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The Unbearable Lightness of Being

A PREFACE

IN INTERVIEWS AND ESSAYS on her status as a writer, Christine Brooke-Rose describes herself as having “little or no existence.” In Stories, Theories and Things, where she considers her dual career as experimental writer and literary theorist, she says ruefully: “outside the canon no interpretation, rather as one (now abandoned) dogma had it: outside the Church no Salvation. Fish [Stanley] would add: therefore no existence” (Brooke-Rose, Stories, Theories and Things 4). She notes that although her work has been reviewed, she lacks existence at the “critical level”:

I am one of the many authors who have a brief existence at what Hirsch (1967), as opposed to Fish, calls the interpretation level (the ‘meaning’ or simple reading of the text as syntax, for instance by reviewers), but who have little or no existence at what Hirsch calls the critical level (the ‘significance’ or what others call interpretation, that links the text to other things/realms of thought: the world, that is, other stories, other texts). This can only begin to happen, for better or for worse,
when an author enters a canon, however shifting, and I have a knack of somehow escaping most would-be canonic networks and labels: I have been called ‘nouveau roman’ in English and ‘nouveau nouveau,’ I have been called Postmodern, I have been called Experimental, I have been included in the SF Encyclopaedia, I automatically come under Women Writers (British, Contemporary), I sometimes interest the Feminists, but I am fairly regularly omitted from the ‘canonic’ surveys (chapters, articles, books) that come under those or indeed other labels. On the whole I regard this as a good sign. (Brooke-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things*)

“On the whole,” she considers this neglect “a good sign,” but there is the distinct note of complaint in this description. The predicament of the “I” here is worth noting, for this predicament of invisibility or omission is ubiquitous in both Brooke-Rose’s fictions and her critical writings. The author, Christine Brooke-Rose, is a specter, a being of “little existence.” Like the shades that inhabit the underworld in *The Odyssey*, like the ghost of King Hamlet intoning “remember me,” the author’s existence depends upon the ear of the other. Only within the “Church” of the canon is a literary afterlife (Salvation) possible. Beyond the hint of petulance is a serious point about the ontology of authorship: the “I” of the author is simultaneously established in writing (on the page) and yet always aware of the persistent threat of its “textermination” at the hands (or deaf ears) of others. The proper name, “Christine Brooke-Rose,” is a signifier for the life of the author; the author’s existence is a function of intertextuality, which is another word for a living on by virtue of a haunting of other texts.

Now past eighty and living a relatively reclusive life in the south of France after her retirement from her teaching post at the University of Paris, Vincennes, Brooke-Rose desires to haunt the theories and fictions of critics and novelists with an interest in narrative experiment. She desires to be read. Although she has courted difficulty, like the modernists before her, and refused to pander to more popular tastes, she is reaching the end of her life with the desire she fictionalized in her novel *Textermination*: a desire to be given existence through her words. Her most recent books are overtly valedictory, *Invisible Author: Last Essays* (2002), a collection of essays in which she returns to the themes of *Stories, Theories and Things* to further ponder the ontologies of authorship, and *Life, End Of*, a memoir (2006). Like Italo Suevo’s chapter in *The Confessions of Zeno*, “The Last Cigarette,” these “last essays” are both a rehearsal of and protest against the death of the author.
In *Stories, Theories and Things* (published in 1991) and *Invisible Author: Last Essays*, Brooke-Rose conducts a kind of self-interview in which she makes a claim on the ear of the other by offering notes on her “intentions.” The word is, of course, anachronistic in a poststructuralist, postmodernist context, the context in which we must discuss Brooke-Rose. Indeed, she has consistently derided the biographical approach to fiction in which the life is meant to explain the work. Yet in the genre of self-examination in her essays, Brooke-Rose reconnects the umbilicus between the author’s being and her words, as if to add weight to her unbearable lightness. In commenting on her dual roles as critic and writer, she describes a “double paradox, that despite the long taboo on author intention . . . writers are constantly invited to talk about their work (first paradox), though the taboo survives in that they are not supposed to write about it (second paradox)” (Brooke-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things* 5). Ironically, the “taboo” that Brooke-Rose notes is a form of logocentrism, a privileging of the author’s speech in articulating her “intention.” Indeed, the fate of Brooke-Rose’s writings in being both ignored and misunderstood enacts an extreme case of the predicament of all texts, according to poststructuralist theory, a predicament that Derrida has explored, that is, as the fragility and tenacity of the connection between language and being (*Cinders*). This is a predicament that Brooke-Rose investigates in her fiction and criticism. She fictionalizes the orphaning of the text from the author, what Derrida describes in “Signature Event Context” and elsewhere as “writing . . . cut off from all absolute responsibility, from consciousness as the ultimate authority, orphaned and separated at birth from the assistance of its father” (Derrida, “Signature Event Context” 181). With nuance and, sometimes, pathos, Brooke-Rose’s fiction theorizes this central poststructuralist perception of the “death of the author” and the spectrality of all language cut off from its source in being.1

Deconstructing the metaphysics of presence occurs on the level of character as well as author. The “unbearable lightness of being” afflicts the characters in Brooke-Rose’s fiction as it afflicts Brooke-Rose, the author. It is most clearly narrativized in her metanovel *Textermination*, in which literary characters assemble at a convention to hold a “Prayer for Being” to the Implied Reader, hoping, the narrator tells us, to “recover, after an unimaginable journey, to savour what remains of international ritual for the revival of the fittest” (*Textermination* 8). The characters are “ghosts” (*Textermination* 19), languishing from “lack of involved attention” (*Textermination* 2) in an age of popular culture. In this comic, apocalyptic novel, we are reminded of fiction’s link with death. *Texter-
mination brings literature to the brink of extinction, thematizing, and, ironically, bringing to life the various “deaths” that have become such critical commonplaces—of the author, of character, of the novel. And, although the postmodern condition has forced us to confront this situation, exacerbated as it is by the technological developments that produce competing claims on the attentions of would-be readers, Brooke-Rose’s novel makes us understand that all fiction in some sense theorizes its own potential demise. Not only postmodern fiction, but realist fiction as well constructs phantoms of the imagination who demand the reader’s faith. In a meeting between Milan Kundera’s Tomas and Austen’s Emma Woodhouse, Brooke-Rose even stages an acknowledgment that reality and unreality are wed in both realism and antirealism, nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction. Emma thinks: “Being seems to trouble him for some reason, and he calls it unbearably light. And to her astonishment she finds herself agreeing. She has never thought of it in that way, and it somehow relieves her of the oppressive feeling she has had ever since she arrived, that her certitudes are uncertain, that she no longer quite exists in them, no longer quite coincides with herself” (Textermination 109). Specters and speculation go together in the textual world Brooke-Rose has created as she tests and tries out the endurances and vulnerabilities of fiction and its elements. In the thought experiments of Brooke-Rose’s fiction, criticism, character, and theory converge as points of speculation.

In Brooke-Rose’s oeuvre narrative and theory are chiasmic; she demonstrates how theories tell stories and stories tell theory. Theories themselves are metastories told about language and fiction in particular; conversely, fictions are theories that take narrative form; they embody abstractions as they create a fictional ‘world.’ In Stories, Theories and Things and Invisible Author, Brooke-Rose attempts to add weight to the unbearable lightness of fiction’s being and to the kind of speculation we call narrative theory.

This chiasmus of theory and fiction might seem to confine us within a closed circle of postmodern theory and practice that includes new techniques, but not the “techniques for living” promised in my title. For Brooke-Rose, however, new fictional techniques are needed to represent the cultural narratives of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, narratives that must capture heightened constraint and loss. In A Rhetoric of the Unreal, she describes this cultural narrative:

Never before have the meaning-making means at our disposal (linguistic, economic, political, scientific) appeared so inadequate, not only to
cope with the enormity of the problems we continue to create . . . but
simply to explain the world. This seems to be the century which, despite
or because of the pace of technological advance, has taken the longest,
relative to that pace, to emerge from the mental habits of the previ-
ous century. We know that all the old secure values have gone, that
a radical change is occurring which man must undergo or perish, yet
we somehow go on as if, ensconced still in relics of nineteenth-century
ideologies, in a way which other times in parallel situations apparently
did not. (Rhetoric of the Unreal 6)

Brooke-Rose associates the last fifty years with a painful loss of our
ability to differentiate reality from what she calls “the unreal.” Her nov-
els mime the absence of certain reality, or of some crucial analog for what
we used to take as indubitably real. Obsolescence and extinction—even
the loss of the human archive—haunt her texts. As they rupture “the
relics of nineteenth-century ideologies,” her fictional experiments are
performed for the sake of finding new ways to theorize life and formu-
late conduct in a new world order. The revival meeting at the heart of
Textermination, meant to staunch the extinction of its attendees, presages
the grand narrative of evolution told in her last novel, Subscript, which
begins 4500 million years ago with a chemical reaction and ends with
humans on the earth about eleven thousand years ago. In Subscript, con-
straints on language, mirroring constraints on biological life, turn out to
be glorious modes of engendering evolution and survival. Every one of
Brooke-Rose’s fictions is a rehearsal for living under the constraints of
a new world, one that is as much a matter of shrinking possibilities as
it is of a renewed expansion. Yet, contrary to any melancholy implied
by Brooke-Rose’s vision, her fiction draws creative vitality and moral
inspiration out of the limitations it evokes.

In this book I make three claims about Brooke-Rose’s fictions: (1)
Despite their playful experiments with language, they are not insou-
ciant about the pain underlying the “corpus crysis” (Thru 736) and
“direlogue[s]” (Amalgamemnon 29) of the twentieth and twenty-first
centuries; (2) They explore opportunities to convert pain, through dis-
cipline, into fictional power; and (3) They trust theory to emerge fic-
tionally. Her novels produce significant experiments in writing and
theorizing the novel tradition that fictionally “diagnose” the unreality
of twentieth-century life, the conditions that much contemporary theory
seeks to analyze and demystify. Kenneth Burke said that literature pro-
vides “equipment for living.” Brooke-Rose’s texts and techniques offer
us just such instruments.