The Art of Losing

REMAKE, INVISIBLE AUTHOR, AND LIFE, END OF

Since 1996, Brooke-Rose has produced three “remakes” of her own life, turning and returning to the theme of the archive of her life and work. Although her previous novels fictionalized aspects of her own autobiography, three valedictory addresses, Remake, a fictional autobiography (1996), Invisible Author: Last Essays (2002), and Life, End Of (2006) engage her “techniques for living” in the project of looking back at life. All three texts make the invisible author visible: Remake, a work of “memesis” that mixes memory and invention; Invisible Author, a series of critical essays on her writing practices and the state of narrative criticism (which I have cited throughout); and Life, End Of, which Brooke-Rose describes as “a therapeutic memoir.” Realizing she is on the verge of extinction, the duck-billed platypus attempts to theorize and fictionalize her life and life’s work.

Invisible Author begins, “Have you ever tried to do something very difficult as well as you can, over a long period, and found that nobody notices? That’s what I’ve been doing for over thirty years” (Invisible Author 1). In these three autobiographical texts, Brooke-Rose takes her-
self as experimental subject, expanding and explaining her archive simultaneously. Yet in attempting to make visible what has gone unnoticed and set the record straight, these three texts come to terms with the fragility of the archive. “Official” memory reflected in literary tradition, the “Dow Jones Index of Authors” (Remake 13) is mercurial, with the authors’ stocks rising and falling. Indeed, for an experimental novelist like Brooke-Rose, age, sex, and nationality conspire to ensure her invisibility (“Ending up as a harmonious Houyhnhnm, invisible as old, as woman, as English to the French and vice versa, as offbeat novelist barking up the wrong tree . . .” (Remake 169). Likewise, personal retrospection is subject to chance. Adumbrating her evolutionary subject in Subscript, she writes in Remake: “Chance, evaded by the human sciences imposing pseudo-systems, is at the heart of biology, of life. Memory is unique, random and fragile, like life, and like life dies for ever” (Remake 171).

Exploring the similarities and differences between the storage of memories in a computer and the human brain in Remake, Brooke-Rose plays on the anagram of “file” and “life,” with each of the eleven chapters labeled a “file.” Who and what survive the cut, which “files” are saved and which are lost—these are questions that continue to absorb her. Characteristically unsentimental and impersonal even in her most autobiographical writing, Brooke-Rose nonetheless attempts to ensure her own survival. As always in her writing, technique combats textermination, as “something of the technique survives, or seeps through” (Invisible Author 178). The author of A Grammar of Metaphor, the narratologist who loves to grapple with the formation of narrative sentences, applies grammatical analysis to her own life; self-confrontation is the encounter of subject and object, passive and active.

In Remake and Life, End Of, Brooke-Rose sets for herself the difficult and paradoxical task of looking back in the present tense. In both, she applies her signature narrative constraint, her impersonal present tense Narrative Sentence (NS), to her own life. Described elsewhere by Brooke-Rose as an “objectified narratorless mode” which “not only privileges the time of story over the time of discourse but, more concretely, never lets this central consciousness say ‘I’ except in dialogue” (Invisible Author 58), Brooke-Rose’s signature impersonal narrative sentence is used to test the limits of what I would call her technique of “impersoning.” Remake begins, “The black car limousines along the colonnade. . . . The viewer, an old lady of seventy-two, has professed literature, for twenty years as teacher in a Paris University but for forty years as writer, retired to Provence” (Remake 1). As she acknowledges in her chapter “Remaking” in Invisible Author, the genre of the fictional
autobiography is not in itself unusual; “most autobiographical novels are written in the third person with a fictional name, or even with ‘I’ and a fictional name. Indeed, most novels use autobiographical material, far more so than I have ever done” (Invisible Author 57). What is different about Remake as a fictional autobiography, however, is the use of grammatical constraints to further distance the writing from the writer, the dancer from the dance. In Remake she ups the ante in the use of her constraint on the first person pronoun “I” in two ways. Except for one chapter that includes a diary entry about her mother’s death, she eschews all personal pronouns and possessives in her text. Without possessives, the notion of self-belonging, of self-possession is called into question. Second, the self as object, as well as subject, is constrained because pronominalization of the self is disallowed. Without pronouns for the self, no secure substitution principle underwrites self-confrontation as it does with the reflexivization in a common phrase like “the girl saw herself.” Bizarrely, in a novel about something as intimate as one’s own life, in which the self confronts itself in writing, we are deprived of the familiarity of pronouns.

The title of the novel, “Remake,” also reminds us of the distance between the self and its composition in writing, the writer and her writing. It emphasizes the image-making process in life-writing, the distance between the life lived and the making of an image of the self in which memory, desire, and invention are fused. The self-described genre of this writing exercise is “bifografy” (Remake 11). The author is fictionalized as a writer, “an old lady of seventy-two” (Remake 1), with multiple appellations signaling her different selves at different stages, including “the little girl” and the proper name Tess Blair-Hayley. The old lady peruses the “files” of her own life in order to write her life story at the suggestion of her publisher. The novel presents scenes from various stages: the protagonist first as a little girl shuttled between Geneva, London, and Brussels; Tess as a young woman during wartime, serving as an intelligence officer at Bletchley Park, then briefly married to an English officer named Ian, and still later, married to a Polish poet named Janek; Tess as a daughter experiencing her mother’s entrance into a convent at age fifty and the mother’s subsequent death; Tess as a doctoral student in her forties at the University of London, later offered a job to teach at a university in Paris. In fictional form, these elements of plot adhere to the events of Christine Brooke-Rose’s life. The name “Tess” evokes the layered, textured, even tactile nature of the self remade: “only a name [Tess] and memory can tesselate and texture all those different beings . . .” (Remake 41).
But another author surrogate appears prominently in the narrative, a surrogate who, like the name “Tess,” captures the multiplicity of selves that make up the subject and object of the writing. Brooke-Rose calls this author surrogate “John,” after the classic, masculine proper noun that Noam Chomsky uses to illustrate the rules of transformational grammar. At the end of the novel, Tess explicit refers to Chomsky’s “rule of reflexivization.” In a final chapter in which the selves of the protagonist turn dialogic, Tess tells the old lady that she understands that “John began as a Chomsky rule about reflexivization” (Remake 165). This confirms the old lady’s thoughts at the beginning of the novel about the techniques of fiction, specifically the grammar of most autobiographies: “Clearly grammar supports self-confrontation. John \textsuperscript{1} confronts John \textsuperscript{1}. The rule of reflexivization requires a coreferentially repeated Noun Phrase in the deep structure to become pronominalized” (Remake 3). The problem confronting the old lady, however, is that “the entities are not of equal status and stature, the confronter is a speck in time compared to the army of confrontable selves.” In other words, pronominalization is impossible because “[g]rammar doesn’t say how many Johns or how many selves (and what colour), or whether some past Johns are confronting one present John or one present John is confronting one or all or a selection of past Johns” (Remake 3). Thus John doesn’t confront “himself”: he confronts a host of other “Johns.” The different “Johns” are assigned subscripts: John \textsuperscript{13}, “the litcritter” (Remake 11); John, the “lighting engineer” (Remake 52); John \textsuperscript{21}, the “script-writer” (Remake 65); John \textsuperscript{45}, the “focus-puller” (Remake 52).

In an essay that anticipates the novelistic treatment of the writer in Remake, entitled “Self-Confrontation and the Writer,” published in 1977, Brooke-Rose discusses Chomsky’s transformational grammar and his illustrative uses of “John.” John functions as the names for the split selves of the writer (habitually masculinized, as in many of theory’s illustrative examples). It is in this essay that she links her own emergence as a writer with her discovery of the importance of grammar and grammatical constraint. She says she became a writer only after she “learned the rules” and after she wrote four ordinary novels.\textsuperscript{2} The name “John” signals the crucial role that grammar plays in Brooke-Rose’s texts. As in A Grammar of Metaphor, where grammatical analysis provides a new way to think about metaphor in English poetry, Remake finds in grammar the generative principle for enlivening the genre of autobiography. What is the grammar of the self?

First, in Brooke-Rose’s hands, the self and the other are not clearly separable. Brooke-Rose dismantles autobiography’s conventional split
between the self and the world, its convention of tracing the self as either acting on the world or being acted upon by others. Instead, “John” stands for both the writing selves and the significant “mentors” and “tormentors” who helped form that self. Because all “others” are seen through the fog of memory in autobiography (or “bifografy”) and “memory is necessarily self-centred” (172), “other people are fogs, alter ego et galore. . . . In memory all the parts are played by actors called John, in self-confrontation” (172). Because in the genres of biography and autobiography, others cannot be known from the inside (as they can in fiction), the name “John” stands for all the important actors in Tess’s life who have played a role in constructing her. The usage is explained in the text: “Bifografy’s like that. Can’t invent, can’t be free to go inside. All the main characters male or female, the mentors, are called John, for that reason” (165). All the “mentors” and “tormentors” in her life share some form of the name John: her mother, Jeanne, her sister Joanne, her husbands Ian and Janek, her aunt Vanna (Giovanna), a cousin Jean-Luc. In a play on the Academy Awards show or *This Is Your Life* (television’s habitual remaking of images plays a central role in the novel), the old lady thinks, “There are so many others to confront . . . executive producer, director, and innumerable others contributing to the life remade alter ego et galore. . . .” (13).

Finally, the name “John” stands for the possibilities and constraints of language itself. Grammar, like a computer, is a system of opened and closed gates. Emphasizing the infinite possibilities for John before he is dispatched into grammar, the old lady thinks: “John is whole languages. John has as many selves as utterances, virtual or realized, as many selves as there are words in lexicons, each word an aetiology, a phoneyetic fragility, with semiantic seachanges, infinite contiguities and tall spokes of paradismatic possibilities. John is the excitement, the pursuit of knowledge, the donor with the magical auxiliary, an eagle, a flying horse, an invisibility ring” (3). A life is a grammatical sentence, with paradigmatic and syntagmatic choices, seemingly infinite before the choices are actualized in a sentence, before the first word constrains what may follow. And there are rules about what can or cannot happen to grammatical subjects and objects, passive and active players: “John builds a house but cannot be built by a house, John can’t be admired by sincerity, nor can John elapse” (4).

Yet, as always, Brooke-Rose is interested in the surprises of grammar, the way constraint, like the absence of “to be” or “to have,” or the absence of past tense, generates something new. The old lady gets impatient with the normal grammatical rules that John is meant to illustrate,
for example, the different roles assigned to “John” when he is active or passive, the difference in function between animate and inanimate actors. She thinks of writers who have revitalized the parts of speech—the way Donne created metaphor with pronouns by making them act as nouns, or the way e e cummings converted adverbs to adjectival use in his “pretty how town” (4). Remake’s grammar surprises us out of predictable patterns and expectations. During the course of the novel, the rules stand on their heads. We are told that John is built by a house, that is, by “the house of fiction” (172). As in Amalgamemnon, Brooke-Rose challenges us to evade our own predictable internal grammars as a weapon against “the smart empty talk of the quidnappers, orbiting round the world like a dead language with an internal grammar generating only dead sentences” (Remake 49). Generative grammar’s ability to generate structures systematically is also grammar’s generative ability to surprise us. Out of the parade of grammatical examples of deep structures that run the risk of endlessly repeating only their own predictable patterns, a kind of poignant self-knowledge emerges. According to Chomsky’s rule, “John cannot elapse”; yet, we discover that “John is not easy to please . . . and seems to have elapsed after all” (6), as many of the loved ones, including husbands, exit from the life being told. The dry, bureaucratic word, “elapse,” more commonly attached to licenses than to lives, suggests the poignancy of loss. Without self-pity, this elapsing is extended to the disappearance and death of the author. Seemingly casually, the old lady mentions that the name “Blair-Harley” itself will disappear because the old lady has no children. Names do elapse. Fiction is one way to preserve the survival of the writer’s name.

Elsewhere Brooke-Rose admits that Remake itself was a remake of sorts. In Invisible Author, she tells the story of the book’s composition. She first wrote her autobiography in conventional form (past tense) and then deliberately remade it along experimental lines, the constraints against personal pronouns freeing her to confront herself in the genre of autobiography. As in most of the stories Brooke-Rose tells about her fictions, the story of Remake is a story of hitting on the right grammatical constraint, as if fiction were generated from a formal challenge, in this case, one of Chomsky’s weird illustrative examples sprung to new life, like Minerva from the head of Zeus. Brooke-Rose’s “John” is the residue of the shadow of transformational grammar that spawns a new kind of autobiography. As critic, as well as writer, Brooke-Rose was attracted to the idea of materializing fiction out of illustrative grammatical example. Among her papers is a letter to Joseph McElroy in which she ventures a fanciful theory about the origin of his novel Plus, the story of a brain
who receives impulses from Earth. Plus, Brooke-Rose conjectured, might have been generated by Chomsky’s famous “Colourless ideas.”

In its embargo on the grammatical rule of reflexivization and constraint on personal and possessive pronouns, Brooke-Rose’s technique resembles the Oulipean emphasis on generative or transformational grammar. In *Literary Memory, Consciousness, and the Group Oulipo*, Peter Consenstein speaks of the “Oulipean remake” of literary genres through the use of constraints: “As a practice, the members of the group publicly discuss the constraints they employ and if we look upon the landscape of literature, there are no genres, periods, or forms that are not susceptible to an Oulipian remake.” In “announcing” her constraint in the mock dialogue between the old lady and Tess that ends the novel, Brooke-Rose departs from her habitual practice of burying the constraint without explicit critical comment in the text.

Unlike the finished autobiography, however, the life continued, and in a kind of sequel, Brooke-Rose has returned to the old lady, now as an “invalid” in *Life, End Of*. The book is a memoir that Brooke-Rose did not intend to publish, part therapy and part experiment. It reflects her declining personal situation; through her increasing disabilities, her life has narrowed to the confines of two rooms in a house in the south of France. Characters are fictionalized, including the protagonist, who is sometimes called Tess. In painstaking detail, the narrative captures Brooke-Rose’s experiences as her contact with the world diminishes with the deterioration of her health. The book is explicitly a final confrontation of the self in writing, the final valediction. Predicted in *Remake*, the decline has arrived, the pain only partly deflected by the use of a pun “Heredotage” (62).

If the title “remake” suggests not only the remaking of the life but also the prepackaged images that pass for “news” on the television that the old lady watches, ironically, poignantly, in her memoir television images serve increasingly as her technological pipeline to the world. The word “love” enters only through the scores of the tennis matches which the old lady watches on the screen (“Globalisation. Ah, the globe. Or is it the lobe of the universe? The lob of a tennis star? Neuronic games, games to exercise the neurons” [116]. *Life, End Of* presents the old lady’s further lapses and losses and deprivations, the decomposition of the self occurring bit by bit, piece by piece.

In *Remake* we are told that “the old lady’s publisher” had provided the impetus for her autobiography: “Why is the old lady trying to intercept all those interseptic messages? Old-age self-indulgence? No. The
old lady’s publisher has asked for an autobiography. But the resistance is huge. The absorbing present creates interference, as well as the old lady’s lifelong prejudice against biographical criticism, called laundry-lists by Pound. Only the text matters, if the text survives at all” (Remake 6). The invitation, recorded in the fiction itself, seems aimed at countering the charge of vanity by a writer who has repeatedly gone on record renouncing the self-absorption of the autobiographical. In Life, End Of, there is no invitation from the world. Indeed, the trope of self-confrontation that underwrites Remake becomes increasingly urgent as the invalid’s contact with the world progressively closes off. “The immediate environment always shrinks, from house to flat to room to bed to coffin to earthworm-tums then grows again to compost to earth to planet to universe” (Life, End Of 12). This is Stephen Dedalus at eighty, the movement outward from the self to the universe ironically refigured.8 The opposite of the “bildung,” the process of decline in Brooke-Rose’s “memoir” catalogues the losing of body parts and memory files. The invalid, progressively loses “pieces of herself” (balance, eyesight, feeling in her extremities, memory), virtually imprisoned in her two rooms. “Earth-bound but abandoned by the galaxy the universe” (95), her feeling of being severed from the world return us to the amputated landscape of “The Foot.”

If not an invitation from the world, what occasions this further remaking? It is a question asked explicitly early on in Remake: “but then can stimulus for confrontation of all those fogs come out of mere serenity, for undoubtedly the old lady is serene rather than out of ruthless hurt thru and thru” (Remake 18). In Life, End Of, the invalid addresses the issue and again comes out on the side of serenity: “the small activities left become trebly precious. And astonishingly those ailments are not accompanied by clinical depression. Serenity remains” (Life, End Of 11). “Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent’s Narrow Room” is the title of a Wordsworth poem—the invalid reassures us that she is coming to terms with her narrowed straits.9 As the manuscript progresses and further bits are lost, it is clear that if writing issues from serenity, it is also the last stay against oblivion: “This bit of life is made a bit more of life by writing” (76). She calls the memoir she is writing “a dying diary, undated except indirectly because the sense of time is lost” (Life, End Of 87). Near the end of the memoir, the invalid writes, “Montaigne says life’s purpose is to teach us to die. However, the standard of teaching is now so low that the task is getting tougher and tougher as more and more people among the six to nine billion rightly have access to it” (Life,
End Of '93). Wryly, as the bits of her life disappear—body parts, friends, husbands, lovers—the writing remains, giving poignancy to the idea of “techniques for living.”

Pathos, however, is unwelcomed in a Brooke-Rose narrative, and Life, End Of is no exception. As in her other texts, Brook-Rose refuses to sentimentalize, to personalize her experience in first-person representation. Loyal to the end to her invention, she makes use of the impersonal Narrative Sentence (NS) that has been the hallmark of her fiction, only this time, imagining herself as the other, a twist on the thematic of seeing the other’s point of view. The important ability to “imagine the other” continues as a theme in Life, End Of. The invalid identifies “Other People” (O.P.), as opposed to “True Friends” (T.F.), as those with a “disability of the imagination” (26). The most interesting ‘othering’ in the narrative is the process of self-estrangement that comes with disability, the representation of the body as intimate stranger. The splits between subject and object, mind and body that absorbed the old lady in grammatical self-confrontation and subscript (John₁, John₂, Tess, the old lady, the little girl) are now embodied. Although Yeats’s line, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” from “Among School Children” plays an emblematic role in the memoir (a friend quotes it to suggest the author may be too close to her subject in parts of her memoir), it is a line from “Sailing to Byzantium” that seems to capture the invalid’s sense of closing off from her own body. The heart of Yeats’s poet is “fastened to a dying animal” and “knows not what it is.”

With a play on words that is also an enactment of self-division, Brooke-Rose parses the way the body “feels.” The body experiences the world through physical contact; hence, the body’s relation to “feeling” (pun intended) is explored. The body is both subject (it touches and feels things) and object (it is touched and felt). Yeats’s line from “Sailing to Byzantium” is disconcertingly apt. As in “The Foot,” in Life, End Of, Brooke-Rose explores the extremity of losing the extremities in their role as grounding one in the world. Oddly, the loss of feeling in the feet leads alternately to a sense of absence and a sensation of pain. The invalid’s neuropathy leads to a condition in which her body loses its sensitivity to contact on the one hand, since her feet do not feel themselves touching the floor. On the other hand, her legs feel like twin burning poles, experiencing intense pain. “The legs now burn permanently, hot charcoal in the feet creeping up the shins and knees and growing tall, two burning bushes, two pillars of fire for frail support. At every step they flinch wince jerk shirk lapse collapse give way stagger like language when it can’t present the exact word needed, the exact spot where to
put the foot” (Life, End Of 9). The analogy to language is both telling and misleading—whereas the writer is in perfect control of the verbs of quasi-synonyms she ticks off, the legs (unlike language) misbehave.

To compensate for the legs as anchor, a curious, even comic, reversal takes place. The head becomes the point of ballast. The book begins with a characteristic narratorless sentence reminiscent of the careful, inertial description in Out:

The head top leans against the bathroom mirror so that the looking glass becomes a feeling glass. But what does it feel? This position is for body-balance during the brushing of teeth and the washing of face neck arms and torso. Below is for the biddy, and the feet, if sitting on a stool. But especially the torso. For in fact the teeth can also be brushed if the loins touch the washbasin however cold, or the hand grips the edge, on condition neither is wet. (Life, End Of 7)

Less ironically, although perhaps more poignantly, the invalid recognizes that as the body fails, the head must compensate as the portal of discovery for the world. “Heredotage. The quest for brain activity to compensate for the body. For constant intake as opposed to output” (Life, End Of 62). Yeats understood that for the old, the mind-body problem takes on a new dimension. Brooke-Rose explores these implications. “The floor the ground the earth are for walking on feet, the world the universe for walking in the head. A walking illness keeps the universe for the head but leaves, for the feet, only the floor. How long will the head last? The few remaining pleasures are not the sex-drive, nor body-temperature hunger thirst or blood pressure but pleasures in the head so rich and devious, and, also, pain as the dubious pleasure of a constant companion” (Life, End Of 10).

In tending to this wounded body, Brooke-Rose returns to the themes of her early fiction. Like the perceivers in Robbe-Grillet’s novels, consciousness in “The Foot,” Out, and Life, End Of, operates most in isolation, the world a series of objects to be experienced but not fully engaged. Physical inertia prevails. But if “The Foot” explores the erotic dimension of pain as constant companion, a lover’s discourse in which narrative issues from desire for the missing body, in Life, End Of, the relationship to pain is played in a much different register, that of an old and true friend. Paradoxically, as memory, feeling, friends, contacts, all fall away, pain reliably remains.

However, as the narratorless narrative catalogues its own losses, the absences threaten to become all absorbing. That which is missing
becomes formative and formidable. “The old have to think so hard and continuously of every physical detail, physical movement, it’s not surprising they develop a senile self-centredness” (Life, End Of 62). The invalid ponders the question, “What is central and what peripheral? The peripheral polyneuritis feels totally central, responsible for all the burning flinching stumbling falling and for the half bent walk when picking up the cordless phone or Black holes, says a tele-scientist, can, in this case, now forgotten, become creative. Can a black hole become an ivory tower?” (62).

The question of “self-centeredness” is embedded in a chapter in which the ban on first-person narrative threatens to be broken. Or IS broken cannily, in two ways: through the use of speech mode in which the invalid begins to question herself, and so splits into an “I” and a “you” dialogically; and through the self-conscious topic of the dialogue, which is narrative technique, specifically, the use of the first-person in narrative. Thus, the first-person enters not only IN dialogue but as the topic of discourse, as the author and the literary critic have it out in the midst of the memoir. Brooke-Rose reprises her earlier explanations of her “techniques for living” in Stories, Theories and Things, interviews, and in Invisible Author. In the seventh chapter of Life, End Of, Brooke-Rose risks breaking the fictional frame she has constructed. The persona of Tess slips away as author, critic, and character merge. The persona of the invalid pertains to all three roles. As in chapter 7 of Invisible Author, called “The Author is Dead, Long Live the Author,” in this chapter 7, Brooke-Rose returns to a description of her signature technique. Reprising her historical overview of the use of narrative vs. speech mode through the twentieth century, she says:

Oh hell, I’m doing it again. The details of narrative art, which interest no-one, are my Ariadne threads. I can’t create, but I absorbed them and analysed them with enthusiasm all the way through. Enthusiasm is life. End of, please forgive me. (Life, End Of 66)

She goes on to describe the effect of using the present tense without the first person, which is to drop “subjectivity” but retain “immediacy and distance” (67): “A few authors succeed in renewing the tired narrative sentence in this way, with the present tense and no ‘I,’ but it hasn’t really caught on for the novel. It creates characters who must be constructed by the reader entirely out of what they see hear feel think or say, that is, without any help from the author” (67). Later she returns to this aspect of the consciousness tracking its surroundings, this time in self-reference.
to the present text being read: “Here, moreover, the character is disabled. Is he old as well? Is he a he or a she? To know these and many other things, if the Author doesn’t tell, the Dear Reader (the costly reader) must patiently construct the character from what he sees and thinks, bits and pieces, the way we do in life. . . .” (68).

In this seventh chapter, the author/character/narrator flirts with the collapse of the boundaries of her normally three-personed god. The interrogative mode that has been used, without pronouns, earlier in the memoir, now turns into an act of ventriloquy in (at least) three parts, all the while with the authoritative voice, paradoxically, lecturing on their necessary narratological separation. “Who speaks?” one “person” asks and the other answers, “Ah, the twentieth-century question. In fact, since you ask, nobody speaks” (64). We have returned to the metalandscape of Thru, with its insistent refrain of “chi parla?” The technology of the television and the radio, the voices from the world entering the invalid’s room, blend (“Who’s talking? To whom? The telly?” [31]). The narratorless narrative begins to question its own home invasions. “The question about on-going business home-grown is clearly author-interference. Breaking in to the I-less narrative sentence with the self more than implied” (92). Breaking and entering, the personal seems to intrude on the code of impersoning that is Brooke-Rose’s terrain: “Could the infirm character be slowly merging with hisher author? A mere mirror? And if so why the devil or wolf doesn’t heshe use the freer and self-comforting first person, as everyone else does now?” (92).

Self-interrogation is part of the stance of self-derision, a way of distancing the writing self from its own worst impulses to spill into something personal. This intervention is likened to “resuscitation” (76). Paradoxically, “[a]s soon as the author recovers his I-less and speakerless grammar, or uses it properly for the details of disability and death, it’ll all spring to life again. Because disability and death cannot be borne by any of the participants without that double distancing of self-derision” (77).

The relation between the survival of the author and the survival of the text are intertwined, too close for comfort. This is precisely the meaning of a line from Yeats’s “Among School Children” that plays an emblematic role in the text: “How can you know the dancer from the dance” (paraphrased as “So, how can you tell the dancer from the dance?” [70])

It is a line alluded to by Tim, married to one of the invalid’s “true friends” (T.F.s). He reads the invalid’s unfinished manuscript (the one that becomes Life, End Of) and refuses to give her the critical advice she seeks. Instead, in a card that follows his and his
wife’s visit, he offers the line from Yeats as an excuse for his nonresponsiveness. Hurt and angry, the invalid suddenly understands what he means: the author and her character, the author and her text are not clearly distinguishable despite the “othering” that occurs. Moreover, as the invalid ponders the line, she thinks, “The one doing the writing, the other the end-living and dying? No, that’s not right either. Can one die before the other? Still, Tim does penpoint the punpoint” (70). As in all of Brooke-Rose’s fiction and criticism, the death of the author takes on new valences, as a new form of textermination is considered. We are told that the final two sections of the text, “the self-leering text” have been written in bed after a painful fall and hospital stay, whereas previously the manuscript has been reviewed in the armchair and written on the computer, a device no longer accessible. Although the author says that “survival is hardly the point,” she also admits that “Whatever the bit of life has become, it is clung to. Or is itself doing the clinging. This bit of life is made a bit more of life by writing. . . . The desire to continue the self-sorting, slotting, stripping is so strong that the attempt is made” (76). Here is technique for living. Speaking of the term “post-human” that she heard recently, the invalid puns darkly, “But that will at once be confused with posthumous, as of course it should be, human becoming humus” (64).

The “art of losing,” to borrow the title of Elizabeth Bishop’s moving sonnet, is all too appropriate to this almost desperate act of writing in the face of the bit-by-bit loss of the self. The self-consciousness of the writing heightens, rather than mitigates, the pathos. Friends, husbands, abilities, even words are lost; near the end of the narrative, which began in “serenity,” deprivation seems more the rule: “Now that the hands cause ten errors and two spaceless phrases per line, now that writing itself is more and more exhausting and confused, and eyes more and more glaucomish, and legs more and more furious, the three most precious gifts have become deprivations, soon to be reached: reading, writing, and independence” (113). In earlier chapters, she describes her feeling of self-annulment in the lack of consideration shown by O.P.s (Other People)—“Existence, which seems to concern only agendas and arrangements, is constantly annulled long before life is. All the time and automatically when disabled, automatically when old, automatically when female though less so than before. The three together means being placed in a different category of humans” (57–58). However, near the end of the manuscript, the self-annulment is an internal affair. Always more than a purely theoretical subject for Brooke-Rose, grammatical “personing” becomes more urgent. The first person feels
impersonal, the way public concern and kindness become busy routine, and the personal wholly private, even when there’s no-one there to be private from. As with that waking absorption of the bi-local bi-temporal, in hospital stripped of all such hauntings. Perhaps that is what occurs in death, the first person suddenly regained at the very moment of its effacement. (104)

“The first person suddenly regained at the very moment of its effacement”—the death sentence, the one that can never really be written in first person (as opposed to dying, death cannot be spoken in the first person), is the one that the invalid imagines here to be the moment of the personal regained. In Remake, the one chapter that departs from the constraint against the first person is a simulated diary, “full of pronouns,” which is “a meditative account of a dying and a death, written between the acts” (27). Based on a diary Brooke-Rose kept about her mother’s death in a Benedictine convent in 1984, the chapter retains the fictionalization of names and the present tense (rather than retrospective narration), but it does allow itself the immediacy of the first-person report. The fluid “I” in the diary section feels particularly moving after the third-personing of “the old lady,” the emotion somehow earned after such discipline of self-report. In the chapter, “File: Pro-nouns,” which include this diary entry, the old lady describes her mother’s convent surroundings as “Serenity everywhere. But she is isolated in her god-Routine” (28). The diary in Remake is a rehearsal of sorts for Life, End Of, an intimate glimpse of the death sentence, but from the outside (as the early ghost stories are rehearsals of sorts, since only the ghost can speak of death in the first person). In Life, End Of, the actual appearance of the first person is not the closest fictional successor to the diary of the old lady’s mother’s death. As I have said, it is used to distance rather than to peer over the edge into the abyss at the moment of self-annihilation. Instead, it is in the more paradoxical yoking of the loss of the self and a sense of self-nearness (almost Hopkinsonian in the extremity of its self-touching) that being in the first person and nonbeing fuse in the archive of the self.

Near the end of Remake, the old lady thinks of the relationship of Tess and Janek in terms of their contrapuntal loss of organs; first Tess loses a kidney (a life-transforming event taken from a page of Brooke-Rose’s own story), then Janek must have his gall-bladder removed (161).11 Tess’s subsequent new life in Paris is described as a remaking of the self, a recomposition “bit by bit.” We are accustomed to such talk in autobiographical fiction—Janek “embarks on a slow yet thorough demolition
job, piece by piece, upon Tess’s idea of Tess, no longer the helpmeet but the castratrix . . . a self Tess will have to reconstruct in Paris, piece by piece” (Remake 162). This image of the self’s reconstruction, even piece by piece, is a dead metaphor, a fundamental language for the way we think about the self. Veering uncomfortably close to the raw nerves of the dying animal, precisely through the danger zones of metafiction, Life, End Of, attempts to literalize the loss by charting the decomposition of the body. Picking up on the themes of Brooke-Rose’s earlier fiction, particularly Subscript, Life, End Of gives us de-evolution. “The hands, the legs, the shoulders, the body. Super-valued by early man in eras long gone by. Yet evolution stops for all those bits and pieces, continuing only behind the control-board” (Life, End Of 101). As in Subscript, the record and the body are inextricable. Remake and Life, End Of join Textermination, Xorandor, and Subscript in focusing on the fragility of the human archive. This is the unbearable lightness of being replayed in different keys and on different scales, phylogeny and ontogeny. Ecological dangers of the kind that threaten extinction in Xorandor and Subscript invade the archive of the self in Remake: “The old lady’s head is now a nuclear processing plant of lost knowledges, acquired with immense efforts, sometimes leaking or exploding and polluting, but now reduced to small clean nuggets buried in deep salt caverns of the mind” (Remake 153). If it is consciously hyperbolic to equate the loss of memory with threats of nuclear disaster and archeological oblivion, it is also another way in which Brooke-Rose shows her mastery of the grammar of being and nonbeing. Contrary to the Chomskyan rule, John elapses.

In Remake the “terminal blues” are, for the most part, kept at bay. Losses, while catalogued, are still represented under the sign of Thoth, the guide of writing: “Thoth as alternative god, writing as ringwit, to outwit the inwit” (158). The twin adventures of consciousness and language sustain a play on the relationship between the life and the file (“Isn’t life a story? No. A story is arranged. Life is a file. A lot of files, mostly erased” [Remake 65]). The characteristic Brooke-Roseian pleasure in language is preserved in this link between character and language. The story of the writer is the story of language and the acquisition of a deep love of the sea changes wrought by the evolution of language:

Philology is dry bones, but fillology slowly communicates magical seachanges, la mer la terre et l’air of a writer’s material, the skeleton filling in with flesh and blood and sinews, molecules of desire, of creativity, vowels softening consonants, consonants breaking vowels, disappearing, changing places, becoming mute, still there as dried up fetuses in
the spelling but unuttered. . . . Language is like Tess, absorbing alien elements and yet somehow always elsewhere. (Remake 148–49)

In Life, End Of, we are reminded of just how much the craft of writing depends on manual labor, of just how much technique is a physical making. If Tess stands for language absorbing the alien, writing complex, self-distant, and full, the invalid is the writer disabled, alien of the species. If the lipogram in her early fiction relies on the belief that potential emerges from discipline and eschewal, Life, End Of invents death sentences out of the necessity of self-decline. Here, the need for fiction and fiction-making seems almost anthropological, the human necessity to continue to construct the “as if” of fiction, not only in the face of constraint, but out of constraint itself.