike of homosexuals. It was apparent that nearly fifty years later Gysin still felt aggrieved by this rejection, this humiliating and unreasonable deflection of his career. Even among outsiders such as the surrealists, he had been made to feel an outsider. In this

regard, he took vindictive satisfaction in the indignities visited upon Salvador Dali and his wife just across the street at the Pompidou Center. Brion had witnessed the arrival of Dali in an expensive car and an outré costume for the opening of a major Dali retrospective. But the staff of the Pompidou Center had gone on strike, and when Dali made his pompous arrival, they booed and menaced him. Brion relished Dali's discomfiture, thinking that the preposterous old clown deserved it for his inexcusable public statements praising Franco and the Falangist regime and for enthusiastically supporting the execution of the Basque terrorists.

At present Brion was pursuing three projects, he said. He was working with the soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy, collaborating on an album of songs for which Brion was providing the texts. He was also engaged in writing a novel based on the life of the Beat Hotel. He showed us a large, carefully executed, minutely detailed pencil drawing depicting the spiral staircase, the floors, and individual rooms of the hotel. And, finally, he was once again hoping to market his Dream Machine. He presented us with a handsome brochure created by Carl Laszlo, Editions Panderma in Basel, Switzerland. It was essentially a prospectus for the Dream Machine written in German, French, and English, explaining the action, purpose, and effect of the device. I mentioned the 1962 issue of *Olympia* magazine that had included a do-it-yourself kit for building a Dream Machine.⁴ "We tried to give it away, man, we couldn't even give it away," he lamented. "The Dream Machine should have been the drugless turn-on of the '60s," he said, but he had never succeeded in finding a financial backer to put the machine into production. He still harbored some hope of seeing it marketed properly, but after so much time and so many attempts he was more sanguine in his expectations.

He was also pessimistic about the current world situation, especially the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that had only just taken place (i.e. in late December of 1979). "We've lost the Great Game," he complained. The longstanding, grim, vital competition between East and West for control of Central Asia had now in one stroke been decisively won by the Russians. Moreover, the U.S.S.R. would soon control a corner of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic by taking over part or perhaps ultimately all of Morocco by means of their "Polisario fiction." The non-existent Polisario were no more than a cat's paw for Russian expansion. He regretted that the United States was so ill-served by President Carter. "Carter's redneck mentality," he said, "fulfils the worst fears and prophecies of H.L. Mencken."

For that matter, though, in his view things had been going downhill since the fall of the Roman Empire. It was not surprising to him that things had declined to their current state. As for his personal politics, he said, from the 1930s to the present: "I'm an observer. I'm not a joiner." The real human project, he said, should be to leave behind the material, temporal world and enter the eternal freedom of Space. Conflicting ideologies and interest groups (including feminists) were hindering this project. "You're never going to get to Space that way," he said.

In the course of the evening we consumed several litres of beer and several joints. Gysin rolled joints in a fashion I had witnessed in Morocco. First he stuck together two Job cigarette papers. He then split open one of his Player's cigarettes and spilled the tobacco into the two Job papers. From a small round box he sprinkled crumbled flakes of cannabis on the tobacco, then rolled the papers tight. He also prepared for us an impromptu meal, created out of odds and ends he had on hand. He hadn't bothered to shop, he said. Standing

in his narrow kitchen (he could reach both the sink and the stove simultaneously) he made a dish of sausages and mashed potatoes, together with a salad of lettuce and endives. It was delicious.

As we were leaving, Brion asked where we were staying. He was amused to hear that we were lodged at the old hotel at 9 *rue Git-le-Coeur*, no longer a nameless 13th-class establishment but now a two star hotel called Hotel du Vieux Paris. "A literary pilgrimage," I explained. He confessed that he had himself once done the same when he was younger, seeking out and staying at a particular hotel in Paris that figured in a strange novel by Somerset Maugham titled *A Christmas Holiday*.⁵



My second (and last) visit with Brion Gysin took place on the evening of December 29th, 1981. In the two-year interim, we had exchanged a few letters. I had telephoned him after our arrival in Paris asking if we might call on him again. He immediately extended an invitation. He could use some company, he said. In the past few days he had been experiencing "premonitory shortness of breath" and was feeling depressed. We arrived at the appointed hour, bearing half a dozen litres of beer. Gysin had a hacking cough and in the course of the evening suffered several seizures of coughing. The coughing and shortness of breath had shaken him, he said. In consequence, he had just given up smoking Player's cigarettes, a brand he'd smoked since he was seventeen years old. But he had not given up smoking tobacco altogether, merely switched to another brand of filter cigarette, hoping that doing so might serve to quell or help to assuage his cough.

He had recently traveled to New York City, he said, to promote his new LP titled *Songs*, the collaboration with Steve Lacy he'd been working on during our last visit. The record included some of his permuted poems and some song lyrics ("Nowhere Street") he had written as long ago as the late 1940s, when he had hoped to turn his book, *To Master a Long Goodnight*, into a musical. He and Lacy had been seeking a female singer to perform the songs, perhaps to take the repertoire on the road.

New York City had not been to his liking; he had found little there that was agreeable. In restaurants, the food portions were too large and the quality of the food rather poor. He remembered with fondness the pies he had enjoyed there in the 1940s and the tasty homemade relish then available at lunch counters. The political situation, too, had deteriorated markedly, he thought. He ridiculed a recent revealing blunder made by some official in the U.S. State Department who had meant to send a note of reproof to Mauritania and had instead sent it to Mauritius, apparently unaware of the difference between the two countries. This level of ignorance and incompetence, he believed, was a consequence of a purge in the State Department that had taken place in the early 1950s, when numbers of well-educated and efficient homosexuals had suddenly been dismissed from their jobs. This purge had occurred, he said, because "a group of dykes had blown the whistle on them." (The event to which he was referring is known as "the Lavender Scare." It is quite true that in 1950 some scores of gay civil servants were, indeed, dismissed from their positions with the State Department after being labeled "security risks" because, as homosexuals, they were thought to be vulnerable to blackmail by Soviet agents. What Gysin may have meant by his remark concerning "dykes" informing

on the male homosexuals remains uncertain.) He viewed this event as ruinous and fateful. Small wonder, he said, that American foreign policy had for so long been in such disarray and that the State Department was now staffed with people who didn't know Mauritius from Mauritania.

He reminisced about Paris in the 1930s and the people he had met then. Once, in 1934, after drinking all through the night, he had gone to meet the painter Pavel Tchelichew arriving from London on the early morning boat train. Gysin had brought with him a taxi cab full of flowers to welcome Tchelichew, who strolled forth from the train with the handsome young Charles Henri Ford on his arm. This was how Brion had met Charles Henri. Later, Ford had shown himself to be a good friend: on one occasion Gysin admitted to him that he had no money at all to make it through the summer, and Ford immediately reached down to his penny-loafer and removed from it a folded hundred dollar bill, presenting it to Gysin as a gift. The hundred dollars had been hidden there to serve as Ford's "mad money," but he had unhesitatingly and generously given it to Gysin.

On another occasion a chance meeting in the streets of Paris had led to a strange adventure. It had happened that one day Gysin had encountered a fat man walking a boxer dog on a leash. The dog had immediately taken to Brion, demonstrating inordinate affection for him and in this manner Brion had become acquainted with the dog's owner, a man named Nat North. Nat believed that he knew the area in which the Holy Grail might be hidden. His belief, based on research into various Rosicrucian, Templar, and Cathar traditions, was that Joseph of Arimathea had not brought the grail as far as England, but had instead deposited it near Montségur in southern France, near Andorra. Gysin's new friend enlisted his aid in attempting to locate

the artifact. Together, at Nat's expense, they traveled to Montségur where they spent some weeks exploring ancient caves associated with the Cathars. In one such cave, behind a wall, they found scores of skulls and piles of bones probably dating from the Albigensian Crusade. Nat, however, was being followed and persecuted by a Nazi agent who was in quest of the same object. Heindrich Himmler's agents had already secured the Spear of Longinus, said Gysin, and desired intensely to possess the Holy Grail. This Nazi agent had Nat North expelled from France, so that he and Brion never had time to complete their investigations.

In the meantime, Brion discovered that he was claustrophobic and could not endure any further cave exploration. But he believed that he may have discovered a likely location for the grail to have been hidden. He had come upon a cave in which elaborate and difficult labor had been undertaken to cover a large hole. There were also mason's marks visible on this construction. Brion felt there was a strong possibility that this particular place was the location of the Holy Grail, spirited away by a small group of Cathar knights while they were under siege. And now he alone knew where it was. The grail itself, he said, was not a chalice or cup but a simple paten carved out of a large emerald. Brion also informed me that when Nat North returned to New York he was educated as a medical doctor, later became a practicing psychoanalyst, was also a bullfight critic, and later danced the part of Silenus in a ballet. (Although Brion's tale sounds a bit far-fetched, it is true that Otto Rahn, an archaeologist and a member of the S.S., made two expeditions to Montségur in the 1930s, searching for the Holy Grail, and that Himmler himself later undertook a mission to the Monserrat Abbey in Spain in quest of the grail.)

I asked him about his experiences during the war years and he said

that in the early 1940s he had worked in New York City as a stage designer and as a welder in a shipyard, but in both instances rigid union regulations prevented him from continuing in these occupations. During that same time, he applied for American citizenship and had been drafted into the army. He underwent infantry training and then volunteered for the paratroopers. However, he broke his wrist on the very first tower jump and this injury put an end to his brief career with that elite unit. Partly in consequence of this disappointment and partly because he had still not obtained American citizenship, he determined to transfer to the Canadian army. Gysin described for us the strange, solemn, ceremonial scene of his formal transfer from the one national army to another. In a large room, together with a score or so of other soldiers from both armies who stood on either side of the room, he stood at attention on one side of a white line painted on the floor. There were soldiers transferring from the Canadian to the American army, and soldiers going the other way. Upon command, the soldiers stripped themselves of all their clothes, including their underclothes, stacking their uniforms behind them in a neat pile. Upon a second command, the now naked soldiers advanced across the white line (either to the north or to the south), and upon a third command, they dressed themselves in the uniform of the army to which they had transferred. In the Canadian army, he studied to be a Japanese interpreter, he said, learning to draw Japanese characters with brush and ink. It was also in the Canadian army that he met Tex Henson, the great-grandson of Josiah Henson. Conversations with Tex inspired Gysin to research and write *To Master, a Long Goodnight*.

While in the American army, Gysin had designed an emblem that he then had tattooed on his left shoulder blade. It was to serve both

as an individual identification mark and as a personal sign for luck or protection. With this unique emblem indelibly inscribed on his body, he formed “a club of one,” he said. Years later, on a beach, Somerset Maugham had admired it and had subsequently had his current “catamite” so tattooed, Brion said. Gysin felt great disgust at this form of uninspired imitation. It was as if something that bestowed upon him a certain power or protection had been taken away by Maugham’s act. By the way, he asked, had we read Anthony Burgess’s novel, *Earthly Powers*? We had, we said. It was absolutely uncanny, Brion thought, how well Burgess had succeeded in capturing “the old man” (i.e. Maugham). Burgess did a splendid job, he thought, getting down Maugham’s mannerisms, his attitude, his bearing, his speech, his aura, the very spit and image of him. Gysin found Burgess’s fictional portrait truer to life than the biography of Maugham written by his own friend, Ted Morgan.

I asked Brion how his novel was progressing, the narrative based on the Beat Hotel. He had written seven chapters so far, he said. The hotel in his novel was called the Bardo Hotel (which was also his working title for the book) and comprised seven floors and a total of forty-nine rooms. The rooms would represent the forty-nine day state of intermediate existence following physical death, as described in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The seven levels of the hotel would correspond to ascending levels of sexual experience, identity, and awareness. The experiences of the protagonist in the various rooms and at the various levels of the hotel would encompass memory, temptation, terror and catharsis, as in the Bardo state.

Beneath the Bardo Hotel flows a river based on the river Bièvre which, he said, does run beneath the *rue Git-le-Coeur* and empties into the Seine. He said that as you cross the Pont Saint Michel walking

south to the left bank you can sometimes see the river bubble up as it enters Seine water. Indeed, it is the long covered-over, underground river that gives the *rue de Bièvre* its name, he said. Publishers there and along the *rue Git-le-Coeur* used to dump their broken type into the water and also used the river to pulp their pages (sometimes whole editions of unsold books) and wash away the printed ink, whereafter the pulped pages could be drained and dried and rolled to be reused for printing new pages and new books. In his novel, Gysin said, this underground river would serve as a metaphor for the river of language, the river of words, running hidden and secretly beneath all our structures, our lives, our consciousness. (Brion makes use of this image in his novel, *The Last Museum*, where he describes the river *Chie* flowing beneath the hotel as an alphabet soup awash with inky words bleached from the pages of old books, its waters bearing all the words in the world and all of human memory.⁷ Gysin's name for the fictional river *Chie* derives from the French verb for evacuating the bowels.)

In the jargon of the French publishing trade, he said, the term for pulping an entire edition of a book that had failed to sell in sufficient numbers was derived from the name of the publisher-martyr Étienne Dolet. Dolet had been executed by the authorities of church and state for publishing a scandalous book and there was a monument to him on the Place Maubert, which was located at one end of the *rue de Bièvre*, thus in his novel the underground river flowed beneath this monument. The ghost of Dolet would be a presence in *Bardo Hotel*, Gysin said, a presiding spirit of the river of words, a ghost to be laid. (Étienne Dolet is mentioned in *The Last Museum* on page 76 and again on page 166 where an attempt is made to blow up his statue.)

To "rub out the word" was, of course, the ultimate goal of his

writing and of all his work. Brion, who spoke several languages, saw language as imposing a reductive pattern on thought, circumscribing what can be conceived or experienced. Each language, he said, is constructed upon a system of implicit ideas and assumptions and so captures its speakers in a constructed version of reality. There was an historic link, he said, between grammar and monotheism, both were instruments of control, both were limitations, constraints. His writing was a challenge to these codifications of reality, an attempt to undermine them, to dismantle them, and thus to extend the range of vision into the unseen and the unknown.

He spoke with admiration of Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*.⁸ The concept of transcending technical execution and conscious control through self-abandonment had been an inspiration for both his writing and his painting, he said. Employing this method, ordinary habits of perception could be overcome, new connections could be made. (By this time, much beer and a few joints had been consumed. In addition, Brion had downed four large glasses of whiskey.) The world was becoming increasingly regulated and standardized. Consider, he said, the standardization of time. Time zones that extended around the world had been established by western nations, imposing upon Asians, Arabs and Africans the western concept of time, notions of how it must be measured and how it should be used. Wasn't it Martin Luther who had equated time and money? he asked. There was now an orthodoxy of time, a single, authoritative definition ordained and decreed for all of humanity. There was even an international date line. Like the advent of grammar and monotheism, he viewed universal prescriptive conventions of the measurement of time as false and artificial. Since time was itself a prison, the standardized measurement of time was

a prison within a prison; it was a further impediment to liberation. I asked whether he was familiar with J.W. Dunne's curious book *An Experiment in Time*. He said that both he and William Burroughs had read and admired the book during their days at the Beat Hotel. Dunne's theory of serial time was at once too mathematical and too abstract, he said, but the author's accounts of his prophetic dreams were remarkable and were clearly constituted evidence of some kind of liberation from time.⁹

Woozy now, we wobbled from topic to topic. He spoke of his early childhood memories of living at home with his very proper mother. As a little boy he had been the only male among a household of females and he had hated it. One day there had been a visit by a handsome and charming young man to whom Brion was immediately attracted. It had been like a revelation to him or an awakening. His stepfather, with whom they later lived, had been a retired colonel in the Canadian army, administrating an Indian Reservation. He believed that his stepfather was a homosexual who had married his mother for her money. Since World War II, Brion had seldom returned to Canada. Now the country was run by "pseudo-swingers" like the Trudeaus, he lamented. He was appalled by Margaret Trudeau, who had, he said, insulted the Moroccan painter Ahmed Yacoubi and "betrayed the Rolling Stones." She had "fixed" Pierre Trudeau in the same way that Laura Riding had "fixed" Robert Graves. The quality of American political leaders was no better, of course. He could not understand the reluctance of the current U.S. administration to provide arms and assistance to the Moroccan government in their struggle against the Polisario. If the U.S.S.R. (who had invented the Polisario) were to gain control of the Western Sahara and blast or dig a harbor there, they could have "North America under one gun and

South America under another." It was all so sad and stupid, he said. He also complained bitterly of his own lack of literary and artistic success, of recognition, of money. His Dream Machine had failed in the marketplace; he felt marginalized, neglected, rejected.

All evening, despite intermittent paroxysms of coughing, Gysin smoked cigarette after cigarette, interspersed with joints. He mourned his own dependence on tobacco "in the face of all good sense," he said. At length he ran out of cigarettes altogether and searched his trash basket for butts and smoked those. When those had been consumed, we set forth into the chill December night to buy more. Brion limped a bit (the result of a motorcycle accident) and walked hunched as he howled great yawns into the cold air. I asked him if he ever heard from Terry Wilson and he replied, "Yeah, every minute." I thought by this he might mean that he was unhappily in love with him or missing him acutely, so I didn't pursue the topic. We parted ways shortly after. He told us to call him again.



Over the next few years we continued to exchange letters. Brion's cough proved to be emphysema, from which he died in 1986. Before his death he completed a final, monumental painting, which many critics consider to be his culminating work: "Calligraphitti of Fire."

In what sense can it be said that "Brion Gysin let the mice in?" How should we understand Gregory Corso's cryptic little poem? Letting the mice in—an unconventional, unhygienic action—is the act of an insurrectionist, a subversive, one who aims to undermine and defeat established practices. The common denominator of Gysin's painting,

his writing, his sound poems, and his Dream Machine is to overturn ordinary habits of perception, to overthrow traditional ways of meaning, and to allow unperceived, unknown realities to enter our consciousness. Gysin was in league with those primal energies that oppose systems, categories, orthodoxies, dogma, conventions, habits of being, and habits of seeing. Brion Gysin “let the mice in” because he believed that art exists to transform the human eye and mind.

Just as Gysin’s “The Poem of Poems” mixes disparate texts to create a new poetic work, so too, the beliefs, concepts, and attitudes that comprise his personal artistic credo combine elements from various sources to create new modes of vision and expression. There is in the complex of ideas and impulses from which his work springs a quantum of Rimbaudian romanticism and other romantic primitivism, a dash of Dada, a generous portion of surrealist sensibility, a dollop of non-linear writing after the manner of Gertrude Stein, and a measure of Moroccan magic, all mixed with elements of western scientific thought.

In truth, I can’t say that I shared many beliefs or opinions with Brion. Iconoclasm and heresy can all too often and too easily become categorical imperatives and become in their own right forms of orthodoxy. At a personal level, his occasional vainglory and vituperation and misogyny could be painful to bear. But I honor the essential yearning for mystery and transcendence that informs his oeuvre, and the urgency and evocative power of his best work. Despite the retrospective exhibitions that have been organized since his death, and despite the publication of an anthology of his writing, his reputation and position remain uncertain.¹⁰ Even posthumously, he continues to hover at the margins of many movements, groups, and schools, ultimately unassimilable to any, a perpetual dissident. ♦



NOTES

1. "The Poem of Poems" by Brion Gysin in *International Literary Annual*, edited by Arthur Boyars and Pamela Lyon. London: John Calder, 1961, pp. 75-86.
2. *Contemporary Artists*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977, pp. 374-375.
3. *To Master, A Long Goodnight: The Story of Uncle Tom, A Historical Narrative*, with "The History of Slavery in Canada" by Brion Gysin. New York: Creative Age Press, 1946.
4. "Dream Machine" by Brion Gysin in *Olympia*, No. 2, 1962, pp. 31-32.
5. *Christmas Holiday* by W. Somerset Maugham. London: William Heinemann, 1939.
6. Songs by Steve Lacy and Brion Gysin. Recorded on January 28 and 29, 1981 in Paris, France. Vinyl 12 inch LP and 7 inch EP in box set. Released by Hat Hut: Switzerland, 1981.
7. *The Last Museum* by Brion Gysin, London: Faber & Faber, 1986, pp. 75-77.
8. *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel. New York: Pantheon Books, 1953.
9. *An Experiment in Time* by J.W. Dunne. London: Faber & Faber, 1927.
10. "Brion Gysin: I Am That I Am" curated by Bruce Grenville and José Férrez Kuri at The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1998. "Brion Gysin: Dream Machine" curated by Laura Hoptman at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 2010. *Back in No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader* edited by Jason Weiss. Wesleyan University Press: Middletown, CT: 2001.



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Photos of Brion Gysin by Brigit Stephenson.