Techniques of the Living

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Between

A NEW VESSEL OF CONCEPTION

What would be the narrative of a journey in which it was said that one stays somewhere without having departed—in which it was never said that, having departed, one arrives or fails to arrive? Such a narrative would be a scandal, the extenuation, by hemorrhage, of readerliness. (Barthes, S/Z 105)

Published in 1968, Brooke-Rose’s novel Between is a prime example of the scandalous, “writerly” text hypothesized by Roland Barthes in S/Z (first published in 1970). It anticipates Barthes’s conjecture about a new kind of narrative based on the trope of the journey. This multilingual narrative that thematizes travel and translation presents both a narrative of and narrative as a journey severed from origin and telos. In its travel plot, Between thematizes its own experiment with the traditional shape of the journey that underwrites the trajectory of many classic narratives. In the discontinuities and gaps of the narrative, Brooke-Rose does not reject the crucial role of narrative and narrative journey but proposes, with Barthes, a new logic for it. After the “dead-end” of Out, and the cycle of death, rebirth, and death in Such, she continues experimenting with her new narrative sentence, this time with a female center of consciousness and new logic of narrative journey.1

Barthes identifies what he calls the “readerly” text, that is, classic realist narrative, as based on the model of a well-plotted journey, a traditional sequence of events of which he says: “To depart/to travel/to
arrive/to stay: the journey is saturated” (S/Z 105). Like a well-guided tour, this type of narrative leads the reader from place to place, establishing an illusion of continuity in the fullness of its presentation: “To end, to fill, to join, to unify—one might say this is the basic requirement of the readerly, as though it were prey to some obsessive fear: that of omitting a connection. Fear of forgetting engenders the appearance of a logic of actions; terms and the links between them are posited (invented) in such a way that they unite, duplicate each other, create an illusion of continuity . . . as if the readerly abhors a vacuum” (Barthes 105). In contrast, the “writerly” text is a “scandal,” a “hemorrhage,” language that suggests the violation or wounding from within of the classic text, thus destroying its “logic of actions.” This text disseminates meaning rather than fixing it in place. This journey without origin or telos thus serves as Barthes’s paradigm for a psychological freedom from the compulsion and anxiety betrayed in the figure of the “saturated” journey as sequentially plotted. The journey now funds an optimistic theorizing of a narrative mobility that, unlike conventional narrative, does not circumscribe the movement of desire and free play. According to Barthes, there are pleasures, for writer and reader, in the discontinuities and silences of this “writerly” text.

As Brooke-Rose has noted in essays and interviews, during the sixties she read widely and deeply in both contemporary literature and first structuralist, then poststructuralist theory, often writing about French theory for an English audience. The publication of Between in 1968 coincided with Brooke-Rose’s move to the University of Paris, Vincennes, at Hélène Cixous’s invitation, where she taught courses in literature and theory. With her dual vocation as writer and critic/theorist, her fictional experiments not only “test” theoretical speculation but sometimes precede the theoretical framework that would comprehend them (as she notes of James in her analysis of The Turn of the Screw). Between was published two years before the French publication of S/Z and anticipates Barthes’s new kind of narrative journey, with its break from the logic of beginning, middle, and end. In her critical writings and interviews since the publication of S/Z, she refers approvingly to Barthes’s notion of the writerly as privileged over the readerly. In her own description of realism in A Rhetoric of the Unreal, based on the account of the French critic Philippe Harmon, she analyzes it as a kind of saturation. She says that realist texts deploy two strategies that are sometimes contradictory: the circulation of a great deal of information and a readability and clearness that depend on “semiotic compensation,” that is, a variety of ways to make meaningful the load of information.
In Brooke Rose’s description of her own experimental style in *Between*, the journey figures a freedom from conventional syntax, an errancy or wandering that resembles Barthes’s general idea of the writerly: “The syntax of *Between* is free-ranging in that a sentence can start in one place or time, continue correctly, but by the end of the sentence one is elsewhere” (Brooke-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things* 7). Syntax engages in transgressive travel in an unpredictable trajectory, a metonymic slide from here to there that produces a sense of random movement rather than purposeful direction. In an interview in the *Edinburgh Review*, Brooke-Rose represents the experimentalism of her style in terms of an exploration that is not a quest but a magical and pleasurable crossing of boundaries. As a writer she finds herself “on the frontier of something and I must twist language in some way to pass the frontier, and that’s the pleasure” (Turner 31). The pleasure of the text resides in (or, more properly, lambently circulates in) a style that could pass the electronic screening at the airport, a sly smuggling across conventional borders.

In lieu of a “saturated” narrative journey, the entirely present-tense narration in *Between* offers reiterated passages of dialogue and description in several European languages (with English the hegemonic medium). The narrative settles on the European travels of an unnamed female translator of French and German parentage who “travel[s] in simultaneous interpretation” (*Between* 408, 494), translating mostly from French to German. Narrative continuity is replaced by replays and repetitions, with iterated scenes generally not clearly marked as having taken place, either temporally or spatially. We hear a dialogue about annulment: the translator’s marriage is inferred. One hotel room, one plane ride, one lover blends into another. Informational or semantic gaps occur to disrupt the logic of narrative continuity.

The most persistent scene is the inside of a plane en route to one of many European and, occasionally, Asian cities. The novel begins:

> Between the enormous wings the body of the plane stretches its one hundred and twenty seats or so in threes on either side towards the distant brain way up, behind the dark blue curtain and again beyond no doubt a little door. In some countries the women would segregate still to the left of the aisle, the men less numerous to the right. But all in all and civilisation considered the chromosomes sit quietly mixed among the hundred and twenty seats or so that stretch like ribs as if inside a giant centipede. Or else, inside the whale, who knows, three hours, three days of maybe hell. Between doing and not doing the body floats. (*Between* 395)
The travelers go places but seem to exist in a limbo of movement and disorientation, traveling, but caught—like Eliot’s hollow men, like Jonah in the whale—in an interstitial “between” of time and space (“Between the dawn and the non-existent night the body stretches out its hundred and twenty ribs or so towards the distant brain way up beyond the yellow curtain” (Between 404). “Welcome aboard this vessel of conception floating upon a pinpoint and kindly sit quietly ensconced in your armchairs, the women to the left of the aisle the men less numerous to the right” (Between 442). The plane is a vehicle of transportation, a vehicle of metaphor (the “vessel of conception”) that translates us from one place to another: “Beyond the wooden shutters and way down below the layered floors of stunned consciousnesses waking dreams nightmares lost senses of locality the cars hoot faintly poop-pip-poop the trams tinkle way down below in the grand canyon and an engine revs up in what, French German Portuguese” (Between 396–97).

Brooke-Rose describes her conception of the novel in a Jamesian “metastory”: “The I/central consciousness/non-narrating narrative voice/is a simultaneous interpreter who travels constantly from congress to conference and whose mind is a whirl of topics and jargons and foreign languages/whose mind is a whirl of worldviews, interpretations, stories, models, paradigms, theories, languages” (Stories, Theories and Things 6–7).

There are references in the novel to the “freedom of the air” and the “inebriating attractions as the body floats in willing suspension of loyalty to anyone” (Between 461), that is, to the liberating possibilities of such constant airplane travel, but the “intended effect” of the mobile, hectic style and plot, she goes on to say in the above passage, is “mimetic realism—in brief, perpetual motion in my central consciousness, and loss of identity due to her activity” (Stories, Theories and Things 7). Brooke-Rose, who often cautions her readers against searching for authorial “intention,” even the one the author hands you on a plate, serves up a metastory that, in its appeal to mimetic realism, partially tames the “scandal” of the writing. The errant style mimics the theme of anomie and rootlessness, a modern condition, which in the “now” of the writing (1968) is replaced by the banality of late capitalism, the global hegemony of mass culture that turns one European place into another. Like the official voice of the pilot and cabin crew, which originates in some “distant brain” and is amplified over the loudspeaker system, the detached, dispassionate narrative voice announces flatly that “air and other such conditioning . . . prevent any true exchange of thoughts” (Between 399), as the body floats in “this great pressurized solitude” (Between 406).
Translation becomes the central metaphor for the general loss of place in this global village. Despite the disorienting effect of the different languages on the reader and at times on the main character, the rapid language changes in the text suggest an almost frightening fluency of scene, dialogue, character, and relationship. The bilingual interpreter becomes the symptom of this frightening fluency; like the phrases passing through the microphones of simultaneous translation, she herself is a translatable sign. We are meant to hear the double meanings in the phrase “Bright girl, she translates beautifully don’t you think? Says the boss” (Between 414). The French/German translator crosses national borders, geographical and linguistic, with such facility and frequency that “home” and the destinations of travel cease to be oppositional—there is always something alien about home and something familiar in the foreign locations. In her “metastory,” Brooke-Rose insists that this travel is particularly gendered—the female body transported across national boundaries is also the sign of a passive identity which circulates so freely across boundaries that it loses its distinctiveness. In Stories, Theories, and Things, Brooke-Rose describes her own false start with the novel, in which the interpreter was conceived as “androgy nous.” These pages, she tells us, were abandoned when she realized that translation figured a particularly (although not exclusively) “feminine” experience. As she puts it, the novel is entangled “with the notion/imagined experience/theory/story that simultaneous interpretation is a passive activity, that of translating the ideas of others but giving voice to none of one’s own, and therefore a feminine experience” (Stories, Theories and Things 7). Successful translation signals a loss of identity; the translator becomes a conduit, like the microphone that is the tool of her trade. Just as the middle-class woman functions, according to Nancy Armstrong, as the representative protagonist for the nineteenth-century domestic novel, after the male narrators of “The Foot,” Out, and Such, Brooke-Rose turned to the female translator to figure a particularly twentieth-century consciousness of dislocation, invisibility, and redundancy.

This oxymoronic sense of travel as a routine disorientation contrasts sharply with the exciting potential signified by the airplane in Woolf’s writing—in Mrs. Dalloway, for example, where it figures, as Gillian Beer says, “‘free will’ and ecstasy, silent, erotic and absurd” or in Orlando, where Shelmerdine’s descent in a plane suggests “the free spirit of the modern age” (Beer 145). The sense of translation as weary work contrasts as well with the foreign language as a refreshment of the mother tongue, as it functions for Miriam Henderson as she gazes at a Continental newspaper on her trip to Switzerland in Dorothy Richardson’s
Oberland: “The simple text was enthralling. For years she had not so delighted in any reading... Everything she had read stood clear in her mind that yet, insufficiently occupied with the narrative and its strange emanations, caught up single words and phrases and went off independently touring, climbing to fresh arrangements and interpretations of familiar thought” (58). Brooke-Rose presents a more jaundiced, post-World War II view of the possibilities of discovery and escape, a view that echoes Susan Sontag’s description of the symptomatic cultural condition of modernity in her influential essay “The Aesthetics of Silence,” published in 1967. Sontag’s is an essay Brooke-Rose quotes extensively and approvingly in “Eximplosions,” her chapter on modernity in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*. Sontag writes,

In an overpopulated world being connected by global electronic communication and jet travel at a pace too rapid and violent for an organically sound person to assimilate without shock, people are also as the unlimited “technological reproduction” and near universal diffusion of printed language and speech as well as images and the degeneration of public language within the realms of politics, advertising and entertainment, have produced, especially among the better-educated inhabitants of modern mass society, a devaluation of language.

Art, Sontag suggests, “becomes a kind of counterviolence, seeking to loosen the grip upon consciousness of the habits of lifeless, static verbalization” (“The Aesthetics of Silence” 64–65).

Brooke-Rose describes Sontag’s essay on modern art as a “still remarkable, elegant essay, in many ways a proleptic summary of much that has been said since” (*Rhetoric of the Unreal* 343–44) and endorses her assessment that a loss of authenticity is experienced in the modern condition. Much as Dean MacCannell in his now classic study *The Tourist* identifies the tourist as an emblem of modern man in search of authenticity in the face of the discontinuities and alienations of modern society, Brooke-Rose envisions her translator/traveler as caught in a limbo-like transit, in which she yearns to submit to something when “belief” itself is suspended.

The body stretches forth towards some thought some order some command obeyed in the distant brain way up or even an idea that actually means something compels a passion or commitment lost or ungained yet as the wing spreads to starboard motionless on the still blue temperature of minus fifty-one degrees, the metal shell dividing it from
this great pressurised solitude. The body floats in a quiet suspension of belief and disbelief, the sky grows dark over the chasms of the unseen Pyrenees. (Between 405–6)

What are we to make of this seeming paradox in Brooke-Rose’s address to travel, the contradiction, that is, between travel in the novel as a figure for rootlessness and disappointed yearning, a diagnosis of a contemporary condition, and her descriptions of experimental writing as a new and free kind of writerly narrative journey? And how can one reconcile the way the multilingual passages in the text of Between mimic a disorientation and loss of identity and also provide the nourishments of a Continental, experimental style? Does the experimentalism of the style represent a “postmodernist” fiddling while Europe burns?

The answer to the final question, I believe, is no; indeed, through the trope and plot of travel and translation, Brooke-Rose subverts the possibility of the kind of insouciant dismissal associated with at least one major version of postmodernism, which sees it as a break from modernist anxiety and a ludic acceptance of the anomie modernism helped to diagnose.10 Brooke-Rose’s novel helps us rethink the abstract theorizing of the mobility of desire expressed by Barthes and even Brooke-Rose herself in the description of her style; it engages the problematic of postmodern circulations and represents mobility as specifically characterized and historicized, with cultural pains and pleasures written into it.11 The novel thus motivates a significant reappraisal of Linda Hutcheon’s version of postmodernism’s supposed break with modernism, and its subversion “of such principles as value, order, meaning, control, and identity . . . that have been the basic premise of bourgeois liberalism” (13). Brooke-Rose’s novel demonstrates a self-critical form of radical experimentation that ultimately refuses this kind of dismissal.12

For despite the hectic mobility of both her style and her female traveler, Brooke-Rose provides checkpoints in the fluid movement across boundaries; despite its use of the present tense and abandonment of temporal sequence, Between nevertheless produces its “present” moment in relation to a specific European geography and history. The series of displacements through travel paradoxically maps a European place of inescapable historical self-discovery. Brooke-Rose reminds us of the constraints, political and literary, that European history imposes on postmodernism. In terms of the “political,” I refer specifically to the way the novel’s displacements fix on the nameless translator’s movements during World War II. We learn that as an adolescent on a visit
to her paternal aunt in Germany from her native France, she develops appendicitis and must remain in Germany when war breaks out. She begins to translate for the Germans. In arranging and rearranging the border crossings and shifting loyalties of her traveling French/German protagonist, Brooke-Rose creates a palimpsest: the blasé travel of the 1960s, from European capital to capital, illuminates the different border crossings during World War II. Against this background, the random movements and arbitrary excursions raise questions of loyalty, affiliation, and national identity. Customs agents demanding declarations at the borders signal checkpoints in this flux: “Please declare if you have any plants or parts of plants with you such as love loyalty lust intellect belief of any kind or even simple enthusiasm for which you must pay duty to the Customs and Excise until you come to a standstill” (Between 414). This voice is both frightening and inspiring—it evokes the specter of duty, both a price exacted for all this unlimited circulation and a possibly useful demand for an accounting of obligation and commitment. In an analysis of an earlier version of customs in Hawthorne’s “The Custom-House,” which prefaces The Scarlet Letter, Brooke-Rose calls the customs house “a public, institutional place, a place of law and order, where custom and excise must be paid on goods (on pleasure, as cost). It is a threshold. The threshold of narrative” (Stories, Theories and Things 48).

The history that constrains is, however, literary as well as political, for in superimposing a postmodern internationalism on an earlier, more frightening wartime European geography, Brooke-Rose invokes the inescapable inheritance of modernism, an international phenomenon forced by the events of both world wars to revise its assumption that nationalism was something to be outgrown. The multilingual resources of avant-garde experimentalism that sustain Eliot’s and Pound’s modernist poetry and postmodern novels such as those of Brooke-Rose are regarded in Between in the light of linguistic hegemony and domination. (Brooke-Rose wrote most of her novel while staying at the castle of Ezra Pound’s daughter in the Italian Tirol, where she returned, soon after finishing the novel, to write A ZBC of Ezra Pound [see Turner, 22]). In addressing the legacy of Eliot and Pound, Brooke-Rose acknowledges postmodernism’s debt to modernism and exposes the anxiety of influence in postmodernism’s claim to break with its own modernist history. She reveals this claim to be a kind of travel, a defense against the pull of a certain literary “home.” Brooke-Rose’s postmodernist “vessel of conception” deliberately and self-consciously retains the genetic material of modernism.
Thus, despite the freewheeling style and protagonist of *Between*, ideas of placement and mobility, commitment and translatability are deeply touched by the war and its allegiances. The easy availability of European pop culture of the 1960s, constructed from the jargon of advertising, is juxtaposed with the darker memories of the war. Unpleasantly surprised by a waiter or chambermaid who invades the refuge of the hotel room, postwar travelers confront “the fear of something else not ordered” (*Between* 401), an image of those ambivalently haunted by fear of submission and by fear of nothing to submit to. These postmodern ambivalences are textured and colored, one begins to see, by the memories of war and the forms that order and submission took within it. The postwar mobility and translatability of the unnamed protagonist are fixed (though not through any traditional narrative exposition or even flashback) in a particular bilingualism. The Berlitz-like passages of French and German, which blend with other lines of serviceable tourist discourse in other languages (that of menus, advertisements, airport entrances, exits, restrooms), begin to resonate with the differences of their histories, forming both the personal past of the French-German translator and a historical consciousness in the text.

Two particular scenes in Germany haunt the narrative: one set in 1946, after the liberation of Germany and the zoning of Berlin, when the girl works in the French Zone and meets an English airman, whom she marries; the other, an earlier scene in which she is drafted by the Germans into the press supervisory division of the foreign office after she is stranded in Germany. “You must excuse these questions Fräulein but in view of your French upbringing we must make sure of your undivided loyalty let us see now until the age of Herr Oberleutnant at that age one has no loyalties” (*Between* 444). In this context, the passivity of “translating beautifully” is implicated in larger ethical questions of compliance during the war.

Under the powerful umbrella of English, languages conduct a romance and engage in intercultural travel, just as the translator moves from a German to a British lover: “Husbands lovers wives mistresses of many nationalities . . . help to abolish the frontiers of misunderstanding with frequent changes of partners loyalties convictions, free and easily stepping over the old boundaries of conventions, congresses, commissions, conferences to which welcome back Liebes” (*Between* 437). The fraternization of and in tourist phrases leaves the traces of history, “as if words fraternised silently beneath the syntax, finding each other funny and delicious in a Misch-Masch of tender fornication, inside the bombed out hallowed structures and the rigid steel glass modern edifices of the
brain. Du, do you love me?” (Between 447). The postmodern brain is an architectural palimpsest, the skyscraper rising phoenixlike from the ashes of war. Even the Vichy mineral water so repeatedly ordered and not ordered in the text contains the memory of Vichy complicity. The postwar OMO (cleanser) slogan “whiter than white” is grafted onto an allusion to a Persil-Schein certificate, a reference former Nazis would buy after the war to prove that they had never been Nazis at heart. The narrative does not sanitize the traces of war.

Brooke-Rose’s own wartime activity is “translated” into the figure of the nameless translator and her experience of World War II. During the war, Brooke-Rose worked for “Ultra,” a unit of the British Intelligence Service that helped decipher and analyze German radio messages. Enemy codes were cracked on a machine called “Enigma,” which was based on “three operational rotors which could be taken out and rearranged, each with 26 letters: this allowed millions of combinations to be obtained” (Garlinski 73). Using devices known as “bombes,” the decoders would explore “electro-mechanically (not electronically) a range of alternative possibilities at speeds far beyond the pace of human thought.” In practical terms, what the bombes did was to test “all the possible wheel or rotor orders of the Enigma, all the possible wheel settings and plug or Stecker connections to discover which of the possible arrangements would match a prescribed combination of letters” (Lewin 123). Although Brooke-Rose has said that she did not herself participate in the decoding, her acquaintance with such procedures helps us understand a sense of urgency that underlies the postmodern mobility of meaning in the text. Despite the drone of conference jargon, the connection between word games and war games and between translations and crisis emerges.

Yet from this short sketch one can see that Brooke-Rose’s own wartime loyalties were far less equivocal than the interpreter’s. The gestures and mechanics of simultaneous translations are themselves “translated” from Brooke-Rose’s own role into the interpreter’s less fixed position. “I never put myself directly into novels, I find that boring,” Brooke-Rose said in an interview. “So I turn personal experience into metaphor” (Turner 26).16 Perhaps the stable allegiances of Brooke-Rose’s own wartime practice of translation seemed too determined, too clear-cut to supply a metaphor for the confusions and displacements that make “war like a postmodern text.”17 I would argue, however, that Brooke-Rose’s exploration of chance, randomness, and accident in her text directly relates to the special significance that the novel claims for the gendering of travel and translation. For drift, chance, and passivity, symptomatic
of the workings of history, might offer a new technology of narrative, an alternative to masculine teleological paradigms: “The same question everywhere goes unanswered have you anything to declare any plants or parts of plants growing inside you stifling your strength with their octopus legs undetachable for the vacuum they form over each cell, clamping each neurone of your processes in a death-kiss while the new Lord Mayor of Prague promises to take up the challenge in trying to make you commit yourself to one single idea” (Between 413).

The “vessel of conception,” the narrative vehicle of transplant and translation, is here figured as a female body, and the question is this: Can it bear a new idea about history, direction, and destination that is different from either the masculine singleness of purpose and certain destination of the “Lord Mayor” or the jaded opportunism of Siegfried, who tries to manipulate the female translator’s sense of drift in order to seduce her? “We merely translate other people’s ideas, not to mention platitudes, si-mul-ta-né-ment. No one requires us to have any of our own. . . . Du liebes Kind, komm, geh’ mit mir. Gar schöne Spiele spiel’ ich mit dir [Dear child, come with me I’ll play very good games with you]” (Between 413). This sinister allusion to Goethe’s “Erlkönig” reveals a dark underside to the notion of play, suggesting both seduction and death. Although Brooke-Rose’s own loyalties during the war were clearly established, her novel explores the pleasures and dangers of chance occurrence and its role in the process of charting one’s course. The similarities between German and English lovers and the telescoping of wartime experiences with pre- and postwar experiences puncture a simplistic view of ideological choice, while the narrative still insists on establishing distinctions.

As I have noted, in her metastory Brooke-Rose insists that the passivity of circulation and translation in the novel is linked to the gender of the protagonist: “It was a cliché, which was nevertheless true enough generally (like all clichés) for the purpose of creating the language of the novel and getting, as I. A. Richards used to say, the ‘tone’ right” (Stories, Theories and Things 7). This cliché launches the narrative, but through dislocations of both protagonist and style, Brooke-Rose explores possible alternatives to the clichés of masculine aggression and feminine passivity played out in so many ways in twentieth-century discourse. “Between doing and not doing the body floats,” the narrator drones, thus suggesting a middle ground, a middle voice, between passivity and activity. The forays in the novel exit somewhere between action and inaction, accident and purpose.

In The Writing of the Disaster, Maurice Blanchot addresses the fate of
representation after the Holocaust: “The disaster: break with the star, break with every form of totality, never denying, however, the dialectical necessity of a fulfillment; the disaster: prophecy which announces nothing but the refusal of the prophetic as simply an event to come, but which nonetheless opens, nonetheless discovers the patience of vigilant language” (75). In his insistence on rejecting totality yet retaining a sense of urgency—in using the vocabulary of prophecy while refusing prophecy—and in his emphasis on “vigilant language,” Blanchot meshes with Brooke-Rose’s method and tone in Between. Rejecting the type of totalizing mastery that she associates with masculine hubris, she translates passivity into the patience of vigilant language in a stylistic practice that is both modest and bold. Brooke-Rose says of her work: “Modern philosophy talks a lot about the desire and illusion of mastery. But I never feel that, that’s more connected with what has been called the totalising novel, which imposes some kind of global meaning on the reality it describes. . . . My experience has been more one of groping inside language and forms” (Turner 31).

This “groping inside language and forms,” this combination of linguistic risk and vigilance, leads to a style in which “small changes” in often repeated phrases in the narrative subtly suggest the possibility of changes in the plot. Buried amid iterated passages of dialogue are references to such facts as the translator has decided to sell her Wiltshire cottage or to buy a car—these unobtrusive alterations in domicile and transportation are the means by which the circularity of the writing, its beginning and ending in the same linguistic “place” (“Between the enormous wings the body floats”), is amended.

Throughout Between one hears the refrain, “What difference does it make?” This reiterated question is meant to burden structuralist and poststructuralist theories of meaning in language with the weight of political implication and consequence. “The vaporetto bumps against the jetty of Santa Maria di Salute at the mouth of the Grand Canal that gives out on to the wider waters between San Marco and the unanswered question which remains unanswered for the non-existent future unless perhaps what difference does it make” (Between 556). The novel checks its own acceptance of the unlimited circulation of language. On the one hand, the narrative seems to endorse the metadiscourse of poststructuralist theory it includes, the iterated and freely circulating jargon and “codes” of conferences and commissions—biological, semiological, semantic, Lacanian. A passage in English and in French from a semiology conference on Saussurean difference emphasizes the arbitrariness and self-enclosure of the language system:
As for example in a dictionary each apparently positive definition contains words which themselves need defining. Et tous les dictionnaires prouvent qu’il n’y a jamais de sens propre, jamais d’objectivité d’un terme [And all the dictionaries prove that there is never a literal meaning, never the objectivity of a term]. (*Between* 562)

This sense of circularity is exacerbated by the easy commerce between French and English. The writing in *Between* accepts this post-Saussurean, poststructuralist position. The novel, like other poststructuralist fiction and nonfiction, is “about” the circulation of signs as much as it is “about” the travel and displacements of the nameless translator and her colleagues.

Yet, on the other hand, in representing the circulation of signifiers in her text, Brooke-Rose shows how small adjustments of and in language make a difference. The notion that language is an arbitrary, closed system does not obviate the possibility, even the necessity, of vigilant language of the kind Blanchot describes. The change from “Idlewilde Airport” to “Kennedy Airport” one hundred pages later is one example of such attention, a subtle reminder of the violent events of the 1960s that produced this change in nomenclature. Brooke-Rose’s particular “technology” of the “distant brain” shows how small adjustments in the codes of language have historical, personal, and political consequences.

Thus, even cynicism self-destructs as a confident and fixed position, finding itself vulnerable to a critical displacement and subtle dislodging. “The syntax of *Between* is free-ranging in that a sentence can start in one place or time, continue correctly, but by the end of the sentence one is elsewhere” (*Stories, Theories and Things* 7). One of the anonymous conference speakers—at a meeting on DNA—disparages the analogy between the language of codes and the workings of genetics and language. The speaker comments on this analogy as a “seductive hypothesis whose seductive element lies in the fact that we play on words and speak of codes, [which] postulates that the stimulus of environment modifies the sequence of bases, leading to the modification of the code within a cell within a body within a box within a village within a wooded area in an alien land. This would leave a trace” (*Between* 519). Paradoxically, however, in Brooke-Rose’s “traveling” style, this cynicism collapses; the pompous statement “begins somewhere . . . continues correctly,” yet it winds up “elsewhere.” What begins as abstract academic cynicism somehow winds up in the English location of the Wiltshire cottage (the wooded refuge that the protagonist decides to sell near the end of the
novel); this seemingly involuntary travel of the sentence dramatizes the local “truth” of the way memory works to trace personal loss. Everywhere, Brooke-Rose confirms that experimental writing, like travel, is risky business; one can prepare and yet be unprepared for adventures in writing. In this particular example, the errancy of syntax and meaning leads to an “elsewhere” that is, paradoxically, home.

For Brooke-Rose, experimental grammar is never merely a question of the relationship between parts of the sentence but a technique for exploring the fixings and releases of positionality as well. A technique for living. This exploration is signaled in her insistent use of prepositions, beginning with the importance of the title itself to suggest a place that is neither home nor abroad, placement nor escape.19 This emphasis on fixation and mobility within language is, I believe, inextricably connected to Brooke-Rose’s decision to abandon her original idea of an androgynous traveler on finding it to be a roadblock to the journey of the text. In exploring pre-positions and changes in positions, Brooke-Rose focuses on the mark of gender in the circulation of meaning in language. In a significant way, travel in Brooke-Rose’s novel intersects with feminist questions about the possibilities of escape within language, within literature, and within history. The metadiscourse of structuralism and psychoanalysis in the narrative underscores how the mark of gender is carried in the “vessel of conception” that is language in general and this novel in particular. The question, “What difference does it make?” is answered in part with ‘the difference of gender.’ For Brooke-Rose, the myth of androgyny seems too much to sponsor an illusory freedom of unlimited circulation. Twenty pages into *Between*, Brooke-Rose eschews this trope of erotic freedom (a trope that both Virginia Woolf and Brigid Brophy, for example, find liberating):

Et comme l’a si bien dit Saussure, la langue peut se contenter de l’opposition de quelque chose avec rien. [And just as Saussure has said very well, language can content itself with the opposition of something to nothing.] The marked term on the one hand, say, the feminine, grande, the unmarked on the other, say, the masculine, grand. Mais notez bien que le non-marqué peut deriver du marqué par retranchement, by subtraction, par une absence qui signifie. Je répète, une absence qui signifie eine Abwesenheit die simultaneously etwas bedeutet. [But note well that the unmarked term can derive from the marked by reduction, by subtraction, by an absence that signifies. I repeat, an absence that signifies an absence that simultaneously means something.] (*Between* 426)
Where when and to whose heart did one do that? Do what and what difference does it make? None except by subtraction from the marked masculine and unmarked feminine or vice versa as the language of a long lost code of zones lying forgotten under layers of thickening sensibilities creeps up from down the years into no more than the distant brain way up to tickle an idle thought such as where when and to whose heart did one do that? (Between 468)

Despite the fluid translations from one language to another, the position of the feminine gender is marked in opposition to the normative, “unmarked” masculine. As Monique Wittig says in “The Mark of Gender,” “The abstract form, the general, the universal, this is what the so-called masculine gender means, for the class of men have appropriated the universal for themselves” (5). In this schema, the feminine is “marked”—gender itself becomes feminine, the other to the neutrality of the masculine in language, that “other” most visible in the floating signifier of femininity, the French e (about which Barthes has written so interestingly in S/Z). Yet one can say that the feminine is unmarked, missing the mark, missing the phallus and is therefore the sign of lack in Freudian terms (but this difference comes out in much the same way). Either way, the signifiers “masculine” and “feminine” are indissolubly paired, as Lacan shows in the now famous illustration of the signs on the lavatory doors in the train station (“The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud” 151–52), a scene that Brooke-Rose invokes in her own text (“We have no evidence at all that live human beings, let alone the skirted figurine or high-heeled shoe on the door can so embody the divine principle descending into matter” [Between 571–72]).

In the twists in the above passage, however, a potentially different interpretation suggests itself, a possible reversal—the male as “subtracted” from the female and, hence, the masculine as somehow constructed in defense against the female. Such a reading is pressed in the following passage: “Solamente un piccolo with insolent eyes and a great tenderness only to see and touch a little in the narrow passage between the built-in cupboard painted pink and the rosy glow of the situation so characteristic in this our masculine-dominated myth unmarked save by subtraction from the feminine with its ambivalence in the double-negation no e no” (Between 508). The male pursuit of the woman in the narrow passageway is an all too familiar topos within the “masculine-dominated myth.” This scene is “unmarked” or unremarked, appearing “natural,” except if one recognizes in this myth an
ambivalent flight from women and a feeling of lack in the male’s “subtraction from the feminine.” As the passage on page 468 quoted above suggests, the particular grammar of relationship between subject and object (“when and to whose heart did one do that?”) might make a real difference.

Jane Gallop criticizes the feminist attack on Lacanian psychoanalysis for taking the position that these “markings” can ever be escaped: “That effort would place the feminist as observer in some sort of floating position outside the structure, a position of omniscience. Such positioning ignores the subject’s need to place himself within the signifying chain in order to be any place at all. There is no place for a ‘subject,’ no place to be human, to make sense outside of signification, and language always has specific rules which no subject has the power to decree” (Gallop 12). I would suggest that in the travel novel Between, Brooke-Rose acknowledges that however plush or sparse, feminine or masculine, one’s location in the “vessel of conception,” one cannot float outside the plane of language. The “between” of the novel is a space within, rather than outside of, the signifying chain in which gender is marked. Indeed, the novel illustrates how fantasies of escape, provided in literature and philosophy, themselves participate in these gendered markings. Brooke-Rose reminds us how myths and metaphors of flight and travel are indelibly marked in this signifying chain, often through plays on words and conventional phrases. The metaphors of travel are pressed into the service of romance; men are constantly offering to take the unnamed translator “under their wing” (“whatever wing means under which he has taken her auburn blond svelte and dark to their conferences” [Between 434]). And myths of rescue are figured in terms of the woman’s being carried away: “Please do not throw into W.C. because one day the man will come and lift you out of your self-containment or absorption rising into the night above the wing par a quelle aile j’vois pas d’aile moi only a red light winking on and off in the blackness” (Between 446). Hollywood fantasies of rescue are mobilized: “Ah yes! The ideas. Here we came in, the hero will now pick up the heroine on a plane about to land in Hollywood and offer her a contract for life” (Between 460). Even direction is gendered, particularly the movement up and down that underwrites the narrative journey (the basic movement of the flight in taking off and landing). The trope of direction itself allegorizes desire as symbolically gendered. The yearning for transcendence is represented in the metaphors of masculine authority: “The body stretches forth towards some thought some order some command obeyed in the distant brain way up” (Between 405–6). In contrast, the older mythic
geography mentioned above is suggested to be aboriginal, beneath the twentieth-century European map.

The visitor’s attention turns immediately to the sanctuary of Apollo situated on the higher slopes of one of the Phaidriades rocks in five terrace-like levels, brilliant with the splendour of its monuments... the Temple of Apollo beneath which the famous oracle used to sit and utter cryptic prophecies to all who came and consulted it on serious matters like war, alliances, births and marriages. Finally, a little higher up stands the Theatre... and beyond the Sanctuary lies the Stadium, where the Pythic Games took place to celebrate Apollo’s victory over Python, the legendary monster.

The visitor’s attention turns immediately to the masculine unmarked and situated on the higher slopes in five terraces none of which deserves a flow of rash enthusiasm. (Between 430)

According to myth, after killing Python, Apollo seized the oracular shrine of Mother Earth at Delphi; the cult of Apollo depended on this female power. Perhaps it is this “long lost code of zones lying forgotten” (Between 464) that surfaces tantalizingly in the text to suggest a different kind of language lying hidden within the chain of signification, one that would make a difference if rediscovered.

This recovery is problematic, given the power of the “male-dominated myths” to appropriate it. The voice of a cynical speaker on passive resistance warns:

Human beings need to eat, to work, and to this end will either knuckle under or, more often, persuade themselves that le mensonge vital die Lebensluge [vital lie] contains sufficient double-negation to reintegrate him into totality compared with so many fragile truths and lost mysteries that surround us in this our masculine-dominated civilization turned upside down into the earphones and out into the mouthpiece with a gulliverisation typical of the giant myths euphemised into a sack, a basket, a container cavern womb belly vase vehicle ship temple sepulchre or holy grail, witness le complexe de Jonas with which the lost vitality of the word goes down into the mouthpiece and out through its exits and entrances... (Between 510)

Although the cynical speaker emphasizes the way the giant male myths are “gulliverised” by female analogy, the passage implicitly recognizes that the “vessels of conception” and transportation in central male myths
of the Western tradition co-opt, by troping, female morphology. Despite this thick veneer of disdain, the possibility of rediscovering a “long-lost language” is suggested at certain moments in the text, a language of flowers (or plants and transplants), which is associated with the French love letters sent to the translator by Bertrand: “So the white gladiolus explodes in letter after letter in a language that finds itself delicious and breeds plants or parts of plants inside the seven-terraced tower undoing the magic wall of defence anticlockwise from the distant brain way up the downward path escalating to a death-kiss with a half-visualised old man well fifty-seven and plus the circular dance of simulation vital lies lost mysteries and other excitations to the true end of imagination” (Between 542). In this envoi, this circulation of love letters, is the suggestion of a circuit of desire in language not wholly contaminated by overuse, a certain pathetic beauty ironized but not destroyed. Like the Trojan horse, the language of flowers disarms defenses from within. Paradoxically, the exhumation of a buried, archaic past is impelled by a rather silly old man who speaks in romantic clichés, which produce, nevertheless, something “that actually means something compels a passion” (Between 406). The translator suggests something of the sort in her response to Siegfried’s ridicule of her for replying to Bertrand’s adoring letters: “—The language, Siegfried. The fact that all this suffering stuff as you call it pours out in French, well, it sort of turns the system inside out” (Between 516).

But meaning, difference, and significance travel in this text and do not arrive at any one place, even a myth of female power, for Brooke-Rose is always suspicious of such a gesture of mere reversal. Theory, including a feminist reversal of hierarchies, is subjected to critical displacements. “Inverting the polarities, (writing/voice, nonbeing/being, etc.),” she says, “produces dizziness and fear (and resistance). But could the ultimate effect not be reequilibration, which should produce (and has produced) flights of creativity and word-game processes as enriching and magical as those produced by the incredibly complex flow charts and numerical logical operators of computer science?” (“The Dissolution of Character” 195).

It is this “flight of creativity” which Brooke-Rose attempts to produce in her novels, and which makes Between a story of displacement that depicts neither fixation nor flight. One of the experimental techniques she uses to enrich the possibilities for marking gender is to disrupt the operation of personal pronouns through her use of her characteristic “narratorless” narrative sentence, or what she calls, following Bakhtin, free direct discourse. The “nonnarrating” consciousness of the translator
is never represented by the pronoun “I” (although there are passages that read like interior monologues) and very rarely in the third person. Occasionally the translator is introduced in general terms, such as in the phrase “a woman of uncertain age” (*Between 445*). The free direct discourse has the curious effect of turning the character of the translator into a *second-person* pronoun. It seems not quite accurate to say, as Brooke-Rose does, that she is the “central consciousness,” as if she were like Eliot’s Tiresias, for she does not contain the language but is often its audience, as the “receiver” of the conference jargon that flows through her earphones and out through her mouthpiece or as the addressee of primarily male speakers. She becomes not only a traveler but a conduit or vessel of reception as well, similar to the reader as the recipient of the reams of jargon that pass through the narrative. She is more marked according to her gender than the implied “you” of the reader; yet her gender markings are more unmoored than the stable “personing” found in most narratives, first- and third-person alike.

In “The Mark of Gender,” Monique Wittig writes:

> Gender takes place in a category of language that is totally unlike any other and which is called the personal pronoun. Personal pronouns are the only linguistic instances that, in discourse, designate its locators and their different and successive situations in relationship to discourse. They are also the pathways and the means of entrance into language. . . . And although they are instrumental in activated the notion of gender, [personal pronouns] pass unnoticed. Not being gender marked themselves in their subjective form (except in one case) [i.e., the third-person], they can support the notion of gender while pretending to fulfill another function. In principle they mark the opposition of gender only in the third person and are not gender bearers, per se, in the other persons. . . . But, in reality, as soon as gender manifests itself in discourse, there is a kind of suspension of grammatical form. A direct interpellation of the locator occurs. The locator is called upon in person. The locator intervenes, in the order of the pronouns, without mediation, in *its proper sex*—that is, when the locator is a sociological woman. For it is only then, that the notion of gender takes its full effect. (5)

Turning the character into the addressee does not bypass the path of gender Wittig outlines, but it alters a certain predictability both in the power of the pronoun to enforce gender and in the feminist critique of the circulation of woman as semiotic object. In her own critique of semiotics as regressively masculinist, Brooke-Rose castigates semioticians
whom she otherwise admires for their inability to escape phallocentric paradigms. In her fiction she wrenches her translator out of an automatic objectification in the third person. The identity of the translator changes as a function of the kind of “you” that signifies her. For example, we know by the addresses made to her that although never described physically in the text, the translator is attractive. During the course of the narrative, she ages, which affects the “you” she represents (the change in the form of address to her, from “mademoiselle” to “madame,” is only the most overt sign of this process). Unlike Wittig, who attempts to eliminate gender in her experimental fiction, Brooke-Rose rejects the notion of androgyny. She explores instead the way the feminine subject (and object) is constituted in the signifying chain of language, the way her journey as a signified and signifier is marked.

In experimenting with “person” in this way, Brooke-Rose neither places her traveler outside of the “male-dominated” signifying chain nor imprisons her within it. The language of the narrative becomes a structure of displacement rather than of either placement or escape. In this experiment with pronouns she challenges a traditional mode of representation. The grammatical and syntactic mobility of her language enables both the unfixing of identity in the narrative (in accordance with the mimetic realism she mentions) and a fictional possibility that suggests new ways of thinking about character, a new technique for writing gender.

Style offers, to borrow a line from the novel, “a new technique for living” which emerges from contemporary culture (Between 571). The “distant brain” appropriately replaces the author; twentieth-century fiction cannot retreat into nostalgic forms of realism but must catalyze the new ways of knowing made available through innovative media—the computer, for example. Brooke-Rose has increasingly spoken of the philosophical and methodological possibilities emerging from computer technology, possibilities that might help establish new logics of character as well as a new poetry in postmodern fiction: “Just as the flat characters of romance eventually, through print and the far-reaching social developments connected with it, became rounded and complex, so, if we survive at all, perhaps the computer, after first ushering in (apart from super-efficiency) the games and pre-programmed oversimplifications of popular culture, will alter our minds and powers of analysis once again, and enable us to create new dimensions in the deep-down logic of characters” (“The Dissolution of Character” 195). “Fictional character has died, or become flat,” she maintains, “as had deus ex machina. We’re left, perhaps, with the faint hope of a ghost in the machine” (“The
Dissolution of Character” 193). Brooke-Rose’s style consciously locates itself in a particular moment of technological possibility; perhaps the “distant brain” that guides the travel in *Between* is such a ghost (or god) in the machine.23 The convenient ending of the original *deus ex machina* is replaced by narrative technique that never reaches resolution (indeed, the narrative journey is circular, ending in much the same place as it began); yet this technique uncovers connections and significances through small adjustments of sentences.

Computer technology, however, seems inadequate as the sole source of regeneration for narrative fiction, for its revolution might be stuck, Brooke-Rose suggests, in a binary opposition that confirms rather than undermines a phallogocentric ethos. One of the persistent worries Brooke-Rose expresses about various forms of postmodernist writing, from theory to fiction, is its insistent phallocentrism: “With a few notable exceptions, some by women, both the postmodern novel and science fiction, like the utopias of Scholes’s structural fabulation, are surprisingly phallocratic. It is as if the return to popular forms or the parody of them, even via the intellectual cognition of utopian models, necessarily entailed the circulation of women as objects, which we find both in those models and in folktales and early cultures” (“The Dissolution of Character” 193). Brooke-Rose, who has had a vexed relationship to feminism (see “A Womb of One’s Own” for her severe reservations about “writing the body” of the feminine), has become increasingly vocal about this bias in postmodernism. She suggests that a countersource to the computer is necessary to effect a revolution in fiction, which could then aspire to the condition of poetry: “The impetus comes from two apparently contradictory sources, the technological revolution and the feminist revolution” (“The Dissolution of Character” 194). Drawing on Lacan’s distinction between the *tout* and the *pas tout*, she envisions a “new psychology” in which “both women and men artists who have rejected the totalization, the *tous*, of traditional and even modernist art and chosen the underdetermination and opaqueness of the *pas tous* may clash in an enriching and strengthening way with the binary, superlogical, and by definition exclusive structures of the electronic revolution” (“The Dissolution of Character” 196).

A cynical conference voice says near the end of *Between*, “We have no evidence at all that live human beings, let alone the skirted figurine or high-heeled shoe on the door can so embody the divine principle descending into matter in a behavior sufficiently organised to prevent the illiterate women of an Indian village taught the natural method with an abacus from pushing all those red balls to the left like a magic spell
and all coming back pregnant” (Between 571–72). The *deus ex machina* given form in the technology of style in the novel, the (holy) ghost of the god in the machine descending and landing into textuality, gives no guarantee or evidence of consequences in the “real” world. Indeed, Brooke-Rose often speaks of the pleasures of technique as sufficient for the writer on the frontiers of language. “I think it was Yeats who spoke about poetry coming out of a mouthful of air. I’ve always been fascinated by this notion of words and ideas floating up there as in a galaxy, from which the poet draws them down into the text” (Turner 26). Yet Brooke-Rose’s particular brand of postmodern travel charts a space for the flight of the female imagination while mapping out a specific, historical twentieth-century problematic. The circulation of an individual “feminine” signifier cannot be severed from the political order or from a specific history. To explore this history, literary and political, Brooke-Rose transforms Penelope’s domestic vigil of waiting for Odysseus into the vigilant, yet self-surprising language of travel in *Between*. When Penelope voyages, the categories of passivity and activity merge in the writing in a purposeful technical wandering that, nevertheless, yields a serendipitous “elsewhere.” In *Between*, Brooke-Rose conducts what Brigid Brophy in her novel *In Transit* calls “herm warfare” (220). In this skirmish, the old Hermes, “the phallus . . . the god of roads, of doorways, of all goings-in and comings out; all goings-on” is remade as a different sort of traveler supplants the “wandering . . . phallic heroes, in a permanent state of erection; pricking o’er the plain” (Brown, *Love’s Body* 50).