Dead White Males

OUT AND SUCH

OUT (1964)

If Brooke-Rose’s short story “The Foot” presents an abjected narrative “I,” her novel Out, written almost simultaneously, represents an entire abjected society. The novel is a neocosm, in Cristopher Nash’s terms, an “alternative-worlds fiction” (Nash 60). Out is a post-apocalyptic fantasy in which the “color bar” is reversed after a cataclysmic event (presumably some kind of nuclear episode). Unlike the “Melanian” races, the “colourless” have been susceptible to radiation, producing major mutations in their bodies and psyches. Whites have become sickly and powerless and blacks are healthy and in control. Nation states have regrouped in major new political configurations (e.g., Afro-Eurasia, Sino-America) and geographic displacements and internments have occurred. The binary opposition of race still determines social hierarchy, now, however, with a revolutionary reversal.

The narrative microscopically depicts the environs of a sick and unemployed white male who spends most of his time tended by his
wife in their small shack. This former humanist makes occasional forays to the “Labor Exchange” to look for work, but is basically relegated to picking up menial “odd jobs” around the estate of his wife’s employer, Mrs. Mngulu. The unnamed man is a perceiver and object of attention but not an I-narrator or lyric center: “A fly straddles another fly on the faded denim stretched over the knee. Sooner or later, the knee will have to make a move, but now it is immobilised by the two flies, the lower of which is so still that it seems dead.” Rather than actively perceiving his proximate surroundings, the man passively registers objects in the environment, objects including his own body. Out is the first novel in which Brooke-Rose forged what would become her signature constraint, the narratorless narrative sentence. Describing this technique in Invisible Author, she says: “there is no seer, only the seen, no “énonciation . . . only énoncé” (Invisible Author 138). Like Beckett’s “unchosen beings” (Brooke-Rose’s phrase), the man exists outside the power structures of society, with neither the opportunity nor the will to be an agent in his own drama.

The narration is awash in passivity—“sooner” and “later” merge in lethargy, symptomatic of the enervation experienced by society’s whites. The narration is strictly present tense; no authoritative act of narrative retrospection is possible. The passive constructions in the narrative mimic a loss of both energy and action: “Sooner or later some interruption will be necessary, a bowl of gruel to be eaten, for instance, or a conversation to undergo. Sooner or later a bowl of gruel will be brought, unless perhaps it has already been brought, and the time has come to go and get rid of it” (Out 11–12). Protagonist, plot, exposition, event, and suspense—these elements of traditional narrative are largely absent. The novel begins with a man so abjected that he cedes his minimal desire to two copulating and near dead flies whose “drama” keeps him immobilized. Rather than positing meaningful alternatives, the conjunction “or” in the phrase “sooner or later” signifies the man’s, and the narrative’s indifference.

Something has happened, but when or how is never recounted. “Did you ever find your trauma?” (Out 120), the man asks Mrs. Ned, a white woman, but the origin of the present predicament is irretrievable. We learn that there has been a general “displacement from cause to effect” (Out 120). “Somewhere in the archives there will be evidence that this occurred, if it is kept, and for those who risk to look it up. Other episodes, however, cannot be proved in this way” (Out 79). The historical sense enabled in traditional past-tense narration is itself displaced onto some imagined, but uncertain, archive. Thus, narrative, along with
society, suffers symptoms of a disease. A doctor tells the man “diagnosis only prognosticates aetiology” (Out 140), meaning, we learn later, that “no ultimate cause or ultimate cure” is possible, only an accommodation to the present reality (Out 151). A rupture has occurred as a result of some prior injustice or circumstance, but despite the many attempts to determine “what did you do avant la guerre,” there are no causes—only symptoms needing treatment. The lack of movement, the inertia, doubles the meaning of “patient,” as sick characters and ailing narrative wait for something to happen. Society, and, mimetically, the narrative, are riven with what would now be termed posttraumatic stress syndrome, a condition summed up in the line, “The weeds are scattered all over the scorched earth” (Out 197). The reader arrives somehow belatedly, unable to get her bearings.

The present-tense narrative sentence Brooke-Rose developed in Out is, in her own view, her most significant technical innovation, one that permeates her fiction. Lipogrammatic, the narrative sentence refuses traditional past tense narration. In a chapter entitled “The Author is Dead: Long Live the Author” in Invisible Author, she places her development of this narrative sentence, beginning with its use in Out, in the context of the French “nouveau roman,” as initiated by Robbe-Grillet, most prominently, along with Nathalie Sarraute and other French experimental writers. This technique deliberately eschews the third-person past tense narration of the traditional novel, that “reassuring guarantor of real events” (Invisible Author 132) and relies, instead, on the present tense. Indeed, Brooke-Rose sees Robbe-Grillet’s eschewal of the past tense as the technique that inspired Barthes to declare the “death of the author.”

Brooke-Rose read Robbe-Grillet’s In the Labyrinth when it was published in French in 1959 and translated it in 1967, three years after Out was published. (Her translation won the 1969 Arts Council Translation Prize.) She regards In the Labyrinth as the purest example of Robbe-Grillet’s narrative innovation, a “speakerless, narratorless narrative” (Invisible Author 151). It is not the present tense, per se, that she finds so fruitful in Robbe-Grillet, but its paradoxical uses. First, Robbe-Grillet used the present tense and its deictics, traditionally a speech form, in combination with an impersonality associated with the past-tense narrative sentence of the traditional novel. This, she calls the “‘scientific’ present tense (as in a scientific law)” (Invisible Author 138). Second, Robbe-Grillet’s creation of a “scientific” present was limited to a zone of consciousness instead of the omniscient perspective of science. The third and probably most important paradox is that Robbe-Grillet “never evokes an
act of seeing or a consciousness, that is, there is no seer, only the seen” (Invisible Author 138). These paradoxes add up to the distinctive narrative sentence of the “speakerless, narratorless narrative” (Invisible Author 151) Brooke-Rose describes Robbe-Grillet’s “astonishing use of the NS [narrative sentence], in which ‘no one speaks’” (Invisible Author 139). Yet, the narrative sentence is “in the present tense, in which someone necessarily speaks, yet we don’t know who, since he never says ‘I,’ or anything about himself; he is the very ‘no one speaks’ of the NS” (Invisible Author 139). In characterizing Robbe-Grillet’s technical innovation, Brooke-Rose points to a zone of consciousness, rather than a perceiver or speaker. In her translation of In the Labyrinth, Brooke-Rose is careful to maintain these paradoxical features and the strange kind of myopic description that results: “Here the sun does not enter, nor does the wind, nor the rain, nor the dust. The fine dust that dulls the shine of the horizontal planes, the varnished tabletop, the polished parquet, the marble of the mantelpiece and that of the chest of drawers, the cracked marble of the chest of drawers, the only dust here comes from the room itself: from the gaps in the parquet possibly, or from the bed, or the curtains, or the ashes in the fireplace” (Robbe-Grillet, In the Labyrinth 7–8).

In his 1963 manifesto, Pour un Nouveau Roman, Robbe-Grillet describes his technique as counteracting the anthropomorphism of traditional humanism. He desires to be on record as launching a sweeping critique of the use of metaphor to connect man and nature: “To reject our so-called ‘nature’ and the vocabulary which perpetuates its myth, to propose objects as purely external and superficial, is not—as has been claimed—to deny man; but it is to reject the “pananthropic” notion contained in traditional humanism, and probably in all humanism” (Towards a New Novel 57). Yet Robbe-Grillet’s emphasis on the scientific and anti-humanistic implicitly contradicts his reliance on the psychologizing effect of avoidance and obsession in La jalousie or the state of delirium in In the Labyrinth. Indeed, in analyzing Robbe-Grillet’s technique in In the Labyrinth, Brooke-Rose calls the sudden and confusing changes in perspective in the nouveau roman “baroque,” and attributes them to the delirious experience of the dying soldier, its protagonist. The novel, she says, is presented instantaneously, yet out of time, experienced and re-experienced through the dying soldier’s delirium, when all the data of the preceding days have acquired a dream-like intensity that nevertheless confuses time, accuracy and even subjective identity, so that the soldier could be seeing himself from outside himself as well as reliving inci-
dents and collocations of data with omissions, shifts, or added detail, as if through the expanding and contracting lens of memory and imagination; but instantaneously, merging with direct experience.” (“The Baroque Imagination of Robbe-Grillet” 418)

Although the metaphor of the lens suggests the technological apparatus of science, it is linked inextricably here to the psychological state of the soldier.

By her own admission, Brooke-Rose was “influenced” more by Robbe-Grillet than Nathalie Sarraute, another writer of the nouveau roman; yet it is Brooke-Rose’s description of Sarraute’s narrative “tropism” that most aptly characterizes the quality of her own cold narration in *Out*. Sarraute’s novels, she says, explore “the imperceptible movements at the threshold of consciousness as if they were biological tropisms.” In this summary, she contrasts Sarraute with Robbe-Grillet, who “externalizes and objectifies” (Brooke-Rose, “Imitations Are Proof of New Writing’s Power” vii). Yet this description of biological tropisms captures the way Brooke-Rose treats the human beings in her fiction as equivalent to other sentient matter undergoing chemical and physical reactions, in a kind of reversal of the pathetic fallacy. Like plants with the basic responses of turning toward and away from the light, her sickly white man’s emotional spectrum has been reduced to the most basic reactions of approach and avoidance. The avoidance of risk is his most noticeable characteristic, his signature tactic for survival. Danger lurks everywhere amongst ordinary actions:

The feeling is one of heterotrophism. The left foot treads the length of a cemented line. Between the tiles, the right foot carefully selects another line of cement parallel with the edge of the path. The amount of free energy that becomes available for the performance of useful work does not correspond to the total heat change but is equivalent to about ten thousand calories per gram. molecule, the remaining two thousand being involved in the intra-molecular changes of the reaction. It is possible to walk on such parallel lines only, almost without touching the diagonals. (*Out* 39)

In Brooke-Rose’s version of the narrative sentence as “scientific law” a deep estrangement takes place in the writing, a wrenching of narrative from the human perspective. This is a process of estrangement that transcends the more subjective rationale of alienation at work in Robbe-Grillet’s fiction. In this greater narrative defamiliarization Brooke-Rose can be compared to the writer whom she considers the greatest of inno-
vators: the author of what she calls the new “Anti-novel” novel. As early as the fifties, Brooke-Rose wrote essays on and reviews of Beckett for the English-reading public, such as her 1958 essay, “Samuel Beckett and the Anti-Novel,” published in John Lehmann’s *The London Magazine*. It is here that Brooke-Rose acknowledges Beckett’s role behind the development of the nouveau roman, specifically, his experiments with a narrative amnesia that had a profoundly defamiliarizing effect, transforming both the characters and the novel into a species of mutants. In this essay, Brooke-Rose comments on the “out of time” quality of Beckett’s narratives, which she describes as “out of focus and as if observed, not so much by a foreign visitor as by someone outside the human race, outside the world and outside time” (“Samuel Beckett and the Anti-Novel” 40). Beckett shifts the focus of the narrative lens, estranging man as the narrative almost graphs his position: “Hence the weird almost mathematical style in Watt, a style with a slight legal flavour, allowing for all contingencies, a style based on permutations of possibilities. For not only does any one action have numerous explanations, but metaphysically speaking there are also numerous other possible actions which, though not actualized by us in any one instance, exist nevertheless in a timeless mind” (“Samuel Beckett and the Anti-Novel” 41).

It is in *Out* that Brooke-Rose mixes Robbe-Grillet’s myopic, cold descriptive sentence with Beckett’s agnostic list of possibilities played out in the narrative. As in Beckett, but not Robbe-Grillet, *mutation and permutation come together*. Scientific and narrative experimentation merge visibly in the text. In *Out*, the obsessive play of variables, the almost compulsive enumeration of possibilities is not confined to the psyche of the central consciousness but becomes a property of narrative experimentation, possibilities entertained and discarded:

Mr. Swaminathan’s eyes strike an atonal chord, confusing the neural cells which complain by discharging a high mad microvoltage. It is not, however, his eyes which do this but the memory of his eyes having possibly done so, or the psychic presence, now hammered into by the high-pitched ring of metal hammer on metal chisel. A recording engineer might perhaps separate the components of the mixture. If the hammering were extracted, the lost sentences that came and went and returned in reconstructed form might be recovered and heard. (*Out* 98–99)

The “expanding and contracting lens of memory and imagination” that Brooke-Rose speaks about in Robbe-Grillet is literalized in a text
that proposes various instruments for recording experience. In an ironic twist on the French novel’s “scientific” present tense, scientific instruments, “scopes” of all kinds, are advanced in the narrative as possible modern technologies for returning the narrative to old certainties. The narrative suggests that these instruments might be useful in charting physical, emotional, and narrative movements, but the narrative does not “commit” to using them:

A microscope might perhaps reveal animal ecstasy among the innumerable white globules in the circle of gruel, but only to the human mind behind the microscope. And besides, the fetching and the rigging up of a microscope, if one were available, would interrupt the globules. If, indeed, the gruel hadn’t been eaten by then, in which case a gastroscope would be more to the point. And a gastroscope at that juncture of the gruel’s journey would provoke nausea. (Out 15)

Here, the contents of bowels, stomachs, and minds receive equivalent treatment in the deadpan narrative. Although the “human mind” is granted as the only consciousness capable of projecting “ecstasy,” each potential act of measurement, whether by instrument (gastroscope) or human intervention, runs the risk of nullifying the activity itself. And, assuming the bowl of gruel/Petri dish contents had been consumed already, the instrument would provoke nausea and disgust rather than an imagined orgy of ecstatic globules.

There is indeed something “baroque” about this style, which yokes together by violence disparate things, to paraphrase Dr. Johnson on the Metaphysical poets. This is a kind of “analogical thinking” that Brooke-Rose recognizes in Robbe-Grillet, despite his overt claim to eschew all forms of metaphor. Indeed, Brooke-Rose protests that Robbe-Grillet means only certain kinds of metaphors associated with “humanizing” nature. She explicitly counters his sweeping refusal of metaphor by pointing to the “analogical thinking” present in the nouveau roman and points to the Baroque poets as precursors of the genre. In the “best baroque poetry,” she says, metaphor is

neither just decorative nor anthropomorphic but functional, one of the many means developed by those poets for the purpose of resolving the contradictory aspects of emotional experience in relation to the changing validities of time and the physical world. When Donne turns a flea into ‘our mariage bed, and mariage temple’ or says to the sun “This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere,” or of his lady-love
“She’ is all States, and all princes, I,” he is shifting the perspective quite as suddenly as Robbe-Grillet does with a swift verbal close-up or a camera swerve away from, say, the eyes of A, the ‘narrator’s’ wife in Jalousie, to the parapet of the terrace and then to the banana-segment in the distance. In Donne the shift is part of a complex argument, but the argument itself is a way out of an emotionally untenable position stated as an intellectual dilemma. Today, the process is necessarily much less overt, reflecting unconscious or semi-conscious fears, and Robbe-Grillet’s unpronounced [sic] narrator averts his eyes from a visual image because it may, and eventually does, lead to other visual images which are too painful.” (Brooke-Rose, “The Baroque Imagination” 408–9)

Brooke-Rose the critic and Brooke-Rose the experimental novelist merge in these perceptions, as she tries to capture the function of Robbe-Grillet’s deliberate juxtaposition, with its disjunctive formal and emotional effects. In updating this “yoking” with Robbe-Grillet’s example, Brooke-Rose both localizes the sudden shifts of perspective in the pain and desire of the protagonist and acknowledges the avoidance as a narrative property, a textual reaction to the altered properties of a radical new world order.5

Even as she pays tribute to Robbe-Grillet’s influence, Brooke-Rose ups the ante of the narrative stakes. Her own “paradoxical” narrative sentence is more radically severed than Robbe-Grillet’s from the subjective, anthropomorphic rationale that he intends to leave behind. In Out, Brooke-Rose’s narrative technique is neither as phenomenologically based as Robbe-Grillet’s nor as existential as Beckett’s. In her version of the French new novel, Brooke-Rose makes the breakdown of narrative symptomatic of a social breakdown. For Out is a dystopia, a type of science fiction in which we find “new configurations of inner and outer space.”6 Brooke-Rose imagines a scenario of revolutionary reversal which is like a photographic negative, with black and white power relations reversed, sometimes explicitly, in the technology of representation: “In the white wall the glossy black door opens suddenly. The woman stands framed by the whiteness, pert and petite and pretty in a white linen dress the neckline of which embraces the glowing basalt of her throat as a crescent moon the night sky. It is more difficult as a negative. The background is of pale flowers and cypress hedge receding. . . . The negative creates a silence” (Out 175–76).

Language, geography, and physiology bear the effects of this radical reversal of black on white, “negative” on positive. Whites, formally the norm and therefore unmarked in language, are now described as
“colourless,” their lack of color marked linguistically (Out 146). Their “waxiness” (Out 175) is a symptom of deficiencies in liver and spleen. In Out, Brooke-Rose ironically rewriting “the white man’s burden” (Out 140) in a fantasy of a new (and white) “invisible man.” What is unusual about Brooke-Rose’s dystopic fiction, however, is that it links social critique to narrative experiment. As opposed to much science fiction, which leaves a more or less “transparent” prose intact in order to create a coherent “neocosm” or alternate world, in Brooke-Rose’s fiction, discourse becomes symptomatic.

Here again, Brooke-Rose literary critic and Brooke-Rose experimental novelist intervene in literary history. Although a student of science fiction, Brooke-Rose herself finds it formally unadventurous: “One of the most striking features of much science fiction until fairly recently has been its lack of imagination with regard to narrative technique, as opposed to its imagination with regard to ideas. It took over wholesale the techniques of the realistic novel” (Rhetoric of the Unreal 82). Working against this tradition, Brooke-Rose creates a mutant narrative about mutation. Her strict omission of past tense narration and its corollaries—narrative memory, event, authority, and, even, desire—mimes the social deprivations of the colourless characters. The disappearance of retrospective past tense narration (the “guarantor” of the real), signals an ironic punishment for the former subjugators; it brings a loss of narrative memory that severs them from their power to call the shots. The unrelenting narrative present in Out is a “sentence” meted out to the once powerful white society: “—It’s because of there being no past, and no future, ma’am, it’s so difficult, living in the present” (Out 124), the white man tells Mrs. Mgulu, his wife’s employer, who takes pity on him and gives him work. “—You fed on our past,” he tells her, “and drained us, now you deny the past but need to remind us, it’s an empty ritual for you, a weakness. But it hurts” (Out 124). Trapped in repetition, uncertain of the difference between projection and event, imagination and occurrence, the dying white man suffers.

The sickly white imagination swells uncomfortably and uncontrollably, a symptom without a demonstrable cause. History in Out is recoverable only as a series of possible textualizations of the past, “an absent cause”, as defined by Fredric Jameson in The Political Unconscious (35). Nonetheless, history leaves its indelible wound on the bodies of the characters and the body of the narrative. Brooke-Rose’s novel is post-colonial as well as postapocalyptic: the empire strikes back against the vampiric colonizer, giving new meaning to the phrase “the white man’s burden.” If colonialism is the obvious satiric target (and the source of the
original “moral” imperative behind the phrase and its conception), any redress provided by liberalism, with its dream of equality is exposed as illusory. The “displacement from cause to effect” (Out 120) signals the lost cause of liberalism and the specious idealism of the liberal “interest” in all races and peoples. A poster hanging above the entrance to the Labour Exchange proclaims, “We had a dream. It’s a disgrace” (Out 82).

Despite the ironic justice underlying the reversals of power, sloganeering and subjugation continue in their new lodgings. Although the past is “denied” by the newly powerful, the empty mantra of the new bureaucrats actually commemorates the failed dream: “Exalting all colours to the detriment of none, don’t you know your slogans?” (Out 125) says Mrs. Mgulu to the man. The “revolution” produces no miracles, only more bureaucracy, more bourgeois policings of the norm, albeit with a different-looking norm produced. “—And if the past proves nothing why do they keep asking about my previous occupation?” the white man says to Mrs. Ned, and she replies: “—They’re bureaucrats. They’re behind the times” (Out 118).

Thus novelistic “transgression” and societal subversion are linked mimetically in Brooke-Rose’s first use of her characteristic narratorless narrative. The categories of identity, history, and community have been radically altered in the postapocalyptic reordering of society; transgressions of time, mode, and voice reveal a corresponding lack of faith in the categories of narrative. In an essay on similar “transgressions” in the nouveau roman, Brooke-Rose uses Genette’s structuralist system to analyze the creation of a disorienting, perpetual present. Robbe-Grillet and other French writers of the new novel, she says, exploit a fusion of time to create a “slow down” of narrative time. By using the present, whatever the order of events, Brooke-Rose says that these practitioners of the novel leave the reader disoriented: “we never quite know when (and whether) something is occurring, or re-occurring (or being recalled), the only time markers being contingent ones, such as slight differences in the retelling, in the position of objects, or in the climate” (Rhetoric of the Unreal 314). These fictions participate in a kind of narrative “slow-down” which renders the element of “story” wholly problematic, as the categories of foreground and background become indissoluble. In these novels, Genette’s category of “order,” too “becomes irrelevant, since the very notion of ‘event’ is transgressed” (Rhetoric of the Unreal 315).

Thus, although Out retains the lineaments of a plot, as most analysts have observed, events are difficult to chart, both because (1) it is impossible to know whether a particular event is told many times but
happens once (repetitive telling) or told many times and happens many times (singulative telling) (“Transgressions,” Rhetoric of the Unreal 317), and (2) it is impossible to distinguish between scenes that are in the mind or in the world. This transgression is commented on continually and metanarratively in the text: “Unless perhaps a certain period has already elapsed since that episode, if indeed it occurred.” Not only are there new configurations of outer and inner space, but the demarcation between the two is deliberately obfuscated. In this forensic nightmare, we, and the man, are deprived of “proof” of existence and event (“It would help me so much, it would help to confirm my existence,” the man tells Mr. Swaminathan).

These technical “transgressions” create a sense of narrative inertia, as the time of narration greatly exceeds the time of the story. This technical inertia is a “technique for living,” of sorts, for the phrase, “[e]verything that moves increases risk” (Out 57), echoes repeatedly in the text. It is a mantra that pertains to both the man and the narrative; the narrative makes a tropic swerve from certain topics and a phobic refusal to commit to story: “Sometimes it is sufficient merely to imagine an episode for the episode to occur, though not necessarily in that precise form” (Out 68). In this desultory mix of supposition, conjecture, erasure, and iteration, narrative authority vanishes and narrative desire appears moribund.

Postapocalyptic and postcolonial, Out also locates us in a “post-psychoanalytic age” in which transference, the belief, established over time, in the authority of the doctor/analyst, is no longer possible.7 In the absence of traditional trusted “authorities,” licensed to report both psychological and epistemological realities, substitute techniques and specious authority figures proliferate. The “psychoscope” takes over the function of the trusted retrospective narrator; supposedly it “telescope[s] a whole life-time after all, and quite, quite objectively” (Out 150). The swami-like figure of Mr. Swaminathan, Mrs. Mgulu’s “managing agent,” presents himself, one of many bureaucrats and functionaries who intrude on the white man’s consciousness. Surveillance performed by the omniscient narrator is replaced by a series of stand-ins policing his thoughts. No one can set the story straight; no one can provide knowledgeable exposition. Mr. Swaminathan polices the white man’s desires and withholds his approval like a stern father. Yet, although these substitutes appear in the text as separate characters with speaking parts and agency, it is also suggested that they function as figments of the white man’s imagination, as introjected authorities:
—Mr. Swaminathan, you said in the street that memory is a primitive weapon.

—My dear chap, memory is not a place but a racing function of neural cells giving off dismal rhythms at less than ten microvolts, which are driven into by the high-pitched ring of hammer on chisel into marble. What did you say your occupation was before the er—?

—I was a humanist.

—I didn’t mean your politics . . . You’re a square peg in a round hole aren’t you?

The conversation cannot take the form of the hammering because during the hammering there is no conversation, and during the conversation, if it occurred, there was no hammering. Without a recording engineer no chemistry of identity can put those two elements together in time. . . . Either the conversation has partially occurred, the beginning, for instance, the remainder being suppressed, selected, manipulated, transformed, schematised, because inunderstood. Or the conversation has wholly occurred, and been wholly manipulated, transformed, schematised, because inunderstood . . . A corollary is that the conversation has wholly occurred and that Mr. Swaminathan is mad. . . . A second corollary is that the conversation has wholly occurred and is wholly sane but beyond the grasp of sick white reasoning.” (Out 108–9)

In a scene in which the man receives “psychoscopy,” Mr. Swaminathan merges with other authority figures, doctors, priests, fathers, and God. “Will you lay down the white man’s burden?” the doctor adds, and the next line of dialogue, presumably thought by the white man himself is “—He is dying. Absolve him . . . That are heavy laden. Take it up, take it up for me . . . Oh, father, doctor, touch me, cure me, oh Mr. Swaminathan, I love you” (Out 140). Yet the past cannot be absolved or forgiven, the guilt of the “white man’s burden” is not expunged. Some quick fixes are proposed, spurious “technique[s] for living” (Out 132), like the one Mrs. Mgulu proposes, can be provided by a Doctor Fu Teng. The new elite babble on about “rehabilitation” and reclamation (Out 146), but the effects of trauma persist. Despite Mrs. Joan Dkimba’s assertions that “it’s quite incredible but people do forget, oh yes, new generations, despite history and everything” (Out 150), and no matter how many instruments attempt to sanitize the past, a residue remains. Indeed, like the phantom limb in “The Foot,” absence physically aches: “The absolute knowledge that Mrs. Mgulu writes no notes and walks along no highway and does not nod and aches there by her absence, the
absolute knowledge enters the body through the marrow bone, and up into the medullary centers, down the glosso-pharyngeal nerve no doubt or the pneumogastric, at any rate forward and down into the throat which tightens as the knowledge spreads into the chest and hurts” (Out 163).

The fixers, including a peremptory narrative voice that exhorts the man to “comment and percolate” suggest that ridding the mind of painful thoughts is like emptying the bladder: “We can make our errors in a thought and reject them in another thought, leaving no trace of error in us. Comment and percolate. Sooner or later the bladder must be emptied, leaving no trace of urine in us. Explicate and connect. The grey base of the olive-tree darkens and steams a little” (Out 53).

These easy prescriptions, these spurious “techniques,” cannot heal the trauma. Yet, amidst these false cures, hints of possible connections and possible meanings appear. The new instruments of narrative just might detect a meaningful moment before it is quickly erased: “A periscope, held backwards, might perhaps reveal whether the turning away of the red network of veins and the moving off, beyond the red pointsettas, of the broad-brimmed hat over the deeply lined red neck has been totally accomplished, or whether there has been another turn, and a pause, and a watching there still” (Out 39). A look, a phrase of dialogue—something possible but not verifiable “happens” in the novel, before suffering the typical fate of erasure. One is left with a fleeting sense of emotional connection, a pale shadow of what real human interaction might look like. Narrative conjectures, narrative investments in possibilities, however quickly “erased,” begin to take on a resonance.

Thus, out of the strict lipogrammatic denials of the prose—a prose without history, author, narrator, or story—some emotional valence survives. Here, a comment Brooke-Rose makes about Robbe-Grillet’s experimental program is helpful. In her review of Robbe-Grillet’s Jealousy, Brooke-Rose praises his experimental technique but goes on to say: “To me, however, the most fascinating aspect of Robbe-Grillet is the extent to which his novels come off best where he fails these theories, investing objects, willy-nilly, with emotional and moral significance . . .” (“Review of Jealousy” 74–76). Within the Petri dish, the human organism strangely adapts. Within the cold, withholding narrative Brooke-Rose deliberately constructs in her novel, objects and perceptions are invested with emotional significance. Constraints produce adaptations. Even lost words can become valuable: “The dialogue runs smoothly along the kindness in the soft black eyes, orchestrated by a depth of racial memory. . . . The dialogue flatters as the smooth face turns its curved oblongs of reflected
sunlight off towards the olive grove and a monologue moves away on the other side of the dark neck and the crinkly black ball . . .” (Out 181). What emerges in the narrative of Out is a certain poignancy, for despite the politics of amnesia on the part of the strong and the strategy of emotional avoidance on the part of the weak, iteration, conjecture, enumeration of possibilities, begin to look like desire.

In Out, Brooke-Rose breaks the rules of the French rule-breakers. In her essay on narrative transgression in the nouveau roman, she points out the near absence of both “heterodiegetic analepsis (reference to a prior event told by an external narrator outside the characters) and “marked prolepsis, which gives story information in advance (the canonic ‘we shall see later that’ or ‘I never saw/was never to see him again’)” (“Transgressions” in Rhetoric of the Unreal 314). In her own novel, however, a strange form of marked prolepsis does make repeated appearances in the following refrain: “Sooner or later some interruption will be necessary” (Out 11); “Sooner or later movement, which is necessary but not inevitable, will lead to attainment” (Out 16). This is hardly a case of imparting “story information in advance.” Indeed, the distinction between sooner and later doesn’t really matter in this prison of iteration. Yet, the repetition of the phrase begins to seem like a mantra, an insistence that sooner or later, some events WILL occur. The phrase “Sooner or later some interruption will be necessary” reintroduces the desire for a plot. Both the protagonist and the narrative need motivation and the exigencies of storytelling (even experimental storytelling that jettisons “story” and “history”) demand it. The boredom in the phrase gives birth to the possibility of prediction. Instead of the sentimental occurrences of plot in a conventional novel, propositions gather emotional effects as they begin to resemble desire.

The novel closes, however, not with hope, but with a dream of annihilation. Ultimately, in Out, Brook-Rose refuses to sentimentalize these moments or to have them function as more than a trace. At the end of the novel, the white man dreams of a funeral pyre, the site of the extinction of “the human element,” which “disintegrates and radiates into the huge consciousness of light, under the eyelids a gold triangle, a yellow shower” (Out 198). Inner and outer space converge in catastrophe. Another apocalypse is staged, albeit in dream mode: “A moment of agony, of burning flesh, an aspect of the human element disintegrating to ash, and you are dead. But that’s another story” (Out 198). The death of the dreamer leads to the birth of a new novel, a further chapter in the narrative of the dead white male. This Christ-like new “story” is the story told in Such, a novel that records the near-death experience of
another white male, who returns, like Christ and Lazarus, from the dead and is “reborn.”

In *Out*, the elements of traditional narration are obsolete; humanity itself is a dead letter. Some historical event has altered the trajectory of history, some event strong enough to destabilize the tenacious racial structure of power and domination. This new world, this “nouvum” requires a whole new calculus of emotions, of ethics, of politics. In a world where man can only project ecstasy onto flies and where “recumbent humanity” is scrutinized by instruments of science as coldly and efficiently as amoeba under a microscope, sentimentality is obsolete. Yet out of the constraints, out of the deliberate deprivations of traditional techniques, something new, something painful, and something powerful is created. The novel ends. We move OUT. We are evicted.

“We had a dream. It’s a disgrace.” If one were to search for an analogous piece of fiction as cold and deliberately unlovable and unloving as *Out*, one might propose J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, one of the most demanding novels emerging out of the earth-shaking reversals that have occurred in South Africa with the end of apartheid. “A risk to own anything: a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go around, not enough cars, shoes, cigarettes. Too many people, too few things . . .” (98). Coetzee’s novel is in the present tense, like Brooke-Rose’s. Like *Out*, it deliberately eschews the comforts of most fiction, like narrative retrospection and identification with a sympathetic consciousness—the Enlightenment calculus of emotions and knowledge that has underwritten the tradition of the novel. Like the white man in *Out*, Coetzee’s protagonist, Lurie, is a former humanist, a humanities teacher who loses his job after an affair with a student. Abjected from society, he is neither abject nor apologetic. During the course of the novel, he tries to come to grips with the rape of his only daughter as well as an “offer” of protection and a kind of marriage from the taciturn and angry Petrus, the gardener on his daughter’s farm. Both class and color reversals of power occur in postapartheid South Africa. Like the man in Brooke-Rose’s novel, Lurie is a white man so off-center and off-putting that he tests the reader’s patience and powers of identification. Like *Out*, *Disgrace* refuses to represent either art or truth and reconciliation as panaceas that will undo the pain of a history of racism and oppression. Like Brooke-Rose, Coetzee links technique with survival, new “techniques for living.” The tone and tense of prose narrative respond to the growing uncertainties, the new configurations of desire, the demand to address the past
without pretending to erase it. “A tape-recorder might perhaps reveal certain phrases that came and went, leaving no trace of error in us,” we read in Out (Out 57), but for both Coetzee and Brooke-Rose, the trace remains. In both novels, the present is, indeed, a sentence, an effect that bears the painful traces of the past but does not neatly assign it a place in retrospective knowledge. Both authors trust the genre of the novel to represent the painful residue of this suffering, but it is a novel radically reformed. For both, technique fuses form and content in presenting a disgraced and scorched environment. A new kind of fiction is needed, one that casts a cold eye on life, on death.

**SUCH:**
THE DEATH AND AMAZING RECOVERY OF THE WHITE MALE (1966)

“A moment of agony, of burning flesh, an aspect of the human element disintegrating to ash, and you are dead. But that’s another story” (Out 198). *Such* is that other story, a story, if one can call it that, of a dead psychiatrist named Laurence, whose heart, we learn only later, has stopped on the operating table. Clinically dead, Larry has been placed in a coffin and buried before the first page of the novel. The novel begins without attributing a name or form to the consciousness recorded in the first paragraphs: “Silence says the notice on the stairs and the stairs creak. Or something creaks in the absolute dark, the notice having come and gone like things. Someone creaks, leveling out nails perhaps with the pronged side of a hammer . . . Voices hang on a glimpse of five moons, five planets possibly. The layers of my atmosphere, however, distort the light waves traveling through it and upset the definition” (203). The juxtaposition of the possessive pronoun and the cosmic distance unsettles the reader’s perspective. It is impossible to know where we are.

Brooke-Rose has called the novel her “least ‘mimetic,’” and points out that it began only with a sentence that she thought of as she heard the noise of creaking stairs in a hotel somewhere in Portugal. The sentence grew “out of what was neither a technical nor a philosophical idea” (Stories, Theories and Things 14); nevertheless, thematically, *Such* takes the premise of Out one step further and stages the death, rather than the dying, of the protagonist. How does a writer tell a story of a dead white male, a writer who is interested in experimenting with fiction and departing from canons and clichés? A woman writer who
wishes to depart from and at the same time is drawn, almost compulsively, to the “banality of the same untender story” of flawed relationships between men and women? In Out, Brooke-Rose represents the dying gasp of this subject in a text that focused on the “white” in the complex subject of the “dead white male.” As she tells the story in Stories, Theories and Things, in the summer of 1964, after writing Out, she began a new novel about a simultaneous translator of undetermined sex, but became “totally blocked until, some three years and another novel later, this simultaneous interpreter became a woman” (Stories, Theories and Things 6). Such is the novel she wrote in the summers of 1964 and 1965, after dropping the as yet untitled novel Between “in despair” (Stories, Theories and Things 14). In Such, the white male is given one more shot in a story in which he dies and is reborn.

Thus the story of the death and rebirth of the white male in Such is an allegory of his fate in Brooke-Rose’s hands. The dead white male is resurrected as a subject one more time; Laurence, Larry, Lazarus, Someone (all names used in the narrative for the main consciousness) arises after three days and three nights of his death experience, struggling to remember the “journey” he took while lying unconscious. The novel is divided into two parts: Part I begins with his fantastic astronomical voyage, a drama that represents the workings of his unconscious as he experiences the death of the body. It ends with the staged “heat death” of the universe, the point of maximum entropy (and minimum energy for work), a universal death that corresponds to Larry’s own death wish. Part II begins with Larry now “reborn,” returning to his life and gazing in the mirror, struggling with the “nebulous memory” (Such 336 [pun intended]) of his bizarre journey: “[I]nside the mirror the tall thin man stares back, as before death, before recovery, as when life took its normal course through blood vessels, nerve fibres, muscle spindles, bones, flesh and such” (Such 335; my italics).

According to the OED, “such” is “a demonstrative word used to indicate the quality or quantity of a thing by reference to that of another or with respect to the effect that it produces or is capable of producing.” Brooke-Rose points out that “such” is the only “adjectival title” among the prepositional titles in her Omnibus collection (Invisible Author 54). The word points to what comes before or after, either continuing or summarizing what has been said or proposing a new comparison. In the sentence quoted above from Part 2 of the novel that describes the life of the body, with its nerves, muscles, organs, blood, bones, “flesh and such,” the phrase alludes to what has come before. It functions like “etcetera,” confirming what has been, the ordinary, the habitual, the
known. But nothing about this novel takes the ordinary for granted. Larry’s near-death experience jolts “ordinary” human existence off its axis. During his near-death experience, the former physicist turned psychiatrist has his certainties blasted, including the explanations of life provided by both physics and psychoanalysis. Although his “death and amazing recovery” (223; 247) is the story journalists and scientists alike want to hear, Larry finds this story impossible to tell.

Indeed, the bizarre psychic journey Larry takes in Part 1 of Such can only be told in metaphoric terms: it is not life “and such,” but life “such as” only astrophysics can describe it. The narrative in Part 1 turns life inside out, the psychic journey told as star trek. As Sarah Birch, Michela Canepari-Labib, and Christine Brooke-Rose herself have pointed out, the novel relies on a fundamental analogy between inner and outer space and draws its technique from the language of astrophysics. Astrophysics, or the application of the theories and methods of physics to the study of stellar structure, evolution, and origin, is applied to both Larry’s psyche in Part 1 and his “posthumous” views of his relationships with other people once he comes back to life. In Such, Brooke-Rose takes the study of the waves emitted and absorbed by celestial bodies and uses it as a metaphor for the distances between people. “I had discovered,” she says in Stories, Theories and Things “that scientific language, when taken ‘literally’ (non-scientifically) becomes metaphoric” (14). In Invisible Author, she describes Larry as “a man who has died briefly and sees distances between people as a radio telescope sees the stars” (58). Larry registers loneliness, relationship, anger, jealousy in terms of the movement of radio waves and subatomic particles. A woman “bombers the square room with the particles of a vague discontent” (Such 282). The rival who seduces Larry’s wife while he is technically dead is described as riding her “in the nearby remoteness of his ulterior motive which I read like the distant stars” (Such 228). Terms that we normally use to describe the defenses and vulnerabilities of human communication, such as emotional “opacity” or “resistance” are restored to their physical origins, sometimes passing from dead to live metaphor in a single instance. “Something,” the woman cicerone who accompanies him on his journey like Dante’s Virgil, tells him, “And so I find it hard to get through to you. The layers of atmosphere distort the light waves traveling through it and upset the definition” (Such 236). Just as the parabolic dish focuses radio waves into a concentrated signal that is filtered and amplified, we read of “parabolic gestures that create situations,” and “angular attitudes that send things off into elliptical orbits until the crowd yells, hisses, stamps its feet” (Such 362).
The psychiatrist who has spent his life “collecting silences,” attempting to separate himself from the chaos, need, and burdens of human responsibility, experiences the breakdown of the barriers he has erected. He begins to hear things he never heard before, an emotional music of the spheres:

the vibrant hum of waves merging, doubling, trebling each other and overlapping, expanding, bursting the walls, the street, the entire sky in ultra-violet light when before dawn the degree of ionization in the lower atmosphere has fallen off and the higher layer then reflects, something at least. (Such 363)

“Something” is not only his female guide during his fantastic journey, but also a part of his own psyche, like all his guides on this fantastic journey. Something seems to function as the voice of Eros or the life instincts within him, combating Thanatos, the death drive. She is the force toward connection, toward creating greater unities; she represents the instincts of self-preservation and union. (I will return to this Freudian landscape in a moment.)

Creating what one might call a series of subjective correlatives, Brooke-Rose maps outer space onto the deeper psychic level of instincts and drives. Thus, the vehicle in which Something and Someone travel is a “means of communication” with his own psyche first and foremost. It is a “programming of . . . basic urges with Erase, Shift Count, Inhibit” (292). Their vehicle

drives heavily from bump to bump, holding the road well with its thousand hundredweight. The driving depends on perfect co-ordination between Something and me. I watch the fuel, manipulate the gears, she keeps the speed steady and handles the steering wheel. The little orange lights flicker like stars on the grey control panel, each over well-lit letters that say Erase, Uninhibit, Shift Count, Pot Drawer, One-shot trigger and things like that. We thus have no need for a back-seat driver and our two sons can sleep behind the tarpaulin. (260)

The mechanisms of “drives” are comically literalized in the various vehicles that transport Someone and Something over land, sea, and space. In creating a landscape that doubles inner and outer space, Brooke-Rose plays on the overly literal acceptance of Freudian topologies of the unconscious and transforms it into a poetic scenario. In her essay, “Id is, is id?,” first published in *Discourse in Psychoanalysis and*
Literature, reprinted in Stories, Theories and Things, she criticizes the “certain literalness” of some Freudian disciples in their faithful acceptance of a “new theology” (“Id is, is id?” 37) of the unconscious. She acknowledges, however, Freud’s own poetic use of topology in his “incredible search for a mechanical analogy” to psychic processes, like memory and the unconscious (35). “Freud himself was a poet in this respect, and as poet and doctor he gave an explanation of the functioning of the unconscious on an (as yet then unelaborated) model of human languages, an explanation which was both neurologically and linguistically more satisfying than he perhaps fully understood at the time” (37).

Critiquing the rigidity of Freudian typology, Brooke-Rose bends Freud’s dynamic and linguistic models of the psyche to her own purposes in Such. According to Freud, instincts, or drives, bridge the gap between “the somatic and the mental” (Laplanche and Pontalis 364). His dynamic model represents “psychical phenomena as the outcome of the conflict and of a combination of forces—ultimately instinctual in origin—which exert a certain pressure” (Laplanche and Pontalis 126). In Freud’s model, the word “‘dynamic’ is employed in particular to characterize the unconscious, in so far as a permanent pressure is maintained there which necessitates a contrary force—operating on an equally permanent basis—to stop it from reaching consciousness” (Laplanche and Pontalis 126). The analogy between the physical and psychical journey in Such, with its concentration on energies and forces, borrows from the language of astrophysics in order to describe relationships and psychic processes. But it is related as well to the dynamic landscape of the Freudian psyche, itself based on an economic view of quantities of energies that flow and conflict with one another. Indeed, as Laplanche and Pontalis point out, the original context of Freud’s ideas of “free” and “bound” psychical energies was the second principle of thermodynamics (gradual loss of energy) (172).

The relation between the physical and mental is also established in the dual career of Larry, the physicist turned psychiatrist who works in a department of astrophysics in a university. A “scientist” with two vocabularies for mapping the universe, ironically he has so repressed his own desires that it is only through the experience of his death that he breaks through the resistances he has built up over a lifetime of denial. Professor Head, a colleague in the department and the wise spokesperson for an advanced scientific theory that still admits the mystery of the universe, tells Larry that physicists attempt to obtain answers from the particles of the universe while psychiatrists attempt to map the “geometries of the soul.” Speaking to Larry during his recovery, Professor
Head upholds the physicist’s approach: “We do our best. We tap the silent telephones of outer space, we bounce our questions on the galaxies which answer out of aeons. But they give no names, no explanations, only infinities of calculations. You on the other hand give names to the complex geometries of the soul, you explain perhaps, but do you heal, within space-time I mean. These maps represent something, certainly, but not the ultimate mystery of the first creation that has gone for ever with its scar inside one huge unstable atom” (271).

Before his death, Larry has deluded himself into thinking that labeling is the same as therapy, the removal of a scar. His method of analysis represents the most leaden application of Freud. But Larry’s experience of death helps him discover the limitations of this notion of therapeutic cure. After returning from his “journey,” Larry announces his resignation from the hospital staff. He says, “For a long time I’ve had no future as a spy. The great failure of our century. We give names to sicknesses, but we don’t heal, merely create new dependencies” (341). This realization takes place in the context of the more or less “realistic” dialogue that dominates Part II of the text after his “rebirth” (still punctuated by long sections of the “nebulous” memory of his experience). Something makes the same accusation in the fantasy world of the dream journey in Part 1. She accuses him of hiding behind his psychiatric labels, what she calls his “five geometries” (215). Something chastises Someone for the resistances he creates, the defenses that present him from truly “hearing” what others are saying and understanding his own inner voices as well. His “atmospheric density” gets in the way (217). In a sense, his heart has been dead before it literally stops on the operating table. When he returns to life in Part II, his wife, Brenda, tells him that the doctors could find nothing organically wrong with him, “just nerves” (305).

In an explicit reference to Dante, Larry makes his journey “midway through life in the dark wood” (303). His “mid-life crisis” fuses the more typical meaning in ordinary parlance with a more radical turn from mid-life to brief death. His journey into death is a stripping away of the defenses that enable him to shut out both his own inner voices and the needs of others. It is Something who counsels him in this process, literally giving birth to the layers of Someone’s psychic development and helping him to recognize them. At the beginning of the novel, the as yet unnamed dead man climbs out of his coffin to find himself in a landscape that is both an interior of a building—an amphitheatre (part operating theatre and part theater of the absurd, with actors going up and down the stairs)—and an interstellar space, replete with five moons or planets: “Between each desk of the amphitheatre the floor sinks like
a blanket of interstellar cloud. The silence has a creaking quality” (204). On the “outer orbit,” an unnamed woman appears, who describes herself as a “girl-spy.” A dialogue follows, as the man tries to orient himself:

—Don’t you have a name?
—Do you need to tell me apart?
—No, but I’d like to call you something.
—All right then, call me Something.
—Wouldn’t you like to call me something too?
—Oh, no, we’d only get confused.

—But I don’t know my name.
—You will. In the meantime, if you insist, I’ll call you Someone.

(205)

“Something” carries a row of quintuplets, born, as in Greek myth, from part of her anatomy, in this case from her knee. They are described as planets, moons, or cylinders. Someone wants the children to be baptized and in an elaborate “naming” process, Jonas the trumpeter plays the five children into existence. These astral blues brothers and sisters take their names from jazz classics: Gut Bucket Blues, Potato Head Blues, Tin Roof Blues, Dippermouth Blues, and Really the Blues. Each planetary “child” moves off into orbit. The planetary “children” are “slices” of himself, impulses or “cylinders” which drive him but that he banishes from acknowledgment. Someone initially believes that baptism “doesn’t just give names, it gets rid of the original cause” (207), but Something protests that naming does the work of repression only temporarily: “—Only for a time, Someone. The original cause comes back. You don’t understand much, do you?” (207) and “—Oh, they’ll come back. Things do” (206). Each of the “children” will return during Part 1 of the novel. Thus, although Someone wants to jettison his burdens, he finds they return, like boomerangs: “—We all remain,” Tin Roof tells him. “You can’t get rid of us merely by giving us names and sending us into oblivion. Oblivion has its orbits, like everything, you know that” (329). Getting in touch with his inner child, as a new age ideology might put it, he hears the voices of earlier selves buried within him.

Larry’s journey is thus both a family vacation from hell and an inner descent in which he regresses to encounter the various psychic layers of his own development. The five planetary children come back to sing the blues, the drives and desires that Larry has tried to repress. Not until
he “suffers the children to come” (328), as Tin Roof puts it, does the physician heal himself. Larry must recognize the “cylinders” that drive him, including the “ticking of [his] time” (328), his own mortality, and the most basic of human instincts, according to Freud, the death drive.

These planetary children, then, represent different aspects of Larry’s psyche. The age of each child doubles the age of the previous one: Three-year-old Dippermouth (who has a clock face, tells time and, occasionally, screams in alarm), expresses, according to Brooke-Rose, “a small child’s need of constant attention, the times expressing only smile and opposite” (Brooke-Rose, e-mail, 10/20/03). Dippermouth is the first basic indicator of Larry’s flawed “means of communication” (“You can’t photograph means of communication that work by magnetic impulses, except as they appear on dials,” Telford, an old friend, later tells Larry, “and the viewer soon gets bored with dials and wavy lines and mathematical formulae” [367]). The three-year-old Dippermouth is followed by Gut Bucket, with the deeper and more contained emotional life of the six-year-old, and then Potato Head, the more opaque twelve-year-old girl (Brooke-Rose has called her “the opposite sex aspect of any psyche at that age, very affectionate but dumb, i.e., not really recognized” [Brooke-Rose e-mail, 10/20/03]). Tin Roof, the outspoken and “unscreened” twenty-four-year-old, is next, and, finally, the adult reality (Really) of the psychiatrist at forty-eight (328) (According to Brooke-Rose, Really represents “the illusion we have at any adult age that our then reality is THE reality” (Brooke-Rose, e-mail, 10/20/03). In his journey into death and the unconscious, full of violence, danger, and romance, forgotten parts of Larry’s existence are “reborn,” returning with all the ferociousness of intergalactic gasses. He finds “a forgotten area of particles that come whirling back to form filaments of gas in violent motion or extragalactic nebulae colliding perhaps on the outer rim” (390). The flesh and blood man dies and is reborn to middle-aged reality, the “sort of presence to hold on to” (305). But he comes back to life only after he has experienced the nadir, his own death, and the decay and degeneration that “lies inherent in all living existence” (303). Like Marlow in Conrad’s novel, he is indelibly marked by his trip to the heart of darkness. But through his bitter knowledge, Larry returns to life equipped with a deeper recognition of his own relation to others: “I feel that during my death I became everyone I know, even my patients perhaps, whose names and the names of whose neuroses I can’t remember, whose aggressions, inabilities and blindesses I have absorbed over the years, unless mine perhaps” (304), Larry confesses to Professor Head.
This oceanic feeling is a prelude to a greater ability to “read” other people’s distances and desires. His death journey leads Larry toward understanding that he must relinquish the fantasy of the precision of language and the map of identity, both as former physicist and as psychiatrist. The scientist “works wonders with the precision of his language” and “arabesques his way through the equations of energy contained until the chemistry of anger and hurt pride lies quietly balanced in the test-tube, on a dial, on a page that turns a new leaf full of squares and lines intersecting, circles, tangents and cubes, curves too, and the light turns the days into a fifth dimension” (285). Yet, despite the inspiring set of metaphors that astrophysics provides for the novel, science’s pretense to precision in mapping the psyche is treated with great skepticism. Larry/Lazarus must content himself with the free energy in language, its errant combinations and uncontrolled detours: “Words drop into the overlapping rings that lasso out to catch faces, voices that swim for dear life through the heavy water, some drown, some float, some gasp in the chilly depth” (377). Larry contents himself, too, with the indeterminacy of identity, the philosophical principle extrapolated from Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle. As Elizabeth, Stan’s wife, says at the end of the novel, “—So we all pretend to come and go as fully ourselves. And all the time millions and millions of particles of us have combined with others or escaped into various orbits to return to us ultimately” (388). Elizabeth tells him “You used to say . . . Someone would come along and find a unified theory that would do away with indeterminate interpretations, you’d say, and revert to causality. I thought perhaps you might” and Larry answers, “But I didn’t. In the meantime we do the best we can, some of us preferring to pretend causality exists, and others, others preferring to prefer its absence” (387).

In Such, then, “root” causes are exposed as fictions; scientists, like writers, participate in “acts of faith.” As Professor Head tells Larry, mathematics at the level of astrophysics is like fiction: both start with a working hypothesis, producing “something” out of nothing, something not to be confused with absolute truth or cause. Professor Head’s counsel differs from other male characters in Larry’s dream and waking life, who attempt to find the “cause” of his illness—physicians, lawyers, physicists. Their “small and nervous handwriting fills the page at wide impersonal intervals like an equation worked down to the very end and frozen there in resolution as if x could really equal the square root of minus one” (340).
Michela Canepari-Labib reads *Such* as an “attack” on psychoanalysis (Canepari-Labib 45), particularly Freudian psychoanalysis. Yet, I would argue that although Brooke-Rose makes fun of Freudian orthodoxy, she makes use of both the dynamism of Freud’s model of the psyche, in which energy flows, is blocked, and transfers from object to object, and his views of language and its relation to the unconscious. Even Brooke-Rose’s uncharacteristic reliance on the form of dialogue (found to this extent only in *Xorandor*), enacts a kind of analytic situation. As Benveniste put it in “Remarks on the Function of Language in Freudian Theory”:

All through Freudian analysis it can be seen that the subject makes use of the act of speech and discourse in order to ‘represent himself’ to himself as he wishes to see himself and as he calls upon the ‘other’ to observe him. His discourse is appeal and recourse, a sometimes vehement substitution of the other through discourse in which he figures himself desperately . . . through the sole fact of addressing another, the one who is speaking of himself installs the other in himself. . . . Language [*langage*] is thus used here as the act of speech [*parole*], converted into that expression of instantaneous and elusive subjectivity which forms the condition of dialogue. (Benveniste 67)

Like the “other” in analysis, Something is attentive both to the gaps or lapses in Someone’s speech and his substitutions. Telford, who seeks to betray Larry into disclosing his secret story, is his “twin” (361), his interlocutor.11

The language games in *Such* resemble the mechanisms of displacement and substitution in dreams and jokes, which can offer the “royal road to the unconscious,” according to Freud. Particularly in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud emphasizes that unconscious wishes and fears censored in waking life find expression through abbreviation (condensation) or substitution by means of displacement, a process in which ordinary things take on great importance (165), or “indirect representation,” almost any kind of connection, including a “similarity of sound” (172). Words are ‘bent’ in the dream and it is the work of analysis to “unbend” them, so to speak, to understand the dreamwork and its relation to the latent content of the dream. As James Strachey says in his editor’s preface to *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, “it was inevitable that as soon as Freud began his close investigation of dreams he would be struck by the frequency with which structures resembling jokes figure in the dreams themselves or their associations” (4). Freud
points out that a “favorite definition of joking has long been the ability to find similarity between dissimilar things—that is, hidden similarities” (11). He goes on to say that this idea itself has been expressed in joking form: “Joking is the disguised priest who weds every couple” (11).

Brooke-Rose’s “mapping” of psychic processes and human relationships onto the vocabulary and principles of astrophysics “bends” language, like light waves. Something castigates Someone for building up his “resistance,” his “density,” so that verbal communication with him is distorted. In astrophysical terms, gravitational pull and density bend light waves; likewise, Someone’s density creates the bending, even breaking, of laws and of words. Right when he emerges from the coffin, Someone thinks, “The layers of my atmosphere, however, distort the light waves traveling through it and upset the definition” (203), that is, the normal denotation of words. “You chose the way of unconsciousness which bends words to breaking point,” Something later tells Someone. “I told you it would take a long time to unbend them and bring them back to life. You’ll have to do exercises” (220). Something is the coach for this “unbending” process; Larry’s “resistance” and “blindness,” are countered by Something’s encouragement to analysis. Although he repeatedly says he does not dream, Larry’s experience with death functions like dreaming, exposing his unconscious fears and desires in language (and at one point he admits to having a “peculiar dream” [229]). As “girl-spy,” Something exerts a kind of analytic pressure, an impulse toward clarification of latent meanings. In particular, she instructs him in a basic principle of both physics and psychoanalysis—that energy passes through matter, a principle that Larry, despite his professional training, has failed to understand. Abstract ideas express themselves in “things” in a process of displacement. “You have to use the word something” [to speak of people’s essences],” Professor Head says at one point. “We all communicate through things, superficial things mostly” (284). It is no accident that one of the vehicles the “family” takes on its journey is a “sort of cigar-shaped” conveyance, perhaps a joking reference to Freud’s phallic landscape in which a cigar is never just a cigar. Something tries to be the medium through which Larry understands how the tangled web of words operates. This process of unbending the meaning of words is painful, as Someone continually tells Something.

As Freud shows in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, jokes themselves appear frequently in dreams. Larry’s death-dream landscape is like a comedy club for stand-up, a place where wisecracks and punchlines abound. The atmosphere moves between a surreal or comic strip animation (Tin Roof takes off the top of his head and eats the contents
of his own mind) and slapstick (fat ladies sit on unwilling dead men). We hear repeatedly that Larry the psychiatrist, “dies laughing,” a phrase that itself exemplifies the way dead metaphors, like Lazarus, come back to life in Brooke-Rose’s novel. Every opportunity to remind us of the “root” meaning (the square root?) of expressions is taken. “Words are a plastic material with which one can do all kinds of things,” Freud comments. “There are words which, when used in certain connections, have lost their original full meaning, but which regain it in other connections” (Jokes, 34). The ticker tape parade to celebrate Larry’s life-saving heroics has the crowd “flush[ing] with pride” which, in this landscape of regression, merges with the flush of a toilet: “the lavatory flushes full, I flush with pride. . . . The whole town flushes with delight” (288). Stance (his wife’s lover) tells Larry, “Why don’t you take a trip? I can fix it for you in a jiffy” and his wife says, “—How do you know, says my wife on the quick verbal uptake for lack of deeper satisfaction, that he wants to travel in a jiffy./Laugh, I thought I’d died” (227). “Uptake” is both verbal and physical; vehicles of conveyance are carriers of meaning, both within and above the speed of sound. “You might as well ask for the moon” (239) Something tells Someone, and literally, he does, when he searches for Dippermouth.

Double entendres comically literalize verbal expressions: Larry’s flesh-and-blood life before death has him consistently “breaking promises” to other people; and in the dream landscape, these “breaks” are restored to their physical properties: “when you break your word, it creates density and upsets the definition” (235), Something tells him. Like the word “uptake,” the word “comeback” puns on the central plot situation of Larry’s return from death and his penchant for repartee. Upon Larry’s “comeback” from death, the first dialogue between Someone and Something (already quoted) is like a stand-up routine, reminiscent of the old classic, “Who’s on first?” (“—Do you need to tell me apart?/—No, but I’d like to call you something./—all right then, call me Something./—Wouldn’t you like to call me something too?/—Oh, no, we’d only get confused” (205). The story of his inner journey is like an inside joke the journalists seek to tell the waiting public: “—How did it feel exactly repeat feel exactly query what did the joke fat woman unjoke say did you die laughing pardon me you see she said you didn’t cry unpardon if I may get in a query edgeways query . . . no comment I feel sick don’t puff your cigar-shape at me comment has humour expand human touch your end my reply” (222–23). If the phrase “cigar-shape” signals the phallic landscape of the Freudian dream, here it evokes the territory of Groucho Marx, delivering his one-liners with a flick of cigar
ash and rapidly raised eyebrows. “To every man his own afterlife if any” (339), Larry tells his lawyer, in a parody of Marx’s famous dictum, but Groucho is a more apt genius than Karl in the novel.12

Although Larry would prefer to travel above the speed of words (supersonic) because he “collects silences” (210), Something understands that words themselves are the messy “means of communication” (211). Again, in her role as girl-spy, she demonstrates her understanding of the secret life of words. While Larry tries to use words to fix and distinguish separate entities, Something encourages him to recognize the messy interaction between words and things. At one point, Larry makes explicit the relation between understanding his experience and getting the joke: “—Or have you lost contact with base? Base! Ha! Now I understand. When you say you follow your instructions you mean you follow your base instincts. Well, why didn’t you say so? All this talk of laws and meridians within, you had me quite perplexed. Good girl. Come let me rouse your base instincts” (237). At a moment when Someone comes to understand the workings of his own desire, he finds the pleasure of the joke, an experience that Freud describes as a “sudden release of intellectual tension, and then all at once the joke is there—as a rule ready-clothed in words” (Jokes 167). The sexual instinct teams with the pleasure of the joke to allow the discharge of energy. Reading Such participates in such pleasures as well. This is the pleasure of noticing the recurrent play on words between the “big bang” theory of creation (233) and the “kiss kiss bang bang,” the sex and aggression, which characterize the interactions among characters (231, 373). In a jumble of like sounds of the kind Freud describes, Jonas blends with Jonah who has been inside the whale and is a typological figure for Lazarus/Larry. And there is a further play between Freud’s “oceanic” feeling described in many near-death experiences (and attributed to religious feeling) and the ocean in which Jonah is swallowed by the whale—”Ah sure done swallow an oceanful of sand crossing Jordan in dat big big fish” (290).

If science replaces religion as the great story of the twentieth century, Freud’s schema of warring drives provides a twentieth-century mythology of the soul. “The theory of the instincts is so to say our mythology. Instincts are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness” (from New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, quoted in Laplanche and Pontalis [216]).

In “The Dissolution of Character in the Novel,” Brooke-Rose refers to Freud as a potential earlier source of the death of character than the French writers of the nouveau roman. She refers to “Freud on dreams and the case histories so much more convincing than any subsequent
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ghosts of fiction” (Brooke-Rose, “Dissolution of Character” 186). If the classical novel is dead, along with the past tense narration of realist novels, science and psychoanalysis may momentarily revive interest in the dead white male who served as their protagonist. One could say that they offer a “post-dissolution” narrative possibility. In borrowing the poetry of the stars and the supple words of dreams, Brooke-Rose performs the magic rite of restoring the dead—character and novel both. She turns a human body into whirling atoms and human interaction into bombarding particles. At the end of the novel, the narrative sentence, the scientific present, reasserts itself. In the struggle with Elizabeth that seems to lead to Larry’s death, he loses his “I.” In Such, Brooke-Rose takes a telescopic view of human generation: “We love like ancient innocents with a million years of indifference and despair within us that revolve like galaxies on a narrow shaft of light where hangs the terror in her eyes as the life drains away from blood-vessels . . . out of the story of a death and amazing recovery and into the unfinished unfinishable story of Dippermouth, Gut Bucket Blues, my sweet Potato Head, Tin Roof, Really, Something and me” (390). It is an “unfinishable” story because it is astronomical, psychic, and the never-ending story of the blues. In this lyrical evocation of our interstellar apathy, Brooke-Rose returns to the question of being, a problem which has also been referred to as the problem of the “as such” of philosophy, “the great phenomenologico-ontological question of the as such . . . the human subject or Dasein.”

The story of the dead white male is a sensational story of death and “amazing recovery” worthy of the British tabloids. “In narrative,” Walter Benjamin contends in his famous essay, “The Storyteller,” “death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell” (Benjamin 94). Linking narrative endings with literal scenes of dying in fiction, Garrett Stewart writes in Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction, “We go to death scenes for the kind of knowledge that is knowledge only insofar as it is pure retrospect, wrenched free from supposed experience into containment and clarity, displaced from inarticulate pain, for instance, to epiphany” (Stewart 45). Yet what are we to make of Brooke-Rose’s refusal of “pure retrospect” in her characteristic narrative sentence? What does it mean to write a death sentence without the characteristic “authority” of narrative ending, the view from the deathbed, and to create, instead, a “nebulous memory” constantly confused with the present and represented as cosmic voyage? Far from “containment and clarity,” Such presents instead a compulsion to repeat the traumatic experience,
as if under the pressure of analysis, a reliving rather than a recollection from a distance.

As she stages the death of the white male protagonist, Brooke-Rose simultaneously stages the death of narrative as we know it. Or, more accurately, she stages the life and death of narrative in the fits and starts of the story, which, like Larry, threatens to abort in medias res. The death instincts “strive towards the reduction of tensions to zero-point. In other words, their goal is to bring the living being back to the inorganic state” (Laplanche and Pontalis 97). Before the end of Part I of the novel, Larry confesses that he fears a second life more than he fears death: “I have acquired a painful sensitivity to noise, to radiation and to the taste of love degrading itself away in men and in myself until it levels itself completely and no shocks occur, no movement and no life around my staring eyes and I work out the square root of my time” (291). Such stages not only Larry’s death, but his death instinct, his movement toward quiescence and the end of desire. At these moments, the narrative itself is threatened with extinction. Indeed, between Part I and Part II of the novel, this extinction is enacted. The novel enacts its own point of maximum entropy, as it represents the heat death of the universe. In a standard definition, “Entropy indicates the degree to which a given quantity of thermal energy is available for doing useful work—the greater the entropy, the less available the energy” (Columbia Encyclopedia). Although energy cannot vanish, “it tends to be degraded from useful forms to useless ones. When the universe as a whole reaches maximum entropy, the temperature will be the same everywhere and no energy will be able to be converted into work. This is known as the ‘heat death’ of the universe.”

The male Someone begs to be released from the burden of his centrality, that is, the narrative obligation to give shape to his experience of death, the one man come back to tell the story. Rather than fleeing from the lightness of being, he seeks refuge in it. He wants to relieve the pressure of attachments, figured as throwing the fat lady off his body. He wants, that is, to die. (“I don’t want to go back, I don’t, I don’t” [332], he says at the end of Part I, as the narrative approaches its own extinction mimetically). It is Larry’s children who save him, and since they are parts of himself, their rescue signals that in some recess of his outdated being, he desires to live on, to take on more being. Part II of the novel is his temporary stay of execution, a return to “some sort of presence, something to hold on to at least, such as a banister” (335–36), the flesh-and-blood instantiation of the middle-aged man.
In Reading For the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative, Peter Brooks constructs a theory of narrative desire from Freud’s theory of the death instincts in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Brooks sees the organism’s journey toward death as a model or “masterplot” for narrative desire and its progress toward its own end. According to this model, narrative is a dynamic model in which plot works itself out in narrative time between the two quiescent moments of beginning and end. “Plot,” Brooks says, “is a kind of divergence or deviance, a postponement in the discharge which leads back to the inanimate. For plot starts (or must give the illusion of starting) from that moment at which story, or ‘life,’ is stimulated from quiescence into a state of narratability, into a tension, a kind of irritation, which demands narration” (Brooks 103). In Such, the first novel in which Brooke-Rose says she found her voice, the moribund fictional relevance of the white male is revived along with Larry/Lazarus/Someone, in a narrative that flirts with its own extinction along the way. It is as if some of the irritation into narratability remains in the texture of the narrative. On the one hand, the tribulations of the male protagonist are meant to be representative, even allegorical. This allegory instills in the reader an identification with and sympathy for Larry’s predicament. On the other hand, the generic male is also gendered male and his representation is mixed with an objectifying aggression. In the metaphors of incision, of clinical probing, invading and querying both his body and his mind, there is a sense of revenge, a surgical impulse to remove the layers of disappointment, blindness, infidelity and deception. Larry’s narrative “treatment” is more painful than his sudden death. The “surgeons cut carefully at the bark, removing it in quarter-cylindrical segments” (Such 218). Like the phantom limb in “The Foot” and the dying man in Out, the physicist turned psychiatrist has narrative “life” at the price of a certain abjection or surgical “cut.” Describing the predicament of character in the twentieth-century, Brooke-Rose says that characters are like “stray phalluses,” “swollen with words” (“The Dissolution of Character” 186). The image is one of castration—character as verbal fetish disguising the lack beneath. Here, Brooke-Rose refers to both male and female characters in the age of technology and popular culture. Indeed, her female “characters” are as supererogatory as her male—the classicist Mira in Amalgamemnon, like the unnamed dying man in Out, waits on an unemployment line, and characters, both male and female, in Textermination are like ghosts.

Yet when the woman, the object of desire, becomes the subject, something different occurs—an access of energy and tone of insistence, a note of prophetic warning. In Between, Thru, Amalgamemnon, and
Textermination, Brooke-Rose moves from the posthumous male to a female consciousness, a Cassandra-like figure who becomes the central driver of her “disc/horse” (Thru). The ache of what’s missing is still palpable even in this fresh dramatization of female experience and female-centered narrative, but in Between, Amalgamemnon, and Textermination, where a female consciousness takes on these narrative burdens, she has the capacity to be in touch with both past and future amidst the sad waste of the present. “Some argue nevertheless that parts of a divided nucleus recede from one another at great speed, the shock processes involving ejection of high energy particles that must ultimately form a human element, a star where the taste of love will increase its luminosity until it cools in quiet rage at all that tenderness that went to waste, accumulating only the degenerate matter of decay” (Such 390). The “Orphic discoveries” Stewart speaks of (on the deathbed) are repudiated; in lieu of epiphanies are these fading stars. The white male dies laughing. In 1966, Brooke-Rose returned to the simultaneous interpreter she had envisioned writing about in 1964. Only this time, she realized that the translator was a woman. Brooke-Rose’s “metastory” in Stories, Theories and Things begins with Between. It stages another journey that subverts the classic paradigm of narrative journey, another journey in a sense “between” the beginning and the end, life and death “inside the whale, who knows, three hours, three days of maybe hell. Between doing and not doing the body floats.”

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