



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The Reader's Share: Christine Brooke-Rose and the Persistence of Objects

Davis Smith-Brecheisen

ASAP/Journal, Volume 5, Number 1, January 2020, pp. 79-99 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2020.0003>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/755032>

Davis Smith-Brecheisen

# THE READER'S SHARE:

CHRISTINE BROOKE-ROSE AND THE  
PERSISTENCE OF OBJECTS

## PART I: ANOTHER TURN

**C**HRISTINE BROOKE-ROSE's 1964 novel *Out* begins with two winter flies lying motionless on the knee of its protagonist who wonders what framing the flies in a microscope might reveal: "A microscope might perhaps reveal animal ecstasy in its innumerable eyes, but only to the human mind behind the microscope."<sup>1</sup> That revelation, he immediately thinks, would be his alone, although it would come at a cost: it would "interrupt the flies."<sup>2</sup> Almost immediately, this scene of observation is itself interrupted when someone, likely his wife, disturbs him and brandishes a flyswatter—"the winter flies you have to kill," he thinks.<sup>3</sup> While all of this is happening, the flies remain undisturbed by both the "pale policing [blue] eye" and the "bright red plastic" flyswatter hovering above them.<sup>4</sup> The narrator does not kill the flies, however. He does not even interrupt them. Instead, he simply watches: "The Winter Flies lie quite still, dead to their present framing in a circle of dark red plastic, dead to the removal of the red plastic frame around the light of awareness on them."<sup>5</sup> When the scene is repeated a few pages later the protagonist is substituted in the

---

DAVIS SMITH-BRECHEISEN received his PhD at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His work has appeared in *Studies in American Fiction*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Jacobin*, *Mediations*, and *nonsite.org*.

*frame for the fly, but instead of being the object framed in red, he is the object who gazes out from the red frame. "The kitchen door is framed by the bedroom door. At the end of the short dark passage, almost cubic in its brevity, the kitchen through the open door seems luminous, apparently framed in red."<sup>6</sup> Just as the flyswatter frames the flies under the policing eye of the narrator, the narrator, framed by the doors (which frame each other), observes the "blue and pale" expanse of the winter sky, its description echoing the blue eye.<sup>7</sup> In these first few pages, then, a series of recurring images—of the frame and of the "policing" eye—repeat and connect the narrator to the fly.*

The effect of this substitution is a structural shift where the observer becomes the observed. In that shift, the phenomenological and epistemological questions raised by the narrator—what "a microscope might perhaps reveal" and to whose mind—likewise become the questions of those who observe him. They become, in effect, the questions of the reader, who has been watching the scene unfold. More specifically, when the relationship between the observer and the observation is described in uncertain terms about what the microscope "might perhaps reveal" and about how that observation would "interrupt" the thing being observed, the text instantiates a particular interpretive problem about what is revealed to the "human mind" in the act of observation—that is, in the act of reading. Through this and a series of other substitutions and dislocations, *Out* dilates this scene of copulating flies into a novel that poses a series of related questions about the human mind and knowledge, or systems of meaning, and following from this, the relationship between the reader's experience of the text and its status as an object—what Brooke-Rose elsewhere calls the "textuality of the text."

Publishing widely between 1957 and 2002, Brooke-Rose was not only a novelist, but she was also a prolific literary critic and theorist. Where Brooke-Rose the novelist appears to suggest the tension between the ontology of objects and their enclosure within a system of meaning, and consequently on reading as a kind of transgression on the text's ontological independence, Brooke-Rose the literary theorist was committed precisely to preserving that objectivity. In a widely read article published in 1976, "The Squirm of the True: An Essay in Non-Methodology," she set out to "free" Henry James's famously ambiguous

*The Turn of the Screw* from its “many layers of misreadings,” so that it is possible “once again to look at it as a text.”<sup>8</sup> Above all, she wants to restore “a respect for the textuality of the text” and to move away from the natural-versus-supernatural debates that had dominated scholarship on James’s ghost story to that point.<sup>9</sup> She argues, then, that showing the proper respect for the “textuality” depends on restoring “ambiguity” to *The Turn of the Screw*, which she writes “must not be resolved” because the point of the story is precisely to preserve it.<sup>10</sup> And in order to maintain the text’s ontological separation from its many interpretations (to maintain its ambiguity and textuality), Brooke-Rose proposes a series of “objective rules” or “theoretical principles” of interpretation “without which no text can be analyzed in a clear perspective.”<sup>11</sup> More important than the principles themselves—which are more or less substitutable depending on the theoretical position being espoused—is that Brooke-Rose is arguing that literary theory and its principles act as a kind of instrument or frame that allows the reader to retain her “clear perspective,” or objectivity, and thus she defends the text against the competing interpretations that have ensnared it. She commits, in other words, to a kind of objectivist fantasy that the correct theoretical approach might produce the correct reading, in effect protecting the “textuality of the text” from the plurality of readings to which it had been and continues to be subjected.

In 1976, this theoretical position put her at odds with what was emerging as a crucial development both in readings of *The Turn of the Screw* and, more significantly, in literary theory as such. For example, in her 1977 text “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” Shoshana Felman argued, like Brooke-Rose, that James’s text derives its “effect” from its “ambiguity,” and she too turned to theory (in her case, Freudian) “not so much to solve or *answer* the enigmatic question of the text, but to investigate its structure,” which is designed to “drag” or “trap” readers.<sup>12</sup> Brooke-Rose and Felman agree that any theory of interpretation functions as an epistemological lens through which the reader can regain a “clear perspective” on the ambiguity of the text. Yet, where Felman argues that ambiguity “is not simply *in* the text” but “resides in *our relation to the text*,” Brooke-Rose sees that ambiguity as autonomous from the reader.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Brooke-Rose’s desire for “objectivity,” then, Felman suggests that theory is uniquely poised not only to reveal the structural importance of ambiguity to *The Turn of The Screw* but ultimately to show the extent to which ambiguity “ensnares” the reader. The meaning of the text, she suggests, is dependent upon

the reader's relation to it. Putting the point slightly differently, in yet another essay on *The Turn of the Screw*, Walter Benn Michaels insists not just on the importance of the reader's relation to the text but on the sense in which, far from having its own autonomous existence, the text may be understood as fundamentally dependent on the reader—or at least as dependent on the reader as it is on the writer. It “is not an entity in itself but a meeting ground for writer and reader,” he argues. And quoting James, he notes, “For the reader, its ‘values’ are all ‘blanks,’ made legible only by ‘[the reader’s] own imagination.’”<sup>14</sup> If, for Felman and Michaels, the reader played a constitutive role (with or without the help of literary theory) in producing the ambiguity of the text, then, for Brooke-Rose, the point of theory is to insist on ambiguity as a fundamental property of the text itself.

My point here is to articulate and situate Brooke-Rose within a moment in the 1960s and 1970s in literary history where theorists and novelists were deeply concerned (and, in an important respect, divided) over “the reader’s share” of literary meaning, as Frank Kermode referred to it.<sup>15</sup> While critics like Stanley Fish, who argued that readers “actually write the text” they read when they are reading, and Roland Barthes, who insisted that “the goal of literary work . . . is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text,” suggested that the reader’s share of literary meaning is, in effect, all of it, the role of the reader was more uncertain among many novelists of the period.<sup>16</sup> For instance, when Joan Didion is asked how she views her work’s relation to the reader in a 1978 interview with *The Paris Review*, she acknowledges that although “[o]bviously” she must “listen to a reader,” she is equally convinced that it is necessary to disavow them, saying “the only reader I hear is me.”<sup>17</sup> And in a 1978 conversation with John Hawkes, novelist John Barth, too, wonders what is owed the reader: “A written object that is not read is in a strange ontological state indeed,” he says. Yet, he continues, “the artist’s loyalty is not to the audience . . . but, finally, to the object.”<sup>18</sup> Barth, like Didion (and, as we will see, like Brooke-Rose), is a writer pulled in two directions, caught between inviting and refusing the reader. The suggestion here is that although accounting for the reader is central to what it means to conceive of a novel, it must be equally the case that the “reader’s share” is nothing. The “reader’s share” is precisely what Brooke-Rose the critic understands herself to be rejecting (but ultimately embraces) by defending the “textuality of the text” and it is precisely what Brooke-Rose the novelist refuses when she turns literary theory into an aesthetic practice.

“

*The “reader’s share” is precisely what Brooke-Rose the critic understands herself to be rejecting . . . by defending the “textuality of the text” and it is precisely what Brooke-Rose the novelist refuses when she turns literary theory into an aesthetic practice.*

”

Brooke-Rose’s double and distinctive role as both theorist and artist thus provides an exemplary site to explore the ways the hermeneutic demands of theory—to arrive at and recognize the correct interpretation (or the impossibility of such)—and the aesthetic demands of art—to make good art—were often at odds over the reader’s role in determining the meaning of the text, even when those competing modes were practiced by the same person.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the observation of the flies in *Out* dramatizes precisely the tension between the “textuality of the text,” or what is observed, and the transgression of the observer, or the centrality of the reader. And in what Brooke-Rose would no doubt have imagined as another turn of the screw, it is paradoxically her theoretical commitment to preserving the objectivity of the text that will ultimately align her criticism with the dominant theoretical view that the reader is constitutive of the meaning of the text. At the same time, the tension staged in *Out* between the object and the beholder, or between the text and the reader, will be crucial to framing her commitment to asserting the ontological independence of the text from them. While this view sets her in opposition to most major novelists of the period for whom the reader is central—for example, Thomas Pynchon, Umberto Eco, and Italo Calvino—it does align her with the aesthetic ambitions of a significant group of contrarian novelists—Didion and Barth as well as William Gass and James Baldwin—who were at least ambivalent about, and at most hostile to, the reader, especially as figured by literary theorists as the producer of literary meaning.

It is not just the rise of the reader that mattered to literary theorists and novelists, but the different meanings of “readership” that arise for literary theory on the one hand and for aesthetics on the other. While for literary theorists questions about what a text was or what an author meant increasingly became questions about the act of reading—about, for example, appropriate methods

of reading and the role of the reader in the production of meaning—for novelists the question of meaning evolved into a more pressing question of whether to solicit or refuse the reader's participation in the construction of their art. Notably, the Brooke-Rose of "The Squirm of the True" derives her argument from the standpoint of literary theory, and the Brooke-Rose of *Out* derives her commitments from the standpoint of aesthetics. There are, in other words, differences not only in the claims Brooke-Rose makes in each case about the role of the reader but also in the kinds of claims she understands herself to be making. Through the work of Brooke-Rose, then, I mean not only to characterize competing positions about the reader held by theorists and the novelists but to suggest that the relevance of the reader has different consequences for literary theory and the novel conceived as art.

In order to describe this difference, it is important to think of *Out* less as a way of articulating a theoretical claim about the novel and more as a way of staking a claim for the novel as art. To stake that claim is to contend with two overlapping problems. One is the reader's relation to the novel, conceived as a work of art. The second is the novel's status as an object. These two problems, I will argue, are closely connected and emerge as central both to literary theory and to the novel (and art, more broadly) in the mid-1960s. By reexamining the reader's status in both literary theory and the novel, this essay will begin to argue how Brooke-Rose is an exemplary artist for a moment when a very old question—"What is the reader's relation to the novel?"—was increasingly framed as a distinctively new one: "What sort of object is the novel?" These questions, I contend, have reemerged as central to contemporary aesthetic practice as literary critics and philosophers in the New Materialisms and Object-Oriented Ontology look for new ways to privilege objects.

## **PART II: THERE BEFORE BEING SOMETHING**

Although Brooke-Rose began her career as a novelist writing relatively conventional (i.e., realist) postwar fiction, with the publication of *Out* in 1964, she began writing fiction that would fall broadly into the category of "experimental," influenced by above all the *nouveau roman*.<sup>20</sup> As Frank Kermode suggests, Brooke-Rose is the only English language author engaged in the "serious practice of narrative" experimentation as "the French have developed it."<sup>21</sup> Of course, "French" here does not mean French, broadly speaking, but is in fact

a shorthand for the emergence in France of experimental fiction that rejected the trappings of the realist form—mimesis, plausibility of action, and characters absorbed in everyday activities—in favor of a theory of the novel that privileged language games and foregrounded its characters' phenomenological experiences in a world of objects. Brooke-Rose's critical trajectory too follows this experimental turn. Here again "the French" were central. While her first work of criticism, *A Grammar of Metaphor* (1958), bears the hallmark of conventional literary criticism not unlike the New Criticism practiced by the likes of William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, by the mid-1960s her criticism began to bear the influence of the semiotic turn in literary studies. For instance, in just five years, she went from publishing "Notes on the Metre of Auden's 'The Age of Anxiety'" (1963) to "Claude Lévi-Strauss: A New Multi-Dimensional Way of Thinking" (1968). This is to say, Brooke-Rose's serious interest in the *nouveau roman* and Structuralism transformed her career: In the span of less than five years, she went from being a fairly successful member of the postwar British mainstream to a leading figure in its marginalized experimental literary scene.

Indeed, one of the reasons Brooke-Rose is so compelling a figure is the extent to which this shift (inaugurated by *Out*) put literary theoretical discourses in close proximity to aesthetic practice, an abutment that allowed her to explore the relation between the nature of signification (and interpretation) as both a theoretical and aesthetic problem. As Brooke-Rose noted, a novelist "do[es] not, when writing, put away . . . literary theory"—because "the novelist . . . writes also as theorist."<sup>22</sup> She continues by saying that "[t]heory has released an immense hidden strength" in her writing at the same time it has—as her "Mentor" or "Law-Giver and Forbidder"—"made writing more and more difficult, because more and more demanding."<sup>23</sup> The suggestion here is that all of her novels from *Out* onwards are more ambitious and more difficult because of the heightened attention to the "constraints" of the theoretical and conceptual principles she applies to the formal commitments of her novels. Alongside the lipogramatic play of her French peers in the Oulipo movement, for example, she restricts herself to the pronounless present tense in *Out*, and in her novel *Between*, published in 1968, she omits the "to be" form completely. It is strange, though, that literary theory should form a bedrock for her literary practice since her literary and theoretical practice exist in tension with one another. How, then, could her competing applications of theory be understood to work out a similar problem? Sorting this question will be the focus of the rest of the essay. As I have begun

“

*In the case of [Brooke-Rose's] critical practice, the appeal to literary theory is ultimately an appeal to the reader and thus a transgression on the literary object. In the case of her aesthetic practice, literary theory becomes a set of rules . . . that ultimately enforces the ontological distinction between the reader and the text.*

”

to suggest, in the case of her critical practice, the appeal to literary theory is ultimately an appeal to the reader and thus a transgression on the literary object. In the case of her aesthetic practice, literary theory becomes a set of rules—or an epistemological frame—that ultimately enforces the ontological distinction between the reader and the text.

In *Out*, Brooke-Rose's appeal to the reader works in these two directions simultaneously. The novel would appear to valorize the reader by focalizing its narrative through a single protagonist who frames, and is framed by, the objects around him, celebrating a subjectivized phenomenological experience. Moreover, as I suggested at the outset, the novel performs a series of displacements that casts the literal reader in precisely the same role as the figural one—a feature of the novel intensified by the absence of personal pronouns in a novel written in the present tense.

It is almost coercive. Gazing out from his home, the protagonist is enclosed by the “vertical bars of the tall wrought-iron gates, flanked, behind the two white pillars and white walls” and the “thick network of the first plane-tree on either side of the drive.” Beyond that still, “the thick network of bare branches” gives weight to “a finer network,” and then to “a finer network still,” and so on.<sup>24</sup> Here, the novel not only reveals what the protagonist sees but, without a subject pronoun to designate who does the seeing, incorporates the reader, who, simply by taking in this series of displacements (like those at the novel's outset), has been asked to see and interpret the world as the protagonist does. The effect here is to heighten attention to perception and interpretation, already inaugurated by the flies, as the reader too is forced to navigate the uncertain epistemological landscape and networks of the novel.

But if the absence of personal pronouns in the present tense is striking because it both incorporates the reader and foregrounds the act of interpretation, it is equally so because it is indifferent to the reader's relation to its experiments in displacement and repetition. To highlight just one such repetition, *Out* repeatedly returns to the observational lens—often a “microscopic” one as in the opening scene—and almost as often as a “telescopic” one—as a camera has. Presenting the world of the novel in the pronounless present tense, *Out* focalizes and telescopes its point of view much as “a camera with a telescopic lens” might.<sup>25</sup>

Brooke-Rose elsewhere articulates the significance of the lens to the novel, and specifically the camera lens, in “Dynamic Gradients,” a 1965 essay that marks one of her early attempts to explicate the theoretical aesthetic significance of the relationship between the beholder and the object in the *nouveau roman* (and in Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* in particular). Although every “object or landscape” in *La Jalousie* is “described as if seen by a camera,” in fact they are “slowly built up to express the emotional state of the observer.”<sup>26</sup> Where she suggests that Robbe-Grillet's objects are always situated relationally and phenomenologically, Robbe-Grillet describes them somewhat differently in “A Future for the Novel” (1956). There, Robbe-Grillet imagines a “future universe of the novel” where “gestures and objects will be *there* before being *something*” and thus remain “hard, unalterable, eternally present, [and] mocking their own ‘meaning.’”<sup>27</sup> In the new novel, it will be “by their presence” and not by “signification” that “objects and gestures establish themselves.”<sup>28</sup> And as “unalterable” objects, present to themselves, they will exist beyond beholders’ “tyranny of significations.”<sup>29</sup> If Robbe-Grillet here imagines a world of objects free of relationality, Brooke-Rose suggests that what makes Robbe-Grillet an important experimental figure is that in his fiction “the distinction between subjective and objective vanishes.”<sup>30</sup> To put the difference succinctly, where Robbe-Grillet imagines a fiction in which the mere “presence” of objects will “continue to prevail over whatever explanatory theory that may try to enclose them in a system of references,” Brooke-Rose argues, “there is no such thing as an object in absolute isolation.”<sup>31</sup> So although Brooke-Rose the theorist no doubt finds Robbe-Grillet's commitment to the “unalterable” and “eternally present” object attractive—this is precisely her point in defending the textuality of the text from the “tyranny of [competing] significations”—it is equally true that she identifies that his commitment to the unalterable object is what allows those objects to circulate relationally.

“

*. . . the movement toward the object is paradoxically a movement toward relationality and subjectivized experiences of art.*

”

Although it has not become clear exactly how yet, what has started to emerge is the idea that the movement toward the object is paradoxically a movement toward relationality and subjectivized experiences of art. Indeed, in a very important sense, the twelve years between her experimental aesthetic turn in 1964 and the publication of “The Squirm of the True” in 1976, Brooke-Rose’s career is largely defined

by this perceived quarrel over the exact nature of the relationship between the “eternally present” object, or text, and the imposition of “signification” onto it by a beholder, or reader.

In the twenty years after Robbe-Grillet first published “A Future for the Novel,” his theorization of objects and their relation to signification would only grow more central to literary theory, literature, and art. In fact, only a year after Brooke-Rose published “The Squirm of the True,” Paul de Man, working through a very different set of texts, formulates the problem in essentially the same terms as Robbe-Grillet, insisting in “Excuses (Confessions)” that “properly understood,” literary texts mean “nothing at all.”<sup>32</sup> In his reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, de Man zeroes in on a passage where the young Rousseau seems to name and thus to blame the servant girl Marion for (rather than to confess to) the theft of a ribbon. Although his (and her) accusers interpret his utterance as an accusation, in fact, de Man argues, one should “resist all temptation to give any significance whatever” to Rousseau’s utterance of the “noise” “Marion.” Not only did he not mean to blame her, he meant “nothing at all”—as Rousseau says, “Marion” is simply the “first [object] that offered itself.”<sup>33</sup> In this account, words, or more accurately sounds, that stand “free of any signification” are described in much the same terms that Robbe-Grillet describes objects, as “non-referential” objects that “establish themselves” outside of the tyranny of signification and thus insist on their own meaninglessness.<sup>34</sup>

De Man’s point—that properly understood language stands “utterly outside of the system of meaning”—is not, however, quite the same as Robbe-Grillet’s desire for an object free of the tyranny of signification.<sup>35</sup> Rather, de Man argues that it is because language stands outside of signification that the sound or noise

(i.e., object) can be “caught and enmeshed in a web of causes, significations, and substitutions” at all.<sup>36</sup> So, although properly understood the text means nothing at all and it is thus a mistake to interpret it, such a mistake is a necessary one because without it “no such thing as a text is conceivable.”<sup>37</sup> His point, then, is that language “free from referential meaning,” like objects that stand beyond the “tyranny of signification,” must necessarily have meaning imposed upon them—the object outside of the tyranny of signification is what produces the conditions under which that object is made to signify. Thus, Robbe-Grillet’s vision of the novel imagines itself to be committed to a version of objecthood that would save the text from the tyranny of the reader, just as Brooke-Rose the critic’s does, but in fact affirms the novel’s status as an object and thus situates that object in relation to the reader. At least one consequence of this is that Robbe-Grillet’s objects are not “mocking their own ‘meaning’” but are instead surrendering it to the reader—the very thing Brooke-Rose the theorist wants to, but cannot, avoid.<sup>38</sup>

To put a finer point on it, this surrender means the relation between maintaining the belief that text is an object in itself and valorizing the relation between it and the reader is more complementary than opposed. So, although Brooke-Rose’s critical attempt to treat texts as if they were objects—as both Robbe-Grillet and de Man do—is aimed at saving those texts from misinterpretations borne out of the “entanglements of previous criticism,” in fact her objectification is an invitation to readers to deepen those entanglements. Ironically perhaps, Brooke-Rose sees this in her reading of *La Jalousie* in “Dynamic Gradients.” Robbe-Grillet’s commitment to producing objects that are not enmeshed in a web of signification, she thinks, is precisely the terms under which are submitted to “the emotional state of the observer.”<sup>39</sup>

Although Brooke-Rose too is deeply concerned with the act of reading and the role of the reader, I have suggested that her “camera” works a little differently by refusing the reader rather than surrendering the text to them. Namely, in *Out* the “camera” is a more coercive instrument than in *La Jalousie*. Although the protagonist of *Out* suggests “knowledge is built up by instruments and the minds behind the instruments,” in the formal commitments of *Out* there is no mind behind the instrument—a feature of the novel emphasized by the lack of a personal pronoun. The “mind” behind the instrument is a theoretical constraint imposed on the text by Brooke-Rose. In effect, the erasure of

“

*. . . Out uses the very mechanism that foregrounds interpretation and incorporates the reader, as a means of asserting the novel's form against them.*

”

the personal pronoun is a technology for obliterating the subjective lens through which the novel is narrated. Framed this way, the series of displacements that run throughout the novel might better be described as instructions to the reader—a way of orienting them to the novel's own demands which precede and are indifferent to its readers. The point, then, is that *Out* uses the very mechanism that foregrounds interpretation and incorporates the reader, as a means of asserting the novel's form against them. And it does so by making form (or meaning) beholden to something other than the reader: namely, a set of rules derived from a theoretical position that emerges out of Brooke-Rose's commitment to theory as a formal constraint, or “Law-Giver.”

*Out* thus thematizes the act of reading (what I have called the demands of theory) while at the same time insisting upon its own aesthetic constraints (what I am describing here as the demands of art). Just as the saturation of the novel by the question of interpretation makes perspicuous questions of reading as such, *Out* displaces this epistemological question—about how to interpret a novel—into an aesthetic one—about how to conceive of the novel as a work of art. At the outset of this essay, I argued that the displacement—from the protagonist observing a fly to a reader observing the protagonist—suggested the inevitability of a transgression of the reader onto the text as an object. Indeed, we have seen Brooke-Rose argue as much in her theoretical engagement with Robbe-Grillet and her own criticism, despite the fact that it is intended to defend the text from the reader. In another sense, however, we have seen Brooke-Rose the novelist appeal to the constraints of theory as a means of organizing the novel in a way that is indifferent to the demands of the reader. It does so not by refusing the reader, exactly, but by acknowledging the presence of that reader while at the same insisting on its own internal rules and organization.

This is what it means to say that the pronounless present tense works in two directions. On the one hand, the novel makes the reader and reading central: The literal reader is compelled to identify with the figural reader, both of whom are asked to navigate the very epistemological questions that were emerging as

central to literary theory. On the other, *Out* presses this thematics of reading into the service of form by reconfiguring theory to fit the aesthetic and ontological demands of the novel. It is striking, too, that the ontological uncertainty and divided structure of the novel between the address to the reader and its formal constraint is the effect of a single aesthetic feature—the subjectless pronounless present tense. One way of putting it would be to say, the figural reader (or more accurately, the act of reading) is constitutive of the novel’s form but that the form of the novel constitutes a refusal of the literal reader.

The stakes of this refusal are explicitly laid out—albeit from the standpoint of art rather than the novel—in Michael Fried’s era-defining essay, “Art and Objecthood” (1967), where he argues that to conceive the work of art as an object (what he called “literalism”) is to give its meaning over to the beholder (what he called “theatricality”). As Donald Judd describes it in “Specific Objects,” works in “actual space” are “intrinsically more powerful,” because they exist in a “specific” relation to the beholder.<sup>40</sup> This is, for Fried, precisely what differentiates the new painting and sculpture as practiced by Judd and others such as Tony Smith and Robert Morris from modernist works. In their conception of the work, the object itself (like de Man’s nonreferential language) does not determine its own meaning. Nor does it seek to. Rather, what matters for “literalist” or “Minimalist” objects is, as Robert Morris describes it, the “entire situation” in which the work is encountered by the beholder.<sup>41</sup> The “entire situation” is important here because as objects in space, literalist works aim to involve the beholder in its meaning. As Fried puts it, because literalism, or “objecthood,” is conceived primarily with “the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work” in mind, the meaning of the work, “virtually by definition, *includes the beholder.*”<sup>42</sup> Without the beholder, there is no situation, no meaning.

So, for Fried as for de Man, the complementarity of these apparently opposed positions—the commitment to the object on the one hand and to the reader on the other—is foundational. There is, of course, a difference between Fried and de Man beyond the obvious one. Where de Man understands himself to be making a claim about how language works when he argues that texts are meaningless objects and thus interpretation is necessarily the imposition of the reader’s meaning on those objects, Fried is making a claim that is above all evaluative—objecthood, he argues, is nothing short of “the negation of art.”<sup>43</sup>

Reframed slightly (and bracketing Fried's dismay), de Man is making a theoretical (and epistemological) argument about how language works and how interpretation is possible, while Fried is making an ontological and evaluative one about the beholder's role in what he considers to be good art.

One of the points of the line of argument I have been tracing—and what makes Brooke-Rose exemplary—has been to articulate an indissociable relationship between the reader and the text, in literary theory and in much of the most ambitious fiction of the period. The other, overlapping point has been to draw out the distinction between the hermeneutic demands of literary theory and aesthetic demands of art. When, for example, the U.S. literary critic Stanley Fish, in a series of texts dating from 1970, argues that readers determine not only the meaning of the text, but “what counts as the facts to be observed” and thus “human beings [are] at every moment creating” (as opposed to merely interpreting) any particular text, he might almost be lifting these claims from the pages of *Out: Knowledge*, notes the protagonist, is “built up by instruments and the minds behind the instruments.”<sup>44</sup> But where Fish (and even Brooke-Rose the critic) understands this to be a point about interpretation, for Brooke-Rose the novelist, the question of the reader's share of meaning is, in effect a Friedian one, about overcoming the reader's relation the work of art.

“

***What makes Brooke-Rose exemplary . . . is that she sits at a pivotal moment in the history of the novel when the question of the reader's relation to the novel was posed as a question of objecthood.***

”

What makes Brooke-Rose exemplary, then, is that she sits at a pivotal moment in the history of the novel when the question of the reader's relation to the novel was posed as a question of objecthood. Where the literary theory I have been tracing is invested in the twinned view that the text is an object and thus that the reader is productive of meaning, that same strand of literary theory mobilized in the service of the demands of art in *Out* is better understood as a mechanism for emphasizing the novel's form and thus in eliminating the reader's share of meaning. Put only slightly

differently, literary theory, as Brooke-Rose the novelist practices it, is opposed to Brooke-Rose's own application of theory to literary texts precisely because from the standpoint of the novel the formal constraint that divides the reader

from the work forestalls the imposition of meaning that, from the standpoint of theory, it would seem to invite.

### **PART III: THE PERSISTENCE OF OBJECTS**

What I have been describing as the centrality of the reader during the period of the 1960s and 1970s is both an epistemological, theoretical problem and an ontological, aesthetic problem that involves related but different concerns. From the standpoint of theory, we have seen figures such as Felman, Michaels, and de Man make the activity of reading central to the meaning of the text. From the standpoint of aesthetics, however, the point has been that the reader (or beholder) occupies a more tenuous, if no less central role. Moreover, through Brooke-Rose's quarrel with herself, I have been describing the complementary relationship between both viewing the text as an object outside of signification and surrendering the meaning of that text to the reader—a view that had become pervasive in art and in theory by the mid-1960s—and the imperative some artists felt to overcome precisely such a relation. In demonstrating this point, I have been articulating the opposition between the hermeneutic demands of literary theory and the technical demands of the novel as art as Brooke-Rose practices it, an opposition that likewise hinges on art's ability to insist on its ontological distinction from the reader by, in Friedan terms, defeating or suspending its status as an object.

By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that the centrality of the object and its relation to the human (subject) has reemerged in philosophy, literary theory, and the novel under the broad term Speculative Realism (or Object-Oriented Ontology). With this renewed commitment to the object, we have seen, if not a renewed commitment to the reader exactly—theory's preoccupation with the reader never really went away—an intensification of that commitment. Writers such as Graham Harman, Bruno Latour, and Quentin Meillassoux have made a philosophical project out of overthrowing (Kantian and Hegelian) Idealism and what Meillassoux calls "correlationism"—the belief that it is impossible to "consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another."<sup>45</sup> For Meillassoux and Harman, overthrowing correlationism and giving objects their due means devising a system of thought that makes it possible to "grasp" the "object in itself" and acknowledge "the nature of reality independently of thought and of humanity more generally."<sup>46</sup> What at bottom

defines Speculative Realism is its “full-fledged defense of the importance of objects for present-day philosophy.”<sup>47</sup> And its radical claim is its insistence that “real” objects have their own “private discrete realities” unavailable to us, and thus we can move beyond the embrace of the subject only via an ontological investigation into objects.<sup>48</sup>

In a 2012 issue of *New Literary History*, Graham Harman steps outside of philosophy to address how this renewed commitment to the object might open new directions in contemporary art and to “sketch what an object-oriented criticism” would look like.<sup>49</sup> Along the way, he describes how Object-Oriented approaches to philosophy contribute to literary theory by differentiating it from the three foundational modes of contemporary literary criticism: the New Criticism, the New Historicism, and Deconstruction. In Harman’s view, each of these modes of criticism mistakenly privileges “relationality” over objects. Where Deconstruction and the New Historicism mistake the object-character of literary objects by “dissolving literary works into a house of mirrors,” and thus treat them as “merely a chain of differences” wherein “everything will be everything else,” the New Criticism mistakes their object in a slightly different way, treating the text as a “privileged zone” outside of its context.<sup>50</sup> In other words, the New Historicists and Deconstructionists hold that the literary texts contain and “define the whole of reality,” while the New Critics (especially Cleanth Brooks whose “Well-Wrought Urn” is exemplary) cut the literary object off from that reality.<sup>51</sup> Object-Oriented Ontology, however, stands apart from any of these modes of criticism, by treating the private “reality” of the literary object “apart from any relations with or effect upon other entities in the world,” and thus it refuses the mistake of “dissolving a text upward into its readings” as the New Criticism does or “downward into its cultural elements” as the New Historicism and Deconstruction do.<sup>52</sup> In other words, no object can be defined by a set of surface relations, either external (as Deconstruction does) or internal (as New Criticism does), because all literary objects are “withdrawn” and “discrete” from the relations in which they are encountered.

As Timothy Morton, who derives his criticism largely from the work of Harman, describes it, what defines Object-Oriented Ontology is that it acknowledges that “objects are prior to their relations” to other objects, and especially, to readers of texts.<sup>53</sup> That is, Object-Oriented Ontology as criticism would succeed as a corrective to other dominant trends in literary criticism by attending to the

text as an object in itself and restoring to that object the complexity and depth it deserves. But this point, we have already seen, is nearly identical to Christine Brooke-Rose's goal in her reading of *The Turn of the Screw*. Although it is true that neither Morton nor Harman labor under the same measure of "objectivity" as Brooke-Rose, it is no less the case that Object-Oriented Ontology's "deeply *non-relational* conception of the reality of things" is intended to restore respect for the object, which is almost precisely what Brooke-Rose the literary critic claims to want to do when she purports to restore the textuality of the text through literary theory.<sup>54</sup> Nor does Harman really overcome the beholder or reader any more than Brooke-Rose the literary theorist does. As Jane Bennett notes in a response to Harman in that same issue of *New Literary History*, although he pursues "an object-oriented picture in which aloof objects are positioned as the sole locus of all the acting," he ultimately also locates "activity in the relationships themselves."<sup>55</sup> By which Bennett means, for Harman objects take on meaning primarily in relation to one another, as in between a reader and a text.

Bennett—whatever her philosophical differences with Harman—is nonetheless sympathetic to this relationality and so suggests he embrace this set of relations (in fact, he will). Since, however, we are under no such constraint and have been describing instead how a commitment to the object in itself entails a commitment to the beholder of the object, we can put the point differently: Object-Oriented Ontology is essentially a reformulation of theory's surrender of the meaning of the artwork to the beholder or reader. The point becomes strikingly clear when we consider how Harman's philosophical commitment to objects with "discrete realities" resonates with Robbe-Grillet's theoretical belief that objects must be "*there* before being *something*"—the entire point of Harman's aloof object is that it is "there" always and only "something" sometimes—and thus shares the fantasy that the text exists beyond the "tyranny of significations" of the reader or observer. And just as the effort to imagine the text beyond the "tyranny of significations" makes signification entirely dependent on the reader, what Harman calls the "discrete reality" of the work of art is nonetheless imagined not as a way of arguing for autonomy from the reader but as a way of producing the beholder or reader as what he calls a "co-constituent" of the work of art.

Harman describes this position in response to Bennett but more significantly still comes to formulate it in terms of art precisely in relation to Fried. Fried is

“right to call for an art without literalism,” he writes, because literalist artists mistakenly pursue an art in which the meaning of the work is, like “everyday objects,” present to the beholder in its “manifest qualities.”<sup>56</sup> But Harman also argues that the meaning of the work can only “be found in the *involvement* of the spectator.”<sup>57</sup> Because a work of art or novel is neither an object whose meaning is equal to its manifest qualities (i.e., paint or materials), nor can it be reduced to the qualities of the objects it represents, it must derive its meaning from the “only real object . . . on the scene”—the spectator or reader. Confronted with a work of art, “each of us, as readers,” he says, “becomes the [work].”<sup>58</sup> And what it means for a reader to “become” the work is, in the simplest terms possible, the assertion that because the work of art or novel is “withdrawn,” or never fully present, the work of art “requires human participation to replace a real object that is permanently lost in its own depths.”<sup>59</sup> And this can only happen when the reader forges an affective connection with the work of art: Good art, writes Harman, “provokes our investment precisely by placing us inside the scene, letting us step in as understudies for the real object.”<sup>60</sup> What Harman has done here is project the beholder into the artwork.

“

***The preoccupation with the object in itself once again leads back to the reader—as is the case with de Man’s materiality, the object means “nothing at all” except in its relation to the beholder or reader.***

”

Here, we can see again how the more theorists insist on the independence of the object (this is after all the fundamental idea of Object-Oriented Ontology) the more essential the subject becomes. The preoccupation with the object in itself once again leads back to the reader—as is the case with de Man’s materiality, the object means “nothing at all” except in its relation to the beholder or reader. Speculative Realism is another way of describing, from the standpoint of philosophy, a theoretical commitment to audience-oriented ontology.

But the major argument of this essay has been that for some artists and novelists the goal of their art has been precisely the rejection of this structure. And if this reading of the work of Brooke-Rose demonstrates that the aims of theory and the aims of the novel are not always, as is commonly argued, aligned—even when the novelist and the theorist were the same person—the point of

the flash forward to Harman's return to Fried nearly fifty years after "Art and Objecthood" is to highlight the reemergence of the relation between objecthood and the reader by way of one of the most significant recent developments in theory and in art.<sup>61</sup> And just as the object has persisted, so too has the insistence by many artists and novelists (including Rachel Cusk and Rachel Kushner) that although at least since the publication of "Art and Objecthood" the beholder or reader has been anticipated "in the structure of the artwork itself," the primacy of the reader is a problem to be overcome rather than a condition to embrace.<sup>62</sup>

————— / **Notes** / —————

<sup>1</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, *Out*, in *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus: Four Novels* (Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, "The Turn of the Screw and Its Critics: An Essay in Non-Methodology," *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 156. Previously published as "The Squirm of the True: A Structural Analysis of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*," *Poetics and Theory of Literature* 1, no. 2 (1976): 513–46.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>12</sup> Shoshana Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," in "Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise," ed. Shoshana Felman, special issue, *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 119; emphasis in original.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 97; emphasis in original.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, "Writers Reading: James and Eliot," in "Centennial Issue: Responsibilities of the Critic," ed. Richard Macksey, special issue, *MLN* 91, no. 5 (October 1976): 848. Elsewhere, in "Saving the Text: Reference and Belief," (*MLN* 93.5, December 1978) Michaels responds directly to Brooke-Rose's essay, dissenting from Brooke-Rose's claim that objectivity might be gained through an appeal to theory.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Kermode, "Novels: Recognition and Deception," *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (September 1974): 105.

<sup>16</sup> Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the *Variorum*," in *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 169; Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (1970; New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Joan Didion, "The Art of Fiction No. 71," interview by Linda Kuehl, *The Paris Review* 74 (Fall/Winter 1978), <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3439/the-art-of-fiction-no-71-joan-didion>.

<sup>18</sup> John Barth, "Hawkes and Barth Talk About Fiction," *New York Times*, April 1, 1979, <http://www.nytimes.com/1979/04/01/archives/hawkes-and-barth-talk-about-fiction-on-fiction.html>.

<sup>19</sup> To cite just two of the most influential accounts, this position that runs through both Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, Or the Logic of Late-Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) and Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Birch, *Christine Brooke-Rose and Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Frank Kermode, Cover endorsement, in Brooke-Rose, *Omnibus*.

<sup>22</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, "Stories, Theories and Things," in *Stories, Theories and Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 13.

<sup>24</sup> Brooke-Rose, *Out*, 22

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

<sup>26</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, "Dynamic Gradients," *London Magazine*, December 1965, 93.

<sup>27</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, "A Future for the Novel," in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 21; emphasis in original.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Brooke-Rose, "Dynamic Gradients," 93.

<sup>31</sup> Robbe-Grillet, "A Future for the Novel," 21; Brooke-Rose, "Dynamic Gradients," 90.

<sup>32</sup> Paul de Man, "Excuses (Confessions)," in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 292.

<sup>33</sup> "Je m'excusai sur le premier objet qui s'offrit," Quoted in *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>35</sup> Andrzej Warminski, "Response: A Response to Frances Ferguson," in "Wordsworth and the Production of Poetry," ed. Cynthia Chase and Andrzej Warminski, special issue, *diacritics* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 47.

<sup>36</sup> de Man, "Excuses," 292.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>38</sup> Robbe-Grillet, "A Future for the Novel," 21.

<sup>39</sup> Brooke-Rose, "Dynamic Gradients," 93.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 150.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 153; emphasis in original.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Stanley Fish, "What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?," *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 94; Brooke-Rose, *Out*, 168.

<sup>45</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (2006; London: Continuum, 2009), 5.

<sup>46</sup> Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, "Towards a Speculative Philosophy," in *Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Jackson, "The Anxiousness of Objects and Artworks: Michael Fried, Object-Oriented Ontology and Aesthetic Absorption," *Speculations* 2 (May 2011): 150.

<sup>49</sup> Graham Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism," *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 184.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 195, 198, 190-91.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 187, 200.

<sup>53</sup> Timothy Morton, "An-Object Oriented Defense of Poetry," *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 208.

<sup>54</sup> Harman, "Well-Wrought Broken Hammer," 187; emphasis in original.

<sup>55</sup> Jane Bennett, "Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton," *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 228.

<sup>56</sup> Graham Harman, "Art without Relations," *ArtReview*, September 2014, [https://artreview.com/features/september\\_2014\\_graham\\_harman\\_relations/](https://artreview.com/features/september_2014_graham_harman_relations/).

<sup>57</sup> Graham Harman, "Materialism is Not the Solution: On Matter, Form, and Mimesis," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 24, no. 47 (2014): 109; emphasis in original.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>59</sup> Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (New York: Pelican, 2018), 100.

<sup>60</sup> Harman, "Materialism is Not the Solution," 109.

<sup>61</sup> While it is almost a cliché of art criticism to note that although Fried intensely dislikes literalist works, "Art and Objecthood" in effect becomes the blueprint for it (see Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 [Spring 1979]: 75-88), this point is much less acknowledged in the history of the novel where the aims of theory and the aims of the novel are mistakenly assumed to be aligned.

<sup>62</sup> Harman, "Art without Relations."