Techniques of the Living

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The Specter as Sign

GHOST STORIES

The most fitting place to start an examination of “the unbearable lightness” in Brooke-Rose’s writing is with her ghost stories. In Go When You See the Green Man Walking, a short story collection published in 1970, for example, narrative speculation begins with the specter. Many stories are told from the position of the already dead: a seraph who greets people at the “Point of No Return” (“George and the Seraph”) or a suicide who takes on bodily existence for one more time to demand that her unfaithful ex-lover give her away in marriage to death (“On Terms”). In the latter story, the “terms” of the title play off of the “on no terms” that mark the failed relationship between narrator and ex-lover. Jealousy feeds the narrator’s fantasy of assembling her bodily atoms one more time to require her ex-lover’s presence at her marriage to death (“But the being not on terms is the driving force which impels me to invent new terms, for of course we are on terms even if only those of agreeing to give me away” [“On Terms” 26]). Protesting her premature obsolescence in their relationship, she forces him to acknowledge his role in her suicide.
In these stories, the work of fantasy is equated with the physical energy needed to sustain an illusion, to prop up a ghost and make her function. The gothicism of these stories underlines the gothicism of all fiction. The ghosts perform the metacritical function of reminding us of fiction’s task of conjuring and the energy it takes—atom by atom—to create the “semblance of a temporal body” (“On Terms” 18) out of words. The difficulty of sustaining this temporal body is emphasized in the truncated form of the short story itself. The fruitful play on the phrases “on terms,” “not on terms,” and “new terms” couples the terms of the love bond with the narrative bond between an “I” narrator and the reader. Out of the literally dead-ended relationship between lovers, the “new terms” of posthumous fiction combine the gothic with black comedy. The postmortem conducted thus leads to new techniques for fiction, with fantasy providing new inspiration, new life. It is no surprise, then, that “On Terms” was first published in a collection called The Fourth Ghost Book. Go When You See the Green Man Walking also included the republication of a rich and emblematic story called “The Foot,” that first appeared in The Unlikely Ghosts. In this story, the most fascinating in the collection, Brooke-Rose allegorizes the spectrality of narrative.

As with “On Terms,” the brevity of the story encapsulates the precariousness of fiction’s conjuring act. Like the other ghost stories in the collection, this story is told from a posthumous position. Composed roughly at the same time as her novel Out (1964) but published later, this important early story is narrated by a phantom limb. Specifically, the first-person narrator is the phantom limb of a beautiful woman whose leg has been amputated following an automobile accident. The narrative “I,” then, derives his existence from his ability to “haunt” his “victim” with sensations of pain from her already severed foot. The story begins: “The victim to be haunted is female. And beautiful. This makes a difference” (“The Foot” 43). The victim is also intelligent, which, according to the narrator, also makes a difference. The “highly intelligent undoubt-edly suffer more than the plethora unimaginative” (“The Foot” 46). In other words, their active imaginations goad them to feel the phantom pain through “imitation neurones” (“The Foot” 49), even though they realize that the limb is gone. Like Beckett characters or Scheherazade, narrators who must continue talking or risk extinction, this spectral voice speaks in order to affirm his ghostly existence and maintain his hold on the patient. The narrator is not the amputated limb but its image, a phantom subject to banishment if the patient, lying disconsolate in a hospital bed, is “cured” by the suave doctor, Mr. Poole. Like the narrative “I” in the story “On Terms,” the jealous lover who is threat-
ened with replacement in the beloved’s and the reader’s attention, the phantom limb guards its existence through narrative. He inflicts pain in order to reassert his connection to the place of the limb’s origin, the body of the female victim. Indeed, the patient’s pain consummates the phantom foot’s existence:

She cries much more than quietly now, she shouts, she sobs, she yells, she gasps. I find it very exciting. The imitation neurones I am composed of agitate their dendrites like mad ganglia that arborise the system as the cell bodies dance along the axis cylinder within the fibres of the foot that isn’t there, move backwards now, tugging away from the interlaced antennae as if trying to wrench themselves from some submicroscopic umbilical tie anchored into soft tissue, caught into bone, straining, straining to freedom birth and terror of time and space as the impulses race down the fibrils and create me, shape me and I ache strongly, I swell to huge existence that possesses her wholly and loves her loves and hurts her unendurably until the cortical area can only respond by switching off the supply of blood along the nerves going out of the spinal cord so that she faints. (“The Foot” 49–50)

The metaphors suggest that the narrator is both orphan, cut off from the body of the mother, and castrated phallus (“I do not mind however at present being thus wound round cut off castrated as a phantom limb for I have temporarily spent my energy in possessing her so hugely hurtfully and I must rest recuperate my atoms . . .”[“The Foot” 51]). This phallic “I’ swells to its phantom existence in writing, yet he recognizes that his power is a sham, a magic puff subject to dissipation. We are made to see the enormous energy necessary to sustaining the narrative’s conjuring act (“the impulses race down the fibrils and create me, shape me), in this case identified as a phallic energy. Tumescence and detumescence are the underlying rhythms in the narrative—as the desire to be felt swells into existence and ebbs after satisfaction. This “lover’s discourse,” a heterosexual plot of longing and abjection, splits the subject, the “I” of narration, into self-confronting parts. The narrator speaks from the point of view of the abjected part, severed from the bodily whole. One could say that his is a synecdochic desire, the desire of the part for the whole that animates the story itself.

“The Foot” is doubly a narrative of abjection: a story of a phantom lover who longs to return to the body of the mother/lover and jealously guards his companionship through pain and a metacritical tale about writing cut off from presence. The story emblematizes the divorce of
narrative utterance from its “lived” context and writing from being. One thinks again of deconstruction’s seminal recognition that “writing [is] an iterative structure, cut off from all absolute responsibility, from consciousness as the ultimate authority” (Derrida, “Signature Event Context” 181). In Brooke-Rose’s version of this “cut,” the prelapsarian body is a female body, its origin haunting a male narrator, as he, in turn, haunts it. The phantom limb, which derives its power by successfully mimicking a lost connection to the body, fears it will be exposed as a fraud. “The Foot” is a narrative of and as fetish, a substitute phallus whose potency is a sham. Like the Wizard of Oz, the narrative “I” fears discovery behind the magic curtain. The short story is a kind of foot fetish, enacting an erotics of longing and substitution.

The potency of the narrator vies with the potency of science, represented by the English doctor healer, Mr. Poole. In the context of the plot, the jealousy of the speaker stems from his fear that his own mimetic powers will be no match for the potent treatment of the doctor. The doctor is a disenchanter, the scientist who tries to convince the patient that her pain is only phantom. Yet this male rivalry between the narrator’s potency and the doctor’s scientific disenchantment is only a screen. For the narrator comes to acknowledge that the patient herself creates his existence. It is SHE who mourns the loss of her bodily image, in the process giving him his paradoxical phenomenality. “And now she thinks about me, giving me strength, existence, and creating my shape, her slim phantom foot, her unendurable phantom pain” (“The Foot” 47–48). He realizes that through her act of mourning, it is she who ontologizes his remains. Although the titles of the short story collections refer to ghosts, these posthumous hangers-on in Brooke-Rose’s fiction have a sensuous materiality to them, more specters than ghostly spirits. These specters figure memory as a palpable reminder and remainder of event and relationship.

By the end of the story, it is the writing of the young woman that itself presents the greatest threat of extinction for the narrator, as the technology of writing becomes a prosthetic tool that will allow her to control her own pain. The story circles back on itself. When Mr. Poole asks his patient what she plans to do when she leaves the hospital, she replies that she has been thinking of writing. “Love stories?” (“The Foot” 59) he asks in his characteristically flirtatious and patronizing tone, and she says no. At this point the narrator, who has already told us that he is not “partial to words, they can be enemies too” (“The Foot” 46), recognizes that the young woman wants to write about him so as to exorcise the phantom pain (“She is thinking of me to write about
in order to get me out of her system as they call it not sympathetic or parasympathetic autonomous but cerebrospinal out of her midbrain on to paper instead of aching there fifty-three and a half centimetres away from her stump” (“The Foot” 59). “I shall not let her get rid of me with words that recreate my shape my galvanising atoms of agony on mere paper to be read by careless unsuffering millions vicariously and thus dispersed” (“The Foot” 60). Her words “recreate” his shape, creating her own prosthesis in language. Disperse him is what she attempts to do, for as she writes, she encircles his narrative, the one that began “the victim to be haunted is female”: “and she opens meanwhile the small exercise book and in thin impersonal strokes she writes the words she hears like white sun swamping all other receptors in the brain so that the white page slowly engraves itself with the victim to be haunted is female. And beautiful. This makes a difference” (“The Foot” 61).

The white page engraves itself with the beginning of the story, the “I” of the phantom foot now subsumed in the young woman’s act of authorship. The grammatical and narrative tables are turned: It is she who is the subject and he who is the object; his effect is already her creation, her cause. She objectifies her pain and mourns her narrative into existence: “à la recherche du pied perdu” (“The Foot” 61), the narrator jokes near the end of the story, but unlike Proust, Brooke-Rose restricts herself to the ephemeral present tense in representing the search of the lost object. Emily Dickinson wrote, “Power is only Pain—/Stranded, thro’ Discipline.” Through the discipline of her gothic writing, the young woman “strands” her pain and usurps the phantom authority of the phantom limb. Writing functions as her prosthesis, extending the life and limits of the body. Brooke-Rose generates narrative, rather than lyric, out of this self-stranding; the discipline of language counteracts loss.

In her meditation on the nature of narrative and loss, On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, Susan Stewart helps to shed light on the erotics of narrative, its relation to the body and to fetish. Her description of narrative as a structure of desire is helpful in discussing Brooke-Rose’s fiction. In chapters on the souvenir and the collection, Stewart interprets the souvenir as “emblematic of the nostalgia that all narrative reveals—the longing for its place of origin” (Stewart xii). “It is this very desire of part for whole which both animates narrative and, in fact, creates the illusion of the real” (Stewart xii). But as Stewart makes clear, the longing for the whole body is marked by a play “between the present and an imagined, prelapsarian experience” (139). In Brooke-Rose’s case, the beautiful women, the
“model,” functions as this platonic body image of wholeness. In “The Foot,” the narrative returns to this archetypal female image, the body of the mother/lover figured as source both of life and death, womb and tomb:

Eyes open can bring beauty alive with awareness of pain terror despair or anger, not to mention desire and liquid tenderness or even the alluring invitation down the pathways to the womb the tomb the cavern the ebb and flow of time linked to the sun-devouring moon the monster chasm of death and timelessness that draws man like a magnet from the moment he is conscious of a fall a wrench of umbilical tissue rough manhandling tumbling lying in soft cloud sucking at heaven severed weight of body on stumbling legs and fall, fall through the days and minutes. Eyes open can bring archetypes alive . . . (“The Foot” 43–44)

Stewart describes her title, “On Longing,” as itself “a kind of ache,” a perfect reference for capturing both the erotic longing and sense of loss that underwrite narrative. It aptly describes the combination of mourning and erotic desire that makes up the particular “lover’s discourse” of “The Foot.” As I will show, this metaleptic lover’s discourse is replayed in much of Brooke-Rose’s fiction, with its apotheosis in her most metacritical narrative, Thru: “‘You are the sentence I write I am the paragraph, generating each other cutting off each other’s word.’”

Roland Barthes explored these erotics in terms of the relationship between writer and reader, the “I” and the “you” of the text, in A Lover’s Discourse and The Pleasure of the Text. Famously announcing the death of the author in The Pleasure of the Text, Barthes acknowledges the ache that remains for the writer’s presence: “but in the text, in a certain way, I desire the author. I need his figure . . . as he needs mine” (Barthes 27). This codependency is staged in Brooke-Rose’s “posthumous” fiction. Walter Benjamin reminds us in “The Storyteller” that the form of the story, unlike the form of the novel, is historically associated with oral rather than written production. Thus, Brooke-Rose’s use of an “I” narrator who tells his story (an element she will eschew in almost all of her novels), exposes the nostalgia behind the “longing” for origin in the body of the author. In exposing this process of estrangement, Brooke-Rose does not minimize the aspect of mourning.

Like all of Brooke-Rose’s writings, this story of palpable absence dramatizes a cultural narrative, an elegy that is historical. By this I mean more than to acknowledge the fact that the fiction “theorizes” a poststructuralist insight. For Brooke-Rose’s fiction is historical in the way it
records in “new terms” what she calls the “unreal” reality of the post-traumatic second half of the twentieth century. In *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (1981), published approximately a decade after *Go When You See the Green Man Walking*, Brooke-Rose tries to account for the “return of the fantastic in all its forms” in twentieth-century literature, theory, and philosophy (*Rhetoric of the Unreal* 7). She sees this important return as a symptom of a ‘reality crisis” in the twentieth century according to which there is a pervasive sense of unreality (*Rhetoric of the Unreal* 3–4). In her novels, reality is already an effect, issuing from some unspecified cause of separation, an abjection associated with the displacements of the twentieth century: e.g., World War II in *Between*, an unspecified, probably nuclear, apocalypse in *Out*, scientific “post-humanism” in *Such*; technology that threatens to render humanism obsolete in *Amalgamemnon*. In choosing the phantom limb as her narrator in “The Foot,” Brooke-Rose puns on the idea of extremity. The foot is the extremity that used to link the body with terra firma, the pedestrian, the “real.” Without this link to the earth, reality becomes unreal, fantastmatic. Yet the word “extremity” also conveys the sense that crisis is a part of our everyday lives:

> And yet it is obvious that to be effective pain must attack the most active therefore vulnerable part of the central memory-image, the extremities once in touch with earth air fire and water, the soles that bear the whole weight of existence as man transmutes his structural archetypes from curled to lying to upright position and learns the shapes of time food light dark play by fingering breasts limbs balls cuddly animals. (“The Foot” 45)

Curiously, this passage from “The Foot” prefigures Brooke-Rose’s last novel, *Subscript*, in which she traces the increasing sophistication and sentience of man as he evolves from the prokaryote cell. Throughout her work, Brooke-Rose’s testifies to a “corpus crysis” (*Thru*, 736) in language and history. The crisis is revealed along the pulses of the body; it is a “corpus” crisis, beginning with the legs whose malfunction calls into question what man’s evolution has wrought. Man must adapt to his environment or face the possibility of his own extinction. In *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* she speaks of “a radical change” occurring “which man must undergo or perish” (6). “Never before,” she says, “has man been so squarely faced with the possible annihilation of mankind and all his works, his planet and perhaps more. . . . These essential differences [between our century and others] . . . are deeply linked to the sense we have that the real has become unreal” (*Rhetoric of the Unreal* 8). In her
powerful essay, “The Dissolution of Character in the Novel,” Brooke-Rose discusses the prevailing sense of characters as verbal structures “more and more swollen with words, like stray phalluses, cut off from the real” (“The Dissolution of Character” 186). The narrative construction of a “foot fetish” in “The Foot” enacts this sense of loss and unreality that marks the twentieth-century in particular. Specters populate Brook-Rose’s fiction, clinging to their power to haunt sensuously, palpably. Painfully and in pain, they acknowledge their obsolescence and cling to their material existence in an attempt to be a body that matters. Brooke-Rose’s fictions “speculate” by materializing their theories of narrative in the equivocal figure of the specter. But the pain awaiting conversion, through discipline, into fictional power (to paraphrase Dickinson) is not purely personal. It is public and historic.

Like the phantom limb of “The Foot,” the specter is a revenant, an unwelcome guest whose appearance cannot be controlled. In Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the International, Derrida speaks of the figure of the specter in relation to the question of repetition. It is a figure of iterability that cannot be put in its place or time. He calls this haunting by specters “historical, to be sure, but it is not dated, it is never docily given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar” (4). In his own analysis of the rhetoric of the unreal that the twentieth century has inherited, Derrida invokes Shakespeare, specifically, the specter of King Hamlet at the beginning of Hamlet, who begins the play with the injunction, “Remember me.” Derrida describes “this pre-originary and properly spectral anteriority of the crime—the crime of the other, a misdeed whose event and reality, whose truth can never present themselves in flesh and blood, but can only allow themselves to be presumed, reconstructed, fantasized” (21; emphasis in original. Emphases in quoted material are original to the text unless otherwise noted.). But for Derrida, this spectrality is not confined to our sense of being haunted by the past. It refers to a haunting, a nonpresence, at work in the present and anticipating the future. He describes this nonpresence of the present as the “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present” (Specters xix). According to Derrida, reality is shot through with its spectral twin. As in Brooke-Rose’s fiction, this “non-contemporaneity” is exacerbated by a number of features of contemporary life imported with the speed of the technological revolution. Describing the “spectral effects” at work in the twentieth century, he cites “the new speed of apparition (we understand this word in its ghostly sense) of the simulacrum, the synthetic or prosthetic image, and the virtual event, cyberpace and
surveillance, the control, appropriations, and speculations that today deploy unheard-of powers” (Specters 54). It also derives from the sense of the already dead and the non-yet-living, the specters with whom we commune in the present. This spectral invasion is also a question of ethics, of attending to the invisible others who cannot claim attention for themselves.

Brooke-Rose, too, is concerned with those “who are not there, of those who are no longer or who are not yet present and living” (Specters xix). These are the specters haunting her texts spanning past and future: Subscript, THE story of survival and extinction; Amalgamemnon, a novel in future and conditional tenses which predicts the end of humanism and, in “unrealized tenses,” imagines the alternatives; Xorandor, a computer fiction in which she imagines us on the eve of the destruction of the human archive.

I propose Brooke-Rose as a candidate for the new writer/scholar that Derrida conjures in Specters of Marx: “There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being (‘to be or not to be,’ in the conventional reading), in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity. Beyond this opposition, there is, for the scholar, only the hypothesis of a school of thought, theatrical fiction, literature, and speculation” (Specters 11). Derrida posits the existence of another scholar, one who could think “the possibility of the specter, the specter as possibility. Better (or worse) he would know how to address himself to spirits. He would know that such an address is not only already possible, but that it will have at all times conditioned, as such, address in general” (Specters 12). Brooke-Rose’s fiction and theory take up the theoretical wager, this hypothesis, the specter as possibility. Her work explores the palpability of absence, the sensuous reminder, remainder, anticipation, of event.

It should be clear from my description that Brooke-Rose’s form of postmodernism provides a vision of inevitable human constraint and loss. It does not conform to the kind of ludic postmodernism privileged by Linda Hutcheon in A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (1988). Hutcheon sees in postmodern literature a break and liberation from modernist anxieties, an open-ended plurality that leaves behind the anxious formalisms of the modernists in favor of a more insouciant attitude. She offers a rather glib inventory of what is jettisoned with postmodern experimentations, “such principles as value, order, meaning, control, and identity . . . that have been the basic premise of
bourgeois liberalism” (Hutcheon 13). Although “control” and “identity” are concepts that come in for some skewering in Brooke-Rose’s fiction, value, order, and meaning stubbornly reassert themselves in new forms that bind the fiction to the theory it materializes. Technique materializes theory through what Brooke-Rose calls “constraint” (I will return to this concept in a moment). Rigor, formulation, and form constrain Brooke-Rose’s essays and fiction; they constrain as spurs to invention. They are not abandoned in jouissance.

With the assistance of an unusual essay by Vivian Sobchack I can further distinguish Brooke-Rose’s work from Hutcheon’s version of postmodernism. In an essay entitled “Beating the Meat/Surviving the Text, or How to Get Out of this Century Alive,” Sobchack attacks Baudrillard’s interpretation of the cuts, slashes and amputations in J. G. Ballard’s *Crash*, an interpretation that celebrates the dematerialization of the text. Sobchack critiques the way that Baudrillard, in particular, and millennial discourses about cyberspace and technology, in general, “decontextualize our flesh into insensate sign or digitize it into cyberspace where, as one devotee put it, ‘it’s like having had your everything amputated.’ In the (inter)face of the new technological revolution and its transformation of every aspect of our culture (including our bodies), we have to recognize and make explicit the deep and dangerous ambivalence that informs the reversible relations we, as lived-bodies, have with our tools and their function of allowing us to transcend the limitations of our bodies” (Sobchack 209).

Now Sobchack, it should be noted, is writing from a particular and highly unusual position, a position she makes explicit to establish her authority: the position of an amputee who has lost her leg to cancer and who tries to come to grips with her prosthesis, her new “cyborg” existence. Her essay is a biting attack on the too confident transcendentalism and happy metaphor hunting in which contemporary theory sometimes engages. Indeed her critique of the decontextualization of the body provides an important corrective not only to Linda Hutcheon and Baudrillard but also to discourses of the posthuman in cybernetics. In this context, too, “The Foot” is an important text to consider. Although I have read “The Foot” in part as an allegory about narrative, it also clairvoyantly introduces the information age, the noncontemporaneity of the present for the “posthuman subject.” N. Katherine Hayles defines this subject as “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (Hayles 3). As Hayles puts it in her analysis, which also critiques the dematerialization that is the object of Sobchack’s criticism, “information loses its body” (Hayles xiii). “The
Foot” inaugurates the theme of information and its embodiments and disembodiments that will recur more explicitly in Brooke-Rose’s later novels. Both the false messages relayed by the phantom limb to the victim and the attention to the boundaries and limits of the body are themes that will recur.

Considered in the light of information theory, the sensuous haunting by the phantom limb creates a reverberating loop between body and mind, a circuit of information. Brooke-Rose’s notes for the chapter reveal not only her determination for scientific accuracy but also her focus on how messages deceive the amputee into an illusory image of the body. The falsely “reverberating loop” is explained in Hayles’s history of cybernetics, which explicitly describes the phenomenon of the phantom limb in terms of signs and signals at work: “[McCulloch] proposed that neural nets can set up reverberating loops that, once started, continue firing even though no new signals are incoming. To distinguish between firings signifying an external event and those caused by past history, he called the former ‘signals’ and the latter ‘signs.’ A signal ‘always implies its occasion,’ but a sign is an ‘enduring affair which has lost its essential temporal reference’” (Hayles 59). In “The Foot,” Brooke-Rose’s drama of narrative as fetish, the sign is caught in reverberating loops of self-haunting. Brooke-Rose conveys both the pathos and the pain that Sobchack resolutely seeks to retain for postmodern discourse. Yet in the end, I would contend that despite its power, Sobchack’s essay loses some effectiveness in its unquestioning recourse to the authenticity experienced by the lived body, that is, the author’s experience. It contrasts with the impossibility of retracing the link to the lived body in “The Foot” and Brooke-Rose’s emphasis on the phantom limb as sensate sign. In Brooke-Rose’s fiction, pain is “stranded” through the discipline of language. She refuses to essentialize the body’s experience.

THE SIGN AS SPECTER: THE TURN OF THE SCREW

Brooke-Rose’s brilliant tripartite analysis of James’s The Turn of the Screw, republished in her book, A Rhetoric of the Unreal, reprises, in the form of literary criticism and theory, the theme of the spectral sign. In 101 pages, it takes James’s tale as its model of the return of the fantastic in fiction. Indeed, following Todorov, Brooke-Rose considers James’s text as the example, par excellence, of the “pure fantastic” (128). According to Todorov, the pure fantastic is a category of reading in which two plots (fabulas), one supernatural and one natural, coexist perfectly such that the reader cannot resolve which one is to be preferred. Brooke-
Rose is mindful, of course, that this seminal turn-of-the-century tale has inspired a history of readings which indeed choose between a ghost story (the supernatural) or a psychic tale of hallucination (the “natural”), but Brooke-Rose’s point, and Todorov’s, is that a scrupulous and “objective” reading of the text demonstrates that the clues support either reading without tipping the balance toward one or the other (the unreal or the real). Her exhaustive essay reads *The Turn of the Screw* as “an endless spiral” (*Rhetoric of the Unreal* 173), in which either reading can be supported structurally by the series of contrasts and oppositions mirrored on multiple levels without recourse to a single originating event.

Indeed, the absence of a single precipitating event for the trauma of the ghosts’ appearance (whether as emanations of evil or emanations of the governess’s psychic state) leads Brooke-Rose to dwell on the psychoanalytic concept of trauma as a metonymic relation between two events that share certain features, “a displacement through which the elements shared by both cause the second to symbolize the first and reactivate it” (159). As opposed to a simplistic psychoanalysis of the governess (a project that Brooke-Rose abhors), her own analysis of the “natural” reading (i.e., the nonsupernatural interpretation) posits that the text itself is symptomatic, i.e., a complex transmission of signs fundamentally dependent upon displacement and substitution. In a reading that combines the tools of structuralist analysis, complete with tree diagrams and tables of repetitions and variations that occur in the text, with the methods of psychoanalysis that focus on what is not said or said obliquely (with discussion of Lacan, Freud and Breuer, and Shoshana Felman), Brooke-Rose considers the ghostly effects of letters in the text and the language of the text. Her original essay on James’s text, “The Squirm of the True II: The Long Glasses—a Structural Analysis,” revised and reprinted in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, anticipates by one year Shoshana Felman’s psychoanalytic essay, “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” published in 1977. In her revised essay, which takes Felman’s work into account, Brooke-Rose focuses on the metonymic displacements and inversions that structure the text and prevent us from mastering its content (i.e., solving its puzzle). She paraphrases Felman’s reading of the “signifying chain of letters” in James’s text that functions as “a chain of ghosts, the erased letter being like the return of the dead, and both like the story of the unconscious, the return of the repressed through the insistence of the signifier” (*Rhetoric of the Unreal*). In cataloguing the quadripartite structure of the text (based on a series of four-sided frames), Brooke-Rose notes that the four storytellers, Griffith, Douglas, the “I-narrator,” and the governess, all are transmitters of the tale for which we are given no “original.” She comments that this transmission
process “further emphasizes the loss of origin, the curiously Derridean trace of lost origin and the curiously Lacanian ‘rehandling of the signifier’ in a complex chain of transmission, each transmittor or addressor having first been a receiver or addressee, a reader who turns narrator” (Rhetoric of the Unreal 173). In this frankly Derridean reading, the missing letters set off a complex transmission of information with neither identifiable source nor destination.

But unlike Felman, Brooke-Rose seeks to anchor her discussion of the ghostly effects of James’s text narratologically, in the precise and careful structuring of its mirroring processes, including, but not limited to, the thematic of the letters and story telling in the text. A fulcrum between structuralism and poststructuralism, Brooke-Rose’s essay tries to show how a poststructuralist reading depends upon a precise formulation of the structures of a text, that “indeterminacy” and “ambiguity” are not antithetical to method and methodology. It also demonstrates that in the work of a “master” such as James, fiction, in its traumatic knowledge, anticipates theory. Although Brooke-Rose mentions that according to previous critics, James could have been acquainted with Freud’s and Breuer’s 1895 Studies on Hysteria (Rhetoric of the Unreal 159), she maintains that a psychoanalytic reading of his text need not depend upon such influence. “James, however, must have been perfectly aware that mirrors and their adjuncts (windows, spectacles, telescopes, etc.) are a constant motif in the supernatural, notably in E.T.A. Hoffmann. Nor is it so by chance. In this text, this odd detail about the governess’s upbringing, and the castration shock it ought in theory to provoke, is a fine example of the writer’s intuition having little need of specific reading in contemporary or (of course) later scientific discoveries” (Rhetoric of the Unreal 398, fn 7). What fiction “knows” is an issue that Brooke-Rose engages in multiple forms and valences, as critic, theorist, and fiction writer. The pleasures, methods, freedoms, and constraints operate variously in texts in which she represents both the systems and intuitions of contemporary discourses. Throughout this oeuvre, however, we witness a fascination with the pressure of what’s missing and an exploration of the ties that bind precisely because they are already severed.

THE FASCINATION OF WHAT’S MISSING

For Brooke-Rose, the fascination of what’s missing is a fundamental matter of technique as well as philosophy and theme. The two are indissoluble. Invisibility, nonpresence, severed ties that bind through haunting—these themes, engaged in her fiction and criticism, correlate
with the most distinctive feature of her experimental writing: her use of lipograms. Lipograms are techniques of omission, self-imposed by the author, in which a grammatical or alphabetical feature is deliberately left out. Strictly speaking, the word “lipogram” means “lacking a letter,” although I join Brooke-Rose in using the term more inclusively to refer to a number of technical “constraints.” *Invisible Author: Last Essays* is devoted to her explanation of her constraints as well as an attempt to tease out the link between these technical omissions and her own invisibility as a writer. Brooke-Rose’s constraints include: the omission of the verb “to be” in *Between*; “to have” in *Next*; personal pronouns and possessive adjectives in her autobiography *Remake* and in sections of *Subscript* (depending on the “consciousness” of the organism she is representing); and constative sentences in *Amalgamemnon*. The most significant and consistent lipogram Brooke-Rose invents in her fiction is a narratorless narrative that eschews the past tense and first-person. With no retrospection (hence, no one vantage point for looking back) and no origin or voice speaking the text, she constantly raises the question “Who speaks?” In chapter 7 of *Invisible Author*, called “The Author is Dead: Long Live the Author,” and in a reprisal in *Life, End Of*, Brooke-Rose describes her technique, adapted for her own purposes from Robbe-Grillet’s nouveau roman, as a “speakerless present . . . [an] impersonal, speakerless (narratorless) narrative” (Brooke-Rose, *Invisible Author* 152).

These “constraints” fund invention. They turn deprivation into power and jolt the novel into experimental form using limitation as a window to creative freedom. Brooke-Rose’s invention of a new, characteristic style asserts a vital alternative. In her focus on lipograms and other constraints in her experimental novels, as well as her emphasis on writing as craft and practice, Brooke-Rose resembles the group of French writers known as Oulipo, a group of writers who founded an association in 1960 which began as a colloquium devoted to the work of Raymond Queneau. The name stands for *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*. Queneau described the objective of Oulipo: “To propose new ‘structures’ to writers, mathematical in nature, or to invent new artificial or mechanical procedures that will contribute to literary activity: props for inspiration as it were, or rather, in a way, aids for creativity.” The idea of “the artisanal nature of literary work . . . central to Oulipian poetics” (Motte “Introduction” 10) characterizes Brooke-Rose’s treatment of technique as well. Writing with constraints emphasizes the discipline and craft of writing as well as its difficulty as labor. In his edited collection of some of Oulipo’s most important writings, Motte points out that “the
French word *ouvroir* has three principal meanings: it denotes the room in a convent where the nuns assemble to work, a charitable institution where indigent women engage in needlework, and a ‘sewing circle’ where well-to-do ladies make clothes for the poor and vestments for the Church” (Motte, “Introduction” 9). Motte does not emphasize the paradox that although all the forms of labor listed pertain to women’s work, most of the Oulipean writers were male.⁸

Yet, unlike the Oulipeans who advertised their lipograms both within their fiction and in manifestos, Brooke-Rose challenged her readers to discover them. Where the Oulipeans publicized the use of their constraints, sometimes affixing a “user’s manual,” Brooke-Rose tended to embed them. In doing so, she has run the risk that her technical “absences” would go undetected. In essays and interviews, Brooke-Rose sometimes laments the fact that her lipograms often went unnoticed by her readers. *Invisible Author* attempts to redress the peculiar “overlooking” of Brooke-Rose’s main grammatical lipogram: the refusal of the third-person, past tense narrative. The book begins with the question, “Have you ever tried to do something very difficult as well as you can, over a long period, and found that nobody notices? That’s what I’ve been doing for over thirty years (Brooke-Rose, *Invisible Author* 1).

In *Invisible Author* she explores the “problem of ‘visibility/invisibility’ raised by the lipogram” (3). For, despite able criticism and positive reviews, critics and reviewers failed to comment sufficiently (in Brooke-Rose’s eyes) on the importance of this absence. She contrasts the lack of attention paid to her use of the lipogram with the attention that Georges Perec attracted in writing *La Disparition* (1969), in which he omitted the letter “e.” Brooke-Rose published *Between* in 1968, a few months before *La Disparition* (translated by Gilbert Adair as *A Void* in 1994). She clearly resents the fact that the critics were intrigued when Perec announced that he had used a lipogram in *La Disparition*; yet when she revealed her own self-imposed omission to a friend and reviewer, Hélène Cixous, no one, including Cixous, seemed to care.

As much as the joint interest in lipogram, the contrast between Brooke-Rose’s use of constraints and those of the Oulipeans is instructive. Never a joiner of groups, Brooke-Rose worked alone all her life, despite her friendship with other writers in England and France. Indeed, the only reference to Oulipo in her essays on her craft in *Invisible Author*, comes in one footnote reference to Georges Perec: “Perec belonged to the club Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle), headed by Raymond Queneau at the time, whom I greatly admired, and which relished formal tours de force of this kind. I was once invited (by a lesser member)
to join, which was a huge honor, but I refused, for fear, perhaps, of being
drawn into such attractive games” (Invisible Author 183, n.5).  

Perec and his translator, for example, offered more markers of absence
than Brooke-Rose in Between. In chapter one of A Void, the reader is
introduced to the main character, Anton Vowl, whose surname itself
marks the absence of the letter “e” in the word “vowel.” In addition,
Anton, the character’s Christian name, is an anagram for “not an,” add-
ing to the clues of the absence of the letter “e.” Every time we see his
name, then, we are reminded of the absence of the most common letter
in the French language. Indeed, later on, the character himself disap-
pears. Although the English title, A Void, names an absence, the French
title La Disparition, meaning disappearance and passing, more keenly
suggests an element of ghostly trace. It is worth noting that in 1972,
Perec wrote Les revenentes, literally, “ghosts,” in which “e” is the only
vowel employed. A headnote to A Void, published in 1994, after Perec’s
death, informs the reader: “After writing La Disparition (A Void), he took
all his unused e’s and devoted them to a short text, Les revenentes, in
which e is the only vowel employed.” (Perec np)  

Talk about a return
of the repressed!

How absence signifies, technically, ontologically, emotionally is a
question Brooke-Rose will raise throughout her oeuvre in different
genres and with different techniques of omission. Although there is
often something elegiac in these hauntings, they are also intimations of
obsolescence. Like the phantom limb, desperate to continue to signify
in the young woman’s life, Brooke-Rose’s characters feel themselves
becoming increasingly obsolete, losing their significance. Writing of
what he calls “obsolete objects in the literary imagination,” Francesco
Orlando sees in literature a range of affective reactions to the obsoles-
cence hastened by the speed, mechanicity, and remakes of modern life.
His categorization of different types of images of “nonfunctional corpo-
rality,” might usefully help classify the “lightness of being” Brooke-Rose
explores: (1) living human (2) nonliving human, (3) living nonhuman,
and (4) nonliving nonhuman. Orlando is most interested in the fourth
category, the “nonliving nonhuman” and least interested in the first cat-
egory, which includes what happens to the human body in its weakness,
decrepitude, and infirmity. Brooke-Rose’s novels, however, take up the
full range of this problematic.

As the title suggests, Out, her first consciously experimental lipogramatic novel, represents abjection, its central consciousness a sick,
lethargic, and out of work humanist. Next (with its lipogram of “to
have”) explicitly represents the abjected as a social class, the homeless.
In most of her novels, humanism is a dead letter, and with it those writers, characters, and professors whose expertise is no longer valued, as with the multifaceted Cassandra-like consciousness of her novel *Amalgamemnon*, crafted in future or “unrealized” tenses only. But it is in *Remake* and, more painfully, in *Life, End Of*, that the central consciousness finds itself in a Yeatsian predicament, fastened to a dying animal. It is here, in her memoir, that “nonfunctional corporeality” renders the writer’s cruelly ironic predicament most acutely. Losing the use of her legs and her eyesight, the worker in difficult prose is no longer able to climb the stairs to her library, to read, and, finally, to write, her pleasure in the artisinal nature of her work now denied.

Brooke-Rose’s books catalogue as well the “nonliving human”—the specters that haunt the living like the phantom limb; the ghosts she analyzes in James’s *The Turn of the Screw*; Larry, the psychiatrist, who has returned from the dead and is the central consciousness of her novel *Such*; the literary characters who wander the pages of *Textermination*, nervously resisting their own extinction in the cultural memory; and, in the broadest archeological sweep, the extinct species of her Darwinian novel, *Subscript*. In *Subscript*, she also takes up the record of the “living nonhuman” (or prehuman), from the earliest cells to the invertebrates and vertebrates that comprise the species before the appearance of homo sapiens. And in *Xorandor*, she examines the “non living nonhuman”—the computer, Xorandor, whose progeny do nothing less than threaten the human archive.13

As Brooke-Rose destabilizes the ontological foundations of her “beings,” it is language that concerns her. She invents new terms for her literature of speculation. In novels and in essays, she creates “techniques for living,” a phrase she uses in her novel *Out*. Again and again, language is the site of both the threatened textermination and of survival. Indeed, originally entitled “Textermination,” Brooke-Rose’s most metatextual novel *Thru* offers constant reminders of the way that “persons” emerge grammatically and ontologically on the page (“out of the Zero where the author is situated, both excluded and included, the third person is generated, pure signifier of the subject’s experience” (*Thru* 647). *Thru* traces the path of “the sign that watches, helpless and in great pain, the engendering of its own projected trajectory struggling along” (Brooke-Rose, *Thru* 737). In “splitting” herself as theorist and novelist in *Thru* and elsewhere, Brooke-Rose stages the drama of the sign watching the engendering of its own trajectory in the theater of theory. Here, and throughout her work, technique is inseparable from techniques for living.