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Christine Brooke-Rose

Hannah Van Hove

Brief orientation

British author Christine Brooke-Rose was born in 1923 in Geneva to an English father and a Swiss-American mother. The family settled in Brussels, Belgium, for most of the period from 1927 to1936 before moving to England, where Brooke-Rose was based until the late 1960s. In 1968 she moved to Paris to teach linguistics and literature at the University of Vincennes and, upon retiring, she relocated to the Provence where she lived until her death in 2012.

Brooke-Rose published four more or less traditional realist novels in the 1950s before she started developing a much more experimental style. From 1964 onwards, her fiction conducts a wide range of grammatical and typographical experiments with language and form, pushing at the boundaries of what a novel can do, right up until her last published work, the autobiographical novel *Life, End of* (2006). During her lifetime, Brooke-Rose published sixteen novels as well as various collections of criticism, a short story collection and some poetry. Despite her prolific output, her work was for a long time largely neglected by the academy and general readership alike and when the *Guardian* published her obituary in 2012, it was entitled: "Christine Brooke-Rose, the great British experimentalist you’ve never heard of" (Ferris 2012).

Developments

In her autobiographical novel *Remake* (1996) Brooke-Rose describes her experience of working at Bletchley Park during the Second World War, translating intercepted German communications, as a "first training of the mind, a first university" (107). During this time, she writes poetry, finding the process of composing poems similar to the work required at Bletchley Park as a Women's Auxiliary Air Force officer: as she puts it, "knowledge" comes "out of the air, intercepted, decrypted, translated, transmitted, like the poetry [she] still sometimes finds time to write, listening to a silent voice, capturing, translating hazy notions and sharp impulses into words and rhythms" (107). Reading the war daily "from the enemy viewpoint", Brooke-Rose learns to "imagine the other", a task, as she points out, that is required of the writer (108). After working at Bletchley Park, Brooke-Rose goes on to do a PhD in medieval French and English philology and in 1954 publishes the poetry pamphlet *Gold* which explores Soviet prison camps while merging medieval formal traditions with the discourse of alchemy. Her literary debut is followed by a quartet of social satire novels which, contrary to her later novels, have a conventional developing narrative plot and are mainly concerned with realistic domestic relationships: *The Languages of Love* (1957), *The Sycamore Tree* (1958), *The Dear Deceit* (1960) and *The Middlemen: A Satire* (1961).

Brooke-Rose falls seriously ill during the early 1960s and the solitary hours confined to her sickbed produce her first experimental work, *Out* (1964). Inspired by the *nouveau romancier* Alain Robbe-Grillet - whom Brooke-Rose goes on to translate into English, winning the Arts Council Translation Prize in 1969 for her translation of *Dans le labyrinthe* -, *Out* shows his influence in its focus on minute detail and seemingly objective description. As well as being influenced at this stage by the French *nouveau roman* (in particular by the work of Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute), Brooke-Rose's encounter with Samuel Beckett's *Watt* (1953) constituted a turning point in her artistic development. As she comments on the experience of encountering Beckett's novel:

> **The almost mathematical precision of language, the humorous play with all possible permutations of the simplest situation, as if each had its own philosophical existence, the mock-"scientific" but also in some essential way truly scientific attitude behind the poetry, all these delighted me, and seemed to me the only possible way of dealing with both inner and outer reality in this age of the uncertainty principle in physics, an age of undermined causality, an age in which subjective and objective have almost merged through the strange colloidal chemistry of psychic and physical energy. (“Christine Brooke-Rose” 1975: 224)**

Indeed, as she makes explicit in the above quote, Brooke-Rose's oeuvre illustrates a preoccupation with language(s), (non-)communication as well as the employment of various kinds of scientific discourses. Thus, discourses of biochemistry and molecular physics are employed in *Out* while her second experimental novel *Such* (1966) utilises the language and jargon of astrophysics. In 1968 Brooke-Rose's multilingual novel *Between* is published, entirely written without the verb “to be”.

After living in Britain for most of her adult life up until the late 1960s, Brooke-Rose is made an offer by Hélène Cixous to come and work at the "Centre Universitaire Expérimental de Vincennes", an institution founded in response to the events of May 1968 which was officially amalgamated into the University of Paris in 1970. Brooke-Rose's fourth experimental novel *Thru* is published in 1975. Flitting between voices and metatextual levels, continually highly self-reflexive, peppered with intertextual references to structuralist and post-structuralist theory and jargon as well as different works of fiction, *Thru*’s experimentations with typography and multiple metatextual and polyphonic levels represent a direct response to the latest developments in structuralist and post-structuralist thought. As Frank Kermode has put it, each of Brooke-Rose's first four experimental works (later collected in *The Brooke-Rose Omnibus* by Carcanet Press) moved further "one way or another" from the "comfortable tacit agreement between author and reader as to the relation of fiction to reality" (Kermode 2006: 17).

There followed four novels which Brooke-Rose described as constituting her "Intercom Quartet": *Amalgamemnon* (1984) which omits all "nonrealized tenses" (Brooke-Rose 2002: 17), *Xorandor* (1986) and *Verbivore* (1990) which both employ computer programming language, and the profoundly intertextual *Textermination* (1991), in which famous literary characters come together at the “Annual Convention of Prayer for Being” to pray for their continued existence in readers' minds.

After her retirement in 1988, Brooke-Rose moves to Provence. In 1996 *Remake*, described by her publisher as an "autobiographical novel", is published. It is followed by the novel *Next* (1998), which excludes the verb “to have” and polyphonically relates the stories of twelve homeless Londoners, employing free-falling typography to represent fractured internal monologue. The novel *Subscript* is published a year later in 1999, employing the discourse of paleontology and spanning millennia to chronicle the journey from eukaryotic cell to early human being. Her last work, another autobiographical novel, *Life, End of* is published in 2006.

Avant-garde strategies and contents

In a 1990 interview Brooke-Rose acknowledges three main influences on her writing: the work of Samuel Beckett, the *nouveau roman* and Ezra Pound (whilst conceding that there are also "so many unconscious influences, it's really not for the author to say") (Tredell 1990: 34). Brooke-Rose's work has often been reviewed and cited in relation to the French new novel, to such an extent that Brooke-Rose has been keen to point out that since her first experimental novel her work has moved beyond that influence. As she has stated:

> **Robbe-Grillet did have a direct influence, at least on** *Out*. **[...] but then with** *Such* **I really took off on my own. I don't think there's any more influence of Robbe-Grillet on** *Such*. **I would say that** *Such* **is my first really "Me" novel, where I don't owe anything to anyone else. (Friedman and Fuchs 1989: 83-4)**

In a British context, Brooke-Rose is often loosely grouped together with a number of 1960s and 70s experimental writers which include B. S. Johnson, Alan Burns, Eva Figes, Rayner Heppenstall, Brigid Brophy and Ann Quin. Whereas it is productive to study her work within such a context in order to trace a more nuanced genealogy of the British experimental novel than conventional accounts (hardly paying it any attention) have allowed for, Brooke-Rose herself resisted this positioning and felt that she had little in common in general with the British literary scene as a whole. Indeed, Brooke-Rose was sceptical of most attempts to label and categorise her work. As she writes in a letter to fellow novelist Muriel Spark in 1986:

> **the trouble is I keep doing something quite different so it’s a bit disorienting for critics who like labels, so that the only one they can think of is "experimental" (which annoys them) or "French", "***nouveau roman***" (completely untrue, but that label annoys them too). I now occasionally get "postmodern". All nonsense. (Brooke-Rose 1986)**

Brooke-Rose's disapproval of the categories used to classify her work stems from what she perceived to be the changing and developing nature of her experimentations. According to her, an "experimental writer" is "someone who tries something different each time" (Brooke-Rose 2002: 41). In her essay “Illiterations”, Brooke-Rose argues that “[t]he best way” for any author “is to slip through all the labels, including that of ‘woman writer’”. As she cautions, however, this comes at the price of “belong[ing] nowhere” (Brooke-Rose 1989: 67); a fate which arguably befell Brooke-Rose whose name has been conspicuously absent from a lot of overviews of British post-war fiction.

Whilst Brooke-Rose thus disapproved of attempts to classify her work according to one overarching definitive categorisation, her work illustrates varied engagements and affinities with a number of post-war literary movements and schools which include the *nouveau roman*, structuralism, poststructuralism, OuLiPo as well as postmodern fiction and science fiction. Her criticism shows that she continued to engage with contemporary literary and theoretical movements, and a lot of her fiction illustrates her knowledge of and adeptness with post-war schools of thought in its appropriation of its discourses in humorous and subversive ways. In addition to responding to post-war literary developments, Brooke-Rose's work also illustrates her continuing engagement with earlier avant-garde literature. Thus, she considers Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) a “highly relevant" text as it "contain[s] the germ of the anti-novel" (Brooke-Rose 1981: 291). Other avant-garde and innovative authors Brooke-Rose admired - in addition to the modernist Pound and the late modernist Beckett, as already mentioned - include, for example, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Guillaume Apollinaire, Machado de Assis, André Gide and Karol Irzykowski (see Brooke-Rose 1958 and Tredell 1990: 34). Her work shares many characteristics with some of this literature: the doing away with linear plot, the drawing of attention to the materiality of the text by the introduction of new graphic elements on the page as well as the introduction of self-awareness and unreliable narration.

As Brooke-Rose writes in her essay “Palimpsest History”: "the novel's task, unlike that of history, is to stretch out intellectual spiritual and imaginative horizons to breaking point" (1992: 137). Brooke-Rose's experimental and often highly self-reflexive novels can be understood as doing just this: interrogating the very goals and methods of fiction. In this regard, her work shares concerns with neo-avant-garde movements and writers in exploring the formal, material, and technical levels of literature.

One more or less constant stylistic feature throughout Brooke-Rose's oeuvre is the use of specific constraints. Most of her fiction thus obeys certain rules of exclusion or self-imposed grammatical limitation, most evident in *Between* in which she uses the lipogrammatic constraint of avoiding the verb "to be" (published, as Brooke-Rose has been keen to point out, a year before the much more famous lipogrammatic novel *La Disparition* by OuLiPo author Georges Perec) and in *Next* which avoids the verb "to have" throughout. Her so-called "anti-autobiographical" novels leave out the word "I" with the narrative referring to Brooke-Rose herself in the third person as "the old lady". Most of her novels employ the grammatical constraint of a narratorless present tense (or sustained present tense). As Brooke-Rose points out in her last collection of essays *Invisible Author*: “mostly, since *Out*, I have explored a narratorless present tense [...] as a neutral, detached narrative “representing” or miming a consciousness, both reflective and unreflective” (2002: 153). *Amalgamemnon* furthermore only employs verb forms — including future tense and subjunctive mood — that conjure conditions unobtainable in the present.

Using constraints “force[s]” Brooke-Rose “to evade the obvious, expected next word - invisibly so” (2002: 45). Discussing the process of writing *Remake*, for example, Brooke-Rose states she was only able to write it after she found the “constraint […] needed”, namely: “to scrap all personal pronouns and all possessive adjectives”. In doing so, Brooke-Rose extended a mode of writing which has since been referred to as “autofiction in the third person” (see Martens 2018).

Writing in 1988, Brooke-Rose sums up much of her career thus far as follows:

> **By now, I do know what I am doing: I deal in discourses, in the discourses of the world, political, technological, scientific, psychoanalytical, philosophical, ideological, social, emotional, and all the rest, so that knowledge to me is not an extraneous element I can put in or withhold at will, it is discourse, it is language […] I deal in discourses, as received and perceived by this or that consciousness […] Discourse comes from Latin** *discurrere, to run here and there***. It has today become whole sets of rigid uses, and I am trying to make it run here and there again.**

Brooke-Rose's emphasis on the etymological origin of the word “discourse” highlights its inherent state of flux, and her equivalence of it with "knowledge". It also illustrates, as Julia Jordan has pointed out, a resistance of "a distinction between form and content" where knowledge is a thing that can be "put in" or be withheld from her writing (Jordan 2018: 266). For Brooke-Rose, language, and hence writing, is inherently tied up with knowledge and does not exist separately from it. The same might be said of the form/content distinction, an opposition often relied on in discussions of experimental literature in overviews of British post-war literature. To talk of “experimental” literature in these overviews often appeared to be to talk simply of the employment of “technical” practices or “gimmicks”. In such a view, form is opposed to content, with the former being the primary concern of experimental literature whilst content, presumably, is what realist literature was all about. Brooke-Rose has pointed out what is so problematic about this realism/experimentalism distinction, explaining how the term “experiment”, in formalist and then structuralist thought, got caught up in the realism/formalism opposition of the time, which itself “had meant so many different things from Hegel onward”:

> **for Hegel (and for the Marxists after him), “formalist” meant superficial (“Preface” to** *Phenomenology of Mind***), but for the Russian formalists (much condemned by the Soviet regime) it meant rigorous attention to literary structures and conventions, in other words, poetics. Thus “experiment” is often regarded as “merely” formal, tinkering with technique […], tinkering with the signifier irrespective of the signified, the “content”, the “truth”, “the real”, and other such idealist concepts, the implication being that the real exists independently of our systems or ways of looking at it, and even, in the case of “mere” form, that such tinkering is not accompanied by any valid “content” at all, let alone “value”. (Brooke-Rose 1989: 63)**

Brooke-Rose’s formulation makes clear how both realism and experimentalism are conceptual constructions; thus to think in terms of a realism/experimentalism binary which implies the former is less “formalist” and somehow more closely aligned with a supposed “reality” than the latter is not particularly helpful. In fact, in some of Brooke-Rose's critical writings, she is at pains to illustrate in what ways her fictional experimentations with form constitute an attempt to more faithfully reflect reality (see, for example, her chapter “Is Self-Reflexivity Mere?” in *Invisible Author*). Her formal experiments are often not at the expense of realism, but rather employed in function of a mimetic enterprise. Thus, the fragmented *in medias res* beginning of her novel *Thru*, for example, employs what Brooke-Rose has called “naïve mimetism”, mirroring the way in which we act and speak and think at the same time, “without telling ourselves who we are, even if it’s also paralleled with direct mimetism of how a text starting thus in medias res needs to constitute itself slowly, in fragments, with trial repetitions and variations and doubts, but not through explanatory flashbacks and such” (2002: 107).

Rife with wordplay and puns, Brooke-Rose’s novels illustrate the playful and humorous nature of language as well as its in-flux status; creating new words by breaking down or combining existing words, playing with their construction or etymology, Brooke-Rose’s work continuously draws our attention to the slipperiness of language and meaning and participates in the “dedication to language dissection” which can be traced from the historical avant-garde to neo-avant-garde literary developments (Scheunemann 2005: 151). In all of this, the active participation of the reader is paramount as Brooke-Rose’s texts encourage the reader to fully engage with the work and thereby join in with the creation of the text, in an attitude closely related to the poststructuralist model of active reading put forward by Roland Barthes. As Brooke-Rose has put it:

> **So what Barthes calls the writerly text as opposed to the readerly text - the readerly text is the consumer product [...] the writerly text is the text which the reader is writing with the writer - I want to share my writing with the reader. Of course, that means the reader has to wake up and see what I'm doing. (Friedman and Fuchs 1995: 88)**

Whilst Brooke-Rose’s work was profoundly influenced by poststructuralist thought, she was nevertheless also quite critical of much of this school of thought. Thus, in the mid-to late 1980s she wrote some illuminating essays on the phallogocentric nature of much of structuralist and post-structuralist thought. In “Woman as Semiotic Object”, she notes for example that: “I cannot help wondering whether semiotics is not a peculiarly reactionary discipline, and semioticians unconsciously nostalgic for nice, deep, ancient, phallocratic, elementary structures of significance” (Brooke-Rose 1991: 249). Referring to work by A. J. Greimas and Claude Levi-Strauss, she identifies “a certain relish” in descriptions which posit women as value-objects within societal systems, pointing out how such systems “had to depend for aeons on women’s silence, on the repression of their signified into the unconscious” (Brooke-Rose 1991: 240-241).

Although Brooke-Rose didn't consider herself a feminist, much of her critical and fictional work nevertheless draws attention to gender issues and inequalities. Thus she has described the condition of being a "woman experimental writer" as: "Three words. Three difficulties" (Brooke-Rose 1989: 55). In *Invisible Author* she elaborates on the difficulties faced by a woman writer of experimental fiction:

> **while any experiment with the language or the conventions of the novel is at first automatically overlooked, this applies much more consistently and durably to a woman experimenter than to a man. A man experimenter, once he does attract attention, is innovative, bold, original, and so on, in articles that show a knowledge of development from precedents: a woman experimenter is just, well, an experimenter, the term often slightly pejorative, without further exploration. Indeed, any noticed or imagined development from precedents is mentioned only for dismissal as imitation. Sacred cows are mysteriously needed but must be male. (2002: 4)**

Conclusion

Brooke-Rose's oeuvre, sharing modernism's interest in formal innovation whilst at the same time displaying affinities with continental European writing traditions like the French *nouveau roman* and the OuLiPo movement, can productively be read in the context of the neo-avant-garde. Her body of work stretches and strains conventional novelistic forms, testing the boundaries of what a novel is capable of. Like the fiction of other neo-avant-garde authors, it raises fundamental questions about representation and reproduction as it explores the formal, material, and technical levels of literature through experimentations with constraints, paratext, intertext, cut-up material, graphic depictions of text on the page, collage, etc. Reading her work through the lens of the neo-avant-garde can help us to situate her fiction within a continental and transnational context which in turn allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the history of the British post-war experimental novel.

Further reading

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