Amalgamemnon

PRE-DICTING THE FUTURE

In her “rehandling” of theory’s signifiers and systems in *Thru*, Brooke-Rose deconstructs the stability of narrative as representation. The deliberate showmanship in the narrative, the conjuring of scenes, dialogues, and diagrams; in multiple and echoing levels of narration, destabilizes not only the concept of authorship but also the concept of mimesis, the representation of a set of events that take place in time. “Intensity of illusion” is created and dispelled repeatedly before our eyes, as discourses of desire are played, with different theoretical mappings offered as guides to the metatextual zones we pass through. These theoretical maps, seemingly proffered as “objective” tools for grasping the meaning of the story, are revealed as themselves “interested” cultural narratives, invested in the pursuit of their own desired objects.

Yet for all its textual disruptions and despite its critique (even parody) of the limitations of theory, the novel conveys the importance of theory’s investments. The passion of the signifier is never in doubt, even as its pains take precedence over its pleasures, the “delirious” hysterical discourse overtaking its deliciousness. For all its play and virtuosity,
Thru is a novel that operates according to the premise that theory and fiction are worthy pursuits. Even if the values assigned to objects of exchange in various theoretical paradigms are discredited and the blind spots exposed, the novel suggests that theories and stories still matter.

The four novels in what Brooke-Rose called her Intercom Quartet (Amalgamemnon, Xorandor, Verbivore, and Textermination) continue to expose the blind spots in “youdipeon” discourses. But the role of literature and theory in the war on the ideology of the real becomes increasingly less assured. In her Intercom Quartet Brooke-Rose represents the possibility of the annihilation of literature, critique, and humanism itself. According to Glyn White in Reading the Graphic Surface, Brooke-Rose’s first title for the novel Thru was “Textermination,” which she changed when she mistakenly believed the title was redundant, already used as a title by William Burroughs (White 126). The novels of the Intercom Quartet all raise the specter of textermination: the end of stories and theories in the technological age. Modernity’s supposed “deaths,” the death of the author, novel, character, and history, presuppositions that Brooke-Rose has tested fictionally since publishing Out in 1964, are pushed to more apocalyptic registers. The novels radiate a heightened sense of cultural urgency. In Amalgamemnon and Textermination, especially, the fictional dialogues of Thru, with their changing pairs of speakers (Armel and Larissa, Ali Nourennin and Salvatore, Jacques, the fatalist, and his master), become “direlogues” with “theororists” (Amalgamemnon 29). We see that ideologies can terrorize.

These novels take on a prophetic feel, as if the prophetess Cassandra presided over all four texts. In Amalgamemnon, the narrator imagines being Cassandra, walking “disheveled the battlements of Troy, uttering prophecies from time to time unheaded and unheeded before being allotted as slave to victorious Agamemnon” (Amalgamemnon 7). Despite their very different narrative techniques—first-person narrative in Amalgamemnon, dialogue in Xorandor, a return to the narratorless narrative in Verbivore and Textermination—all four novels forecast disaster if the warning signs of the prophets are ignored and the increasingly “unreal” course of twentieth-century culture goes unchecked. In this criticism in the wilderness, we are warned that “the patience of vigilant language” (to quote Blanchot’s The Writing of the Disaster [75]) is mortally threatened in a world of media, technology, simulacra, and jargon.

In Amalgamenon (1984), the first-person discourse is spoken by multiple imagined speakers. Although we do not know the identity of the voice that begins the narrative, we learn that it belongs to a classics professor, Mira Enketei (6, 32), who, during the course of the
novel, “mimages” herself as many other characters (14).\(^2\) Her avatars include Cassandra (7, 16), the Trojan prophetess whose fate it is to be be uttering “unheeded” prophecies (*Amalgamemnon* 16) and who becomes one of Agamemnon’s spoils of war. Imagining herself “as if” many different characters, Mira mimages herself as Sandra (Cassandra’s modern counterpart), an Abyssinian maid playing the dulcimer (14), and a “modern intellectual” named Anne de Rommeda (32) (also Andromeda). Even her name, Mira Enketei, identifies her also as a star in the constellation “Enteki-In Cetus” (17), which means “inside the whale,” thereby further invoking the identity of Jonah (“I could cheat of course and turn to the last pages of the world as book and therefore find myself still inside the Whale. In Cetus, Mira Enketei, why not, but Mira will do, a small star varying from third to ninth magnitude in a comparatively long period of eleven months, during half of which she will be invisible to the naked eye” (32).

Like Joyce’s Finnegan, Mira assumes historical, mythic, and astronomical proportions. Her mission, however, remains constant: to awaken those around her to the impending doom she sees on the horizon. The novel’s original title, “Soon,” was an early attempt to convey this pressing predicament. As prophetess, Mira/Cassandra is a diagnostician of the present, who warns that if humanity’s course is not altered, we may witness nothing less than the collapse of meaning and civilization. Like Brooke-Rose, the first-person speaker and her female avatars expose the presuppositions operating beneath the surface of the reality we take for granted. Their warnings are based on extrapolation. Prediction is based on predictability, the deadening repetitions upon which “reality” is based. *Amalgamemnon* takes on the Brook-Roseian problematic of how to unmask the clichés that form the fabric of our existence in order to postulate some alternative possibility, departure or destination for this train that has left the station. As it predicts disaster, the novel also projects the possibility of a different tradition of the future, one that just might include hope.

On the first page of *Amalgamemnon*, Mira predicts her own redundancy, and with it, the obsolescence of all who care about human passion and the passionate use of language. She asks, “for who will want to know about ancient passions divine royal middle class or working in words and phrases and structures that will continue to spark out inside the techne that will soon be silenced by the high technology?” (*Amalgamemnon* 5). The techne of writing, the quick and lively use of language, is opposed to language produced technologically. Readers as well as writers are threatened with obsolescence in this brave new
world: “Who will still want to read at night some utterly other discourse that will shimmer out of a minicircus of light upon a page of say Agamemnon returning to his murderous wife the glory-gobbler with his new slave Cassandra princess of fallen Troy . . . ?” (Amalgamemnon 5). With the advent of computers and technology, the classics professor says she will “soon be quite redundant at last despite of all, as redundant as you after queue and as totally predictable, information-content zero” (Amalgamemnon 5). Redundancy, Brooke-Rose says elsewhere, is the basis of realism. We depend on it to confirm the thick detail of our world; it also underpins the success of our circuits of communication. Yet in Amalgamemnon, redundancy is a word for the obsolescence of humanism, literature, and knowledge, all superseded by “information.”

Like the sickly white male in Out, humanists like Mira will soon be on the unemployment line, “a worker in a queue of millions with skills too obsolete for the lean fitness of the enterprise” (Amalgamemnon 6). The pun on “queue” collapses the useless letter and the useless woman. The phrase “information-content zero” in the first sentence is a clue to the now dominant model of efficiency. The exemplar of the “lean fitness of the enterprise” is the computer. Unlike the binary opposition between 0 and 1 on which computer logic is based, the “u” after “q,” like the “you” of Mira and her fellow humanists, conveys no new information. They are “u”seless in the technological age of the national Education Computer.

Indeed, computers threaten to replace the function of the oracle, programming both the “foetus” and the “prophetus” into wholly predictable patterns. Like Agamemnon, who takes Cassandra prisoner after the defeat of the Trojans, the computer program will amalgamate prophetic speech into the culture machine that produces the pseudo-future:

Soon the prophecies will come out of input as Garbage In, and we shall all become oracular computers, Draculas sucking endless information from the napetrough of a wavelength, murders holdups wars natural catastrophes coodaytahs space-launches daytaunts cultural items and sportspersons sailing round the world on an analogue. The very foetus will be programmed into a prophetus curling up in the womb with a book of genetic information and occasionally switching on or off the booming disco of his mother’s fears and tantrums and galloping vote inventions right left of center. (Amalgamemnon 82–83)

Whether historical, genetic, Oedipal, or political, our meaning-making systems are already programmed to “spin” events in a particular
way. What the prophetess sees is the relentlessness of living inside modernity’s ideology in which prophecy becomes self-fulfilling. Ideas become “reçus” immediately as they are amalgamated with predictable narratives of national interest, of sexual conquest, of political rhetoric. Through much of the narrative, there is a sense of weariness, a sense that nothing can break through the language of habit, this “ineluctable future” (Invisible Author 49). Prediction is immediately short-circuited as predictability. Mira fears that technology will accelerate this process of predictability, replacing knowledge with information and the certainty of code. In this projected future, history itself will have outlived its usefulness.

As prophetess, professor of classics, and reader of Herodotus, the “father of history,” Mira/Cassandra has much at stake in the possibility of the end of both history and prophecy. In the instant world brought to everyone by the world evening news, the fast food-for-thought of “instant history” will expunge both the prophecy of the oracle and the deep cultural record of thousands of years of technē:

There will be computers for self-fulfilling prophecies for what will prophecy be but instant history diluted with tired generalizations and a margin of terror, add half a databank of crowing achievement and six face-saving devices finely hopped... and what if the third millennium after the third-world war refuse this confuturism, what if it pre-defer that the great deeds of men should after all be forgotten, whether Greeks or foreigners and, especially, the causes of the wars between them? (Amalgamemnon 113)

Our accumulated knowledge of error is jeopardized in this vision, and, along with it, our ability to learn from our mistakes and prevent those mistakes from being repeated. With a push of the delete button on the computer, both the past and the possibility of an alternative to the history of war will be expunged. With this deletion, the prophetess fears that history and literature will be themselves “kidnapped on the sacred cow of technoideology above and mass redundancy below” (Amalgamemnon 22). This new form of terrorism involves world-wide amnesia, an end to the inheritance of cultural memory. An “Oblitopia” or “dehauntological campaign” (Amalgamemnon 138) promises a utopian vision of the world-wide circulation of information that will free us from the past: “Perhaps I should allow myself to be abducted by a band of terrorists who will hold me prisoner in Oblitopia or why not right here?” (Amalgamemnon 138).5
Yet, on the other end, as diagnostician of culture, Mira/Cassandra understands that classical histories themselves formed part of the “youdipeon” discourses (to borrow a phrase from Thru) that have silenced women as subject and turned them into objects of exchange, as surely as Greimas’s semiotic diagram assigned them a fixed place within structuralist discourse. As a spoil of war, along with the other women at the dawn of history, Cassandra is included in the documents of history. Cassandra as subject and witness is ignored, her words “unheeded.” Herodotus, whom Mira reads whenever she suffers from insomnia and her lover, Willy, keeps her awake with his snoring (15), begins Greek history with the exchange of women, as if the kidnapping of women led to the launching of a thousand ships. The omissions and distortions of his work lead to its designation in the text as a “fibstory.” The Histories begin with stories of wars erupting as a result of the kidnapping of Io, Europa, Medea—abductions that culminate in the kidnapping of Helen by Paris, a copycat who knew his history all too well. Chunks of Herodotus appear in the narrative, mingling with radio news, dialogue, and Mira’s own mental narrative (replete with the imagined others, including the male Orion, who take turns assuming the “I” of the discourse). Brooke-Rose “plagiarizes” Herodotus to demonstrate the violence against women in classic history, not only physically, but psychologically, with the loss of their voices. In her discussion of Amalgamemnon in Invisible Author, she points out that “the word plagiarize . . . originally meant ‘kidnap,’” and this etymological connection provides an “invisible pun” in the text (50). Not only women, but women’s thoughts and voices are kidnapped/plagiarized in the novel: “I’ll know it’ll be he who’ll end up cassandring me, precisely in nomansland where the male gods will ever take over the pythian oracles, turning them into twittering spokespersons” (Amalgamemnon 136).

The title of the novel signifies the amalgamation of women and their voices throughout the history of the West. These voices, “foreign” to the history, are unintelligible to it. Cassandra’s plight is reflected in Herodotus’ story of the people of Dodona who hear the prophecies of foreign priestesses and, because they cannot understand the language, think they hear the “twittering of birds”:

And yet the story which the people of Dodona will tell about the black dove from Egypt becoming their oracle would surely arise because the foreign woman’s language would sound to them like the twittering of birds. And later the dove will speak with a human voice because of course the woman will stop twittering and learn to talk intelligibly.
Similarly the young Scythians will be unable to learn the language of the Amazons but the women will succeed in picking up theirs, and therefore disappear. (Amalgamemnon 11)

With Mira/Cassandra leading the charge, Amalgamemnon presents a warning about the violence and coercion reflected on the battlefields of history and in the narratives of war. There is no treatment, no instant remedy or politics. Studying the past and the present does not correct this error of perception, since the lenses used—even at the university where Mira has taught classics—are the same flawed driving mirrors found in Thru. Previous theorists of culture and politics have become grist for the culture machine, turned to cliché. The female student of such master philosophers is predicted to “plunge into the Leviathan of the Politics, the Physics, the Metaphysics, the Dialogues, the Republic not to mention the mediation of a Master and Slave and all the rest, and emerge perhaps chained to a rock of ideology or else be carried off like Europe on the sacred cow of dialectics” (Amalgamemnon 9).

How does Amalgamemnon diagnose the present crisis while using techne to adumbrate an alternative possibility? As Mira, who has imagined herself as Orion in a Slavic prison says, “I must get himself out” (Amalgamemnon 21), combining the two dissident personas locked within the walls of official ideology. But in the dizzying metalepses in the narrative, male dissidents like Orion (Amalgamemnon 17, 30) suffer the same fate as women, as the “regimented machines” (Amalgamemnon 20), the brainwashing babble, envelops them both. They, too, are often powerless to confront the male figures (all the Amalgamemnons) who keep the prison machinery going.

So, the question Amalgamemnon raises is how to “write the future” in a way that breaks the hold of the utterly predictable? If in Thru, Brooke-Rose attempts to produce a new “hystery” through the crazy circuits of signifiers cross-cutting her wounded text, in Amalgamemnon, the possible “resistance to foregone conclusion” emerges from a new constraint and “technique for living,” the refusal of the present tense or “constative” utterances. Taking Cassandra’s role as prophetess as a fictional premise, Brooke-Rose eschews both past and present tenses. She “writes the future” by using the future and conditional tenses and by eliminating not only the third-person, past tense narration (in keeping with her characteristic lipogram) but the present tense as well.

The refusal of third-person, past-tense narration has a special significance in Amalgamemnon with Herodotus as a main intertext, since the preterite is the sign of official recorded history. The narrator of Amal-
Gamemnon describes the retrospection that underwrites history as “the usual school of afterthought rearranging history past and present in the light of national self-esteem for political ends and means” (Amalgamemnon 21). Traditionally the sign of history, the third-person past tense is also the “reassuring guarantor of real events,” as Brooke-Rose puts it in the Invisible Author (132). It is the sign of the authorial consciousness in classic realism. In Brooke-Rose’s novels, from Out forward, this traditional sign of the real is missing. Her refusal of a synthesizing, third-person past-tense narration continues modernism’s subversion of the link that realism forged between representation and retrospection. As Gertrude Stein writes in Narration: Four Lectures by Gertrude Stein, “History as it mostly exists has nothing to do with anything that is living.” Both Stein and Brooke-Rose eschew the retrospective arrangement of events upon which historical narrative and traditional fiction depend.

But in Amalgamemnon Brooke-Rose takes the refusal of retrospective narration a step further. For along with the past tense, she eliminates all constative statements, that is, all statements of fact. In doing so she presents prophecy in speech, rather than narrative, mode. Using the first-person pronoun (although, as in Thru, ruthlessly switching from one first-person speaker to another without warning), she attempts to “spark out inside the techne” (Amalgamemnon 5) an “utterly other discourse” that relies on prophetic utterance. Thus, unlike her previous novels since Such, Amalgamemnon is in speech, rather than narrative mode. The novel exists in a curious time of pre-diction, a kind of saying before the end. In imagining an alternative future to the mere reprogramming of the past, the novel simulates what it feels like to live in what Michael Wood calls “the time of our options.” In the absence of the “belated time of narrative, the time when the game is over” (Wood 17), Amalgamemnon makes use of prophecy as a language that, paradoxically, resists foreclosure.

For prophecy that resists foreclosure is a paradox. Initially, Brooke-Rose has said she intended to use only the future tense. In a chapter of Invisible Author called “A Writer’s Constraints,” she describe this experiment as inspired by a kind of challenge she found in Gerard Genette’s Discours du récit (Invisible Author 46–47). Genette postulates that all narratives must situate themselves in time but not in space, with most choosing the past (as do history and classic realism). Even science fiction and apocalypse, Genette points out, are postdated after the event. As for future tense, Genette says it is impossible to sustain over the course of the narrative, usually found instead in short sections within longer texts, sections of prophecy or prediction, proleptic information from the author, or orders. The technical challenge of writing only in future
tense was at first embraced by Brooke-Rose, a challenge she describes in detail in “A Writer’s Constraints” (Invisible Author 47) and in her interview with Friedman and Fuchs in Utterly Other Discourse (33). During the process of writing, however, she realized that though technically “possible,” writing in the future tense can be narratively unsatisfactory in such high dosage: “People do not talk wholly in the future tense. So I widened the constraint to all non-realized tenses . . . : the conditional of course, and what’s left of the subjunctive in English, the imperative, and, when forced to use the present, only questions and, possibly, negations” (Invisible Author 48). This explanation interestingly relies on a fidelity to realism, that is, to reproducing verisimilar dialogue (the way “people talk”). But upon closer inspection, we see that it is the tonal effect of so much future tense, rather than its lack of verisimilitude, that worries Brooke-Rose most. In attempting to eliminate all but the future tense, she discovers ironically that she introduces the sound of assertion and declaration that was to have been banished along with declarative sentences: “For one thing, as I’ve said, it’s very hard to use the future for any length of time without sounding intolerably oracular . . . It took me four or five rewritten versions to get the tone right” (52). To know the future as Cassandra knows it absolutely is to assert the inevitability of a certain fate. Instead, by using “nonrealized tenses” rather than exclusively future tense, she suggests a potential alternative not only to the petty present and tragic past, but to the teleological future as well. As Brooke-Rose says, “the ineluctable future is what my protagonist fights” (Invisible Author 49); paradoxically, she wants to write prophecy that resists the predictability.

The distinction between the future tense and nonrealized tenses turns out to be a philosophical as well as rhetorical choice. It is the realm of the not yet realized—not the Greek fated future—which Brooke-Rose attempts to create. This potential alternative to mere repetition in the future is constructed in a number of ways. The narrative includes modal auxiliaries like “could” and “might,” and interrogatives which work to soften the declarative effect produced by the unrelieved use of “will” and “shall”: “One pseudo-escaperoute might be the suave and portly man” (Amalgamemnon 7); “Probably that would make the new generation the new high priests and oracles of pythian mysteries . . . ” (Amalgamemnon 6). Technically, both sentences in the future tense (“I shall soon be as redundant as . . . ”) and conditional (“One pseudo-escaperoute might be the suave and portly man”) puncture the mimetic function of narrative. They differ tonally in an important way, however, for the extensive use of modal auxiliaries and conditionals mitigates the authority of the
oracular pronouncements and destabilizes the relationship between the

time of the saying and the potential time of the occurrence of the event

predicted. The certainty of the projected future is altered. Despite the

many explicit allusions to Herodotus’ Greek history, Brooke-Rose sub-

stantially alters classical oracular pronouncements and the role of her

“prophetess.” In both Herodotus and Brooke-Rose’s texts, it is Cassan-

dra’s fate never to be believed, but in Herodotus, the prophecies of the

oracles, although often ambiguous, are nevertheless always fulfilled,

often ironically. It is this note of irony that Brooke-Rose does import

from Herodotus, whose Histories are full of ambiguous prophecies that

are frequently misinterpreted with tragic consequences (think of Croe-

sus, who was told by the oracle that he would destroy a great empire,

only to discover it was his own). The atmosphere of ironic fulfillment,

“plagiarized” from the Greeks, does make its way into Amalgamemnon,

along with the many references to, as the narrator calls this victimization

by fate, its “foolfilment” (Amalgamemnon 13).

But Brooke-Rose turns Cassandra’s status as “unheeded and

unhinged” into an opening into a series of potential futures. In a parody

of the binary codes of computer logic, Mira/Cassandra considers a series

of possible choices in almost algebraic fashion. In using “unrealized

tenses,” she does not definitively make the choice, but, instead, proj-

ects alternative possibilities (a or b) and rehearses alternative futures. “I

could anticipate and queue before the National Education Computer for

a different teaching job, reprogramming myself like a floppy disk, or at

the Labour Exchange for a different job altogether, recycling myself like

a plastic bottle” (Amalgamemnon 5). In some cases, this logic of choice

turns out to be a false logic: “and either way I’d be a worker in a queue

of millions with skills too obsolete for the lean fitness of the enterprise”

(Amalgamemnon 6). Yet despite these false oppositions, the pressure

of finding an alternative future persists, sometimes in the form of an

explicit question (“When will the unexpected cease to be foreseeable or

vice versa?” [Amalgamemnon 19]), sometimes, emerging in an anxious

dialogue with the self about how to construct the future: “Let a and b

stand for mutually exclusive hypotheses, extrapolate and develop. Take

it from there, write in future” (Amalgamemnon 21); “Shall I crawl mon-
techristoid through prison walls and dive by air land or sea if so I must

instruct all X and Y chromosomes within me to make the future possible

or to hold it back, or forth. Let sex equal why” (Amalgamemnon 82).

“A and b” emerge in the text as hypothetical alternative futures

rehearsed, algebraic examples and letters that fuse in surprising combi-

nations; “X and Y” are algebraic entities, new sexual combinations, as
well as linguistic ones. For underlying the use of “non-realized tenses” is the pressure of an uttered question that a good oracle can never ask: Could “a” and “b,” “x” and “y” combine to produce something different in both the writing of the future and the future itself? Can an “utterly other discourse” break through and be heard? Despite the machinery of ideology, what emerges in Amalgamemnon is what I would call the utopian, rather than the elegiac, strain of Brooke-Rose’s lipogrammatic experiments.

This utopian strain does not project a utopia that is someplace in time or space; rather, it is created out of a sense of what’s missing in the present. The modals and conditionals begin to suggest what Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno call “an incentive toward utopia.” In a number of dialogues and essays on the utopian function of art and literature, including one translated as “Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing” (1975), the two Marxist philosophers discuss the way literature gives form to the “not-yet” realized possibilities missing in the everyday, possibilities experienced otherwise. Marxist ideology, along with other “isms,” is skewered in Amalgamemnon; nevertheless, I would claim that Bloch’s and Adorno’s description of the utopian longing for something missing helpfully captures the effect of Brooke-Rose’s nonrealized tenses. As Adorno puts it in “Something’s Missing,” “utopia is essentially in the determined negation, in the determined negation of that which merely is, and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points at the same time to what should be” (Bloch 12). Bloch locates a transposition in the notion of utopia from space to time that suggests both a “not there” and a “not yet” in utopian longing:

At the very beginning Thomas More designated utopia as a place, an island in the distant South Seas. This designation underwent changes later so that it left space and entered time. . . . With Thomas More the wishland was still ready, on a distant island, but I am not there. On the other hand, when it is transposed into the future, not only am I not there, but utopia itself is also not with itself. This island does not even exist. But it is not something like nonsense or absolute fancy; rather it is not yet in the sense of a possibility; that it could be there if we could only do something for it. Not only if we travel there, but in that we travel there the island utopia arises out of the sea of the possible—utopia, but with new contents. (Bloch, “Something’s Missing”)

In another essay in The Utopian Function of Art and Literature, called
“Art and Utopia” (78–155), Bloch tries to clarify these “new contents.” The “content of hope,” he says:

represents itself in ideas, essentially in those of the imagination. The ideas of the imagination stand in contrast to those of recollection, which merely reproduce perceptions of the past and thereby increasingly hide in the past. And in this instance the ideas of the imagination are not of the kind that merely combine the already existing facts in a random manner . . . but carry on the existing facts toward their future potentiality of their otherness, of their better condition in an anticipatory way. (Bloch, “Art and Utopia” 105)

“Out of the sea of the possible”—Bloch and Adorno have faith that art and literature are the sites in which the imagination explores a “not yet” that projects some hope through the cracks in the machinery of the predictable. In its nonrealized tenses, Amalgamemnon is unlike most utopian fiction set in the future, which posits what Cristopher Nash calls a “neocosm,” an alternative world constructed in a stable “elsewhere” whose logic and being follow stable laws of translation from the known world (i.e., a place where the laws of gravity are suspended, or the laws of aging, or reproduction) (Nash 102–41). The logic of internal consistency, which governs most alternative world fictions or science fictions, is obviously absent from Amalgamemnon. Paradoxically, the use of future and modalized tenses precludes the construction of such a possible world. In Lecercle’s essay on Amalgamemnon, he dismisses “possible world” theories in analyzing Brooke-Rose’s novel precisely because they ignore the deliberate antinarrative construction of her fiction (156–57). In casting Amalgamemnon in the conditional, the “saying” of the prophecy, with predicted dialogues and scenes, is the only “event.” No future is constatively created. Indeed, any notion of the “promised land” is treated skeptically, along with the promises that mark both political speeches and popular advertising (“And won’t all promised lands of milk and honey and all pleasure domes become battlefields of distant voices prophesying war by nation interposed, just like the other obscene?” [Amalgamemnon 14]).

Instead, for Brooke-Rose the utopian is a series of possibilities enacted in language, the paradoxical longings and doubts expressed grammatically in her syntactic lipogram, with its refusal of realized tenses. Webster’s defines modals as “of, relating to, or constituting a grammatical form or category characteristically indicating prediction of an action or state in some manner other than a simple fact.” As Lecercle points out,
modal logic has contributed to the concept of a “possible world” (156), but Brooke-Rose deprives us of the consistent use of propositional logic, the predictable suspension of laws to create an alternative universe. In her use of nonrealized tenses and modal auxiliaries (like “will” and “shall”), she explores the possibility of a future that departs from the predictably gendered investments in “youdipeon discourses.” If in Thru, typography on the page literally suggests an alternate mapping to the semiotic square, with its predictable syntax of wanting subject and valued object, in Amalgamemnon, the syntactic lipogram gives rise to an unrealized, but potential, opening into the future.

Amalgamemnon offers a literature of ideas rather than characters, a literature in which the received ideas of the present are exposed as the substratum of “the real,” yet they combine as well to illuminate what Bloch calls “their better condition in an anticipatory way.” Amalgamemnon addresses the question of emergence, the possibility of something new arising from the deadening hand of history and the relentless technological machinery of the present. On the one hand, Mira/Cassandra warns that the future will not move toward “the potentiality of otherness,” but toward the repetition of the same, such that prediction and predictability merge. The new, as news, is likely to be incorporated, amalgamated, into this homogenizing discourse:

But will it always be the fate of seers to utter idées by definition recues from every somewhere suspended in some black cloud of news enveloping the earth and ever replenished, at which kings and counsellors will shrug and talk of wave troughs silver linings bright tunnel-ends and chrome el dorados for all? The clichés of the future will develop however, framed in a big surprise as value added such as dynamic structures for instance that will change while passing through the minds of their observers, seers, readers, cyberneticians, historians, pig-farmers and such. (Amalgamemnon 78)

Mira/Cassandra explicitly addresses the kind of false utopia packaged by authorities of various kinds, that encourages us to be content with the everyday and the “pseudo-future” endemic in the forecasts of the world news. This is one meaning of the phrase “as if” heard so insistently throughout the novel: “we’ll all go along as if” (Amalgamemnon 15), that is, ignoring the poverty of our imaginative lives, caught in the unrelieved sameness accelerated by technologies’ reproductive capacities. But a mutually exclusive meaning of this short phrase suggests itself insistently as well: “as if, for instance, I were some other constel-
lation, not Enketei-In-Cetus, not Jonah inside the Whale but Orion say, to be siberianized for flagrant delight of opinion” (*Amalgamemnon* 17). The first “as if” refers to the pseudo future of the world news and the media, the second to fictional projection. On logical and ontological grounds, the supposed nonfiction (the news) and fiction cannot be distinguished (one true, the other false). In the unstable ontological world of *Amalgamemnon*, both operate according to the same principle of “as if,” a projection rather than a fact. Yet the necessity to distinguish the two kinds of simulated entities can be felt in the text:

None of my private telematics will interest him, why have private telematics he might as well say when you could have me and it would be a very good question while I’d think of an answer as to which would seem more fleshy and bloody among shadow figures, the electronic visitors speaking their colourful videolects like substitute guests and husbands blandly conversing in our livingrooms, or the twittering liewaypersons softwarily treading around the rotundity of a composite beast man waning fast and flat? (*Amalgamemnon* 60)

The battlefront of this mutually exclusive choice is language, its stage the page itself. The redundancy so productive in the computer slyly gives way to another agenda, another program that might benefit the redundant classicist in the future. The possibility of this transformation appears in the surprises of the language—the puns, the portmanteau words, the etymological excursions. The birds in the story told by the people of Dodona (*Amalgamemnon* 11) become shifting signifiers, appearing now as new highwaymen stealing the stage, reprogramming the mechanism “softwarily.”

In *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, a work published three years before *Amalgamemnon*, Fredric Jameson writes that modernism can be regarded as both an expression of the “reification of daily life,” demonstrating how “the inhabitants of older social formations are culturally and psychologically retrained for life in the market system” and a “utopian compensation for everything reification brings with it” (Jameson 236). Modernist art can “open up a life space in which the opposite and the negation of such rationalization can be, at least imaginatively, experienced” (Jameson 236). Yet for Jameson, the ideology of modernism must be exposed by the critic, who reads the “gaps” of the fiction, recognizing both the limitations and compensations the fiction offers. But in the silences of Brooke-Rose’s lipograms and the sly etymological memories and slippages of her diction, the
ache of what is missing described by Bloch and Adorno bleeds into the possibility of something different emerging from culture’s well-worn grooves. Brooke-Rose has faith in fiction to perform possibility through what Blanchot has called the “patience of vigilant language”—a careful, but not passive, poetic process. Art is enlisted to shock language out of its predictabilities, its coercions.

For Brooke-Rose, as for Gertrude Stein, there is no refining fire of purification for language, only repetition, rhymes, and recombinations. Her cultural critique wed the experimentation and ecology, re-use rather than transcendence or erasure, moving from redundant to retreading. Brooke Rose, the novelist, embodies this revival through a particular kind of “hauntology,” a mining of the baggage of words. In *Amalgamemnon* writing depends upon a linguistic scavenging that unearths the living possibilities of dead languages and their stories. From this activity, a future is projected. The narrator posits that she could either become totally obsolete and stay on the queue of the Labor Exchange hoping for some other employment, OR she can mine her classical humanistic training and “hope for the best” by returning to the soil “to rear something or other, recycling weeds and words no sooner said than dung” (*Amalgamemnon* 6). Although these alternatives at first seem to collapse into the need for male protection, the idea of recycling words and weeds remains a creative possibility in the text. This “hauntology” is an ecological venture that differs from mere nostalgia for a liberal tradition of learning. The recurring images of humanists on the labor line in *Out* and *Amalgamemnon* and her out-of-work characters in *Textermination* do not suggest a conservative return to older securities and forms. Her Mira/Cassandra is a scavenger, a wordmonger. She resembles the multifaceted Kate/Biddy the hen/ALP figure in *Finnegans Wake*, who forages in the midden heap of language to produce a text “unhemmed as it is uneven.” Mira/Cassandra’s antinarrative is a “madlane memory,” a jumble of words, myths, “fibstories,” and idioms that revels in the messiness of language, “no sooner said than dung.” In a kind of literary quid pro quo, she “kidnaps” stories like the “fibstories” of Greek history that rely unswervingly on narratives of female abduction and rape.

Opposed to this ecological version of history are the male voices in the text. Willy/Has/Wally instead proposes a new “Oblitopia” (*Amalgamemnon* 138) that negates both history and the philosophy of history: “We won’t rehandle or reinterpret it, we’ll create history and forget about it, events will be our instant history, but history as events not history as discourse. We won’t allow you verbiage-mongers to add the water, we’ll scatter the self-consuming ashes to the winds and move on
into the next instant” (*Amalgamemnon* 109). This continuous present is part of the “dehauntological campaign” of the band of terrorists, who seek to abduct Mira and hold her a prisoner in Oblitopia (*Amalgamemnon* 138). The worst fate in *Amalgamemnon* is not abduction and rape. It is a forced amnesia that prevents the “working in words and phrases and structures that will continue to spark out inside the techne” (*Amalgamemnon* 13), a linguistic inheritance threatened by technology’s capacities.

“Softwarily,” Mira creates alternatives to the efficiency of the software programs and the “programme-cuts” the humanists face (*Amalgamemnon* 5). To the extent that this antitechnological bias runs throughout the novel, Brooke-Rose echoes Heidegger in *The Question Concerning Technology*, in his suspicion of technology and the culture of conformity made possible through its ubiquity. It is in *Xorandor*, her next novel in the Intercom Quartet that she takes technology as a productive premise of her fiction and tries to write an experimental text playing off the binary logic of computer programming. In *Amalgamemnon*, however, the pun on “software” in the above quotation suggests that Mira’s sly use of teche seeks to combat the “softquery expert[s] (60) who produce technology’s deadening effects. As Lecercle points out in his fascinating reading of the novel, Heidegger’s “deep distrust of modern technology” was combined with “his wish to go back to etymology and interpret technology as pro-duction, as a form of poetics, which involves a direct relationship with truth as disclosure” (158). In “The Dissolution of Character,” Brooke Rose writes of “language and substance, or what is closest to the real, the poem” (“The Dissolution of Character” 196). Somehow, in the hypothetical mode of *Amalgamemnon*, with its nonrealized tenses and spectral evocations, “the real” emerges through the substance and techne of its language. If the cord between the word and the referent is severed in the death of realism that Brook-Rose both diagnoses in her essays and stages in her fiction, her own version of amalgamation restores the conversation between language and being.

For another word for this real is “being.” In his Heideggerian reading of *Amalgamemnon*, Lecercle invokes Heidegger’s understanding of *Dasein*, with its “coming toward death that is Dasein’s relationship to time” (159). As Lecercle puts it, Cassandra’s “wanderings are those of Dasein relating to the world of her potentialities-for-Being” (157). This essay, which is worth reading in its entirety, brings us back to the recurring theme of the unbearable lightness of being suffered by all the dissolving “characters” in Brooke-Rose’s fiction. In Heidegger, “language speaks out not in play, but as an opening up to Being” (166). Although language does speak out in play (and Lecercle also shows the joyousness
of the linguistic excursions of Brooke-Rose’s prose), this reading captures some of the seriousness of the language games tied to the threat of death that hovers over almost all her fiction and is expressed in the title *Textermination* (and the memory of World War II in *Between*). As in her other texts since *Between*, it is the female voice that tries to project this opening toward being. The appropriately named Willy, one of the male suitors in the novel, is explicitly associated with the denial of being and the imposition of will: “And when I shall have left him it will remain a mystery to me whether anyone so physically solid would always and for others seem to lack a whole dimension of being” (*Amalgamemnon* 71–72, 141). In one of the “direlogues” (53) Brooke-Rose stages in the novel, Orion says to Anne de Rommede, “All words should be played with and names most of all” (33). In reply, she confronts him about the glibness with which he plays with language, saying: “I shall always, from my very profession as political commentator and writer, be aware of the danger of words, but why would you increase their frailness with constant play, even with my very identity?” (*Amalgamemnon* 34).

In a work such as *Amalgamemnon*, with its deliberately destabilized and multiple “characters,” this colloquy seems very odd. Yet the direlogue underlines the stakes involved in crafting the future without assertions of facts, in nonrealized tenses, in portmanteau words and puns. Brooke-Rose’s female voices are painfully aware of the unbearable lightness of being.¹⁴

In *Amalgamemnon’s* house of fiction, letters, constellations, “electronic visitors,” creators and their creations all “exist” in the text as imaginary beings rather than stable entities within either a probable or realistic world. Continuing the play on the “degrees of absence” in *Thru* (from the “zeroist author” on), the shifting signifiers of imaginary entities overlap, combine, change places: professors become invisible stars become authors become genealogical layers on a family tree.¹⁵ Fictional levels blur as the amalgamated voices in *Amalgamemnon* struggle to consider the “gamut of possibilities” (“And I shall utter wordless poems with only rhythms and weird atonal leaps along the gamut of all the possibilities” [*Amalgamemnon* 21]). Amid the flux of nonrealized tenses, some ontological commitments seem more important than others. The human archive itself may be threatened: “Peace then might come, as pure inhuman silence radioactive in the hushed fragments of exploded planet, which maybe some big dish telescopic ear will capture twenty-five billion light years away” (*Amalgamemnon* 19). (This apocalyptic vision will appear in different form in *Xorandor* and *Verbivore.*) Letters are subjected to “black oblivion.” (Orion, imagined by Mira, says, “But
my words will carve through dungeon walls and I shall crawl priest-like through the hole into a neighboring cell, carrying a secret about buried treasure, then montecristoid plummet as a faked corpse into the black sea of oblivion and swim ashore. At dawn I’ll wake exhausted and write my cybernetic story of dissidence on the sand” [Amalgamemnon 20].) Whether this is prediction or promise is ambiguous. Yet, this kind of speech act seems distinct from the tissue of slick inducements and false advertisements endemic in Mira’s contemporary society. “The ever-returning prodigal discourse will always be Listen: I promise” (Amalgamemnon 29). This is the default setting of the Gigo (garbage in, garbage out) computer-generated pseudo-future of new-age romance and the world news. The prophecy in Amalgamemnon refuses the prophetic, as Blanchot has put it. In the wake of twentieth-century “disaster” (and there is a pun here, as in Brooke-Rose, on the concept of “star” [“aster”]), “[D]isaster breaks with “every form of totality, never denying, however, the dialectical necessity of a fulfillment . . . 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” (Blanchot 75).

In an essay entitled “Metafiction and Surfiction,” reprinted in A Rhetoric of the Unreal, Brooke-Rose raises the question of fiction’s future and asks: “Where do we go from here? Toward silence, exhaustion? Or a new beginning?” She points out that a good “theory” “should be able to ‘predict,’ not in the futurological sense, but in accounting for all the theoretical possibilities” (Rhetoric of the Unreal 385). But Brooke-Rose acknowledges that as a fiction writer, she is “not a pure theorist, and even less a prophet, and critical prophecies have a way of being undone by artists” (Rhetoric of the Unreal 385). In her preface to Stories, Theories and Things, she returns to her dual roles as theorist and writer and describes the way that fiction tests the limits of theory:

[T]he novelist writes also as theorist, aware of a fundamental inseparability of elements that critics and teachers have to separate, even rejoice in separating, pin-pointing, for the purpose of this or that type of analysis, though some try to refund them into large universal systems which the novelist knows can only hold in a precarious suspension of disbelief: As with poems and stories, as with ideal definitions of form and formal definitions of ideas, as with statements of position, confessions, autobiographies, greater aims, interpretations, glimmerings of overall themes. All are protean, capturable for brief moments in language, but already changed even into their opposites another brief
moment later. That is the excitement, not unique since it is part of the human condition, but more intensely experienced in the critical and creative activities than in the more unreflexive routines of daily life. (Stories, Theories and Things ix)

In Amalgamemnon, Brooke-Rose offers a new technique for living, another weapon for survival, an opening toward being. In Invisible Author: Last Essays, her own stance might be compared to that of her Cassandra, reviewing a lifetime of being unheeded. In these valedictory essays, the farewell to her readers, spoken in propria persona, brings us uncomfortably close to personal complaint about the lack of attention paid to her work in particular and to women experimental writers in general. A slight peevishness or irritability creeps into the voice that, like the Ancient Mariner’s, seeks to buttonhole the reader and say, ‘wake up—you must hear this.’ The valediction does not forbid mourning; on the contrary, the finality of the voice—‘this is the last time I will say this, so listen for once’—adds to the poignancy of the message. As Benjamin says in “The Storyteller,” the proximity of death heightens the authority of the retrospection and reinforces the wisdom of the message. This is not to say that Brooke-Rose’s tone is melodramatic or self-pitying, only that age and the threat of impending silence bring a sense of greater urgency. The Author is Dead; Long Live the Author.