

Textasy: Christine Brooke-Rose's *Thru*

Christine Brooke-Rose, a British author, was born in 1923 and educated at Oxford, where she studied philology. Bilingual even as a child (speaking English and French), she is now a faculty member of the Anglo-American Department at the Université de Paris à Vincennes. Probably best known as a Pound critic, she has also published a number of novels, the last four¹ of which have been strongly influenced by contemporary experimental French fiction—particularly the *nouveau* and the *nouveau nouveau romans* of Alain Robbe-Grillet, and the even more difficult novels of the Tel Quel school, especially those of Maurice Roche.

Thru, published in 1975, is her most recent novel.² Composed without chapter divisions, the novel contains few pages that even resemble traditional fiction in appearance. "Painstakingly typeset," as the credit reads with good reason, the novel's 164 pages contain charts, lists, diagrams, concrete poems, linguistic formulae, letters, graded student papers accompanied by the teacher's handwritten comments, an academic vita, and occasional Chinese characters.

The novel is not plotless. Instead there are a number of plots, each of which is cut off (almost as soon as it begins) by the introduction of another plot, only to recur later, often in a quite altered form. Originally titled *Texttermination*,³ the novel's central concern is the fictionality of fiction—both this particular fiction and the fiction we share with the author as a common background. In a prodigious display of intertextuality, the novel refers to the *Odyssey*, *Tristram Shandy*, *I promessi sposi*, *La Princesse de Cleves*, *Clarissa*, *Pamela*, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Marble Faun*, *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*, *The Wings of the Dove*. There are also discussions about Beckett, Isherwood, Pound's *Cantos*, Dickens's "deathoflittlenell," and quotations, among others, of Lewis Carroll's "brillig" and "tove," Eliot's "young man carbuncular" as well as his "hollow man," the "nailparings" of Joyce's God, and, several times, a "blue guitar," reminding us of Wallace Stevens's:

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

("The Man with the Blue Guitar")

Like Stevens, Brooke-Rose is well aware of the fictionality of fiction, and uses quotations from previous works of fiction to demonstrate her point. Within the novel we read about the "text in its moment . . . of dialogue with all preceding texts as death and birth in a dialectic to the death with one another" (p. 121), and also of "the text within the text that generates another text" (p. 53). Both the text of the novel itself and the texts quoted within it function in the same two ways. The first of these, to use her term, is to bring "death" to the immediately preceding fiction, by cutting it off in the midst of its development,

¹*Ouv* (1964), *Such* (1966), *Between* (1968), and *Thru*, the novel with which we are concerned here.

²London: Hamish Hamilton. Page numbers within parentheses within the text refer to this novel.

³"An Interview with Christine Brooke-Rose," conducted by David Hayman and Keith Cohen, *Contemporary Literature*, 17 (Winter 1976), 5.

or by altering it so radically that it is no longer the same fiction. The second way is to give "birth" to the ensuing fiction by generating it out of a previous text. Two forms of generation are customarily distinguished in discussions of contemporary French fiction; Brooke-Rose uses both. One is verbal generation, in which a word reminds an author of another word that is similar either in sound (perhaps a rhyme) or appearance (often a rearrangement of the same letters). A semantic relationship between the two words is both unnecessary and rare. In *Thru*, for example, the word "eye" is often used interchangeably with its homonym, the first-person pronoun "I." Or Wallace Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" becomes "the naked emperor of I-scream" (p. 157). Or "wrought iron" becomes "wrought irony" which becomes "ire on eye" (p. 102). "Textasy" (p. 57) combines the similar sounds in "text" and "ecstasy." As these examples suggest, many forms of verbal generation are impossible to translate into another language. This is not a problem for the other form of generation, thematic generation, which (as its name implies) is the development of a text from the semantic meanings of a word, phrase, or image. The opening image of *Thru* is a thematic generator for large sections of the novel and for the structure of the whole novel.

The novel begins with the word which is its title: "Through the driving-mirror four eyes stare back two of them in their proper place [two of them] nearer the hairline further up the brow but dimmed as in a glass tarnished by the close-cropped mat of hair they peer through" (p. 1). The image is the rearview mirror of a car; Brooke-Rose uses the French term "rétrovisueur" and thereafter anglicizes it to retrovizor. As Brooke-Rose has said in an interview, it conveys the "idea of looking forward but actually looking back,"⁴ which as we have seen is a way of describing the relationships among the texts that compose the novel. The rearview mirror, or retrovizor, is necessarily one of the modern ones equipped with an anti-glare device, which has two particular characteristics. If one looks at oneself in one of these mirrors, one can see a second reflection of oneself, higher up than the clearer one, with the eyes (which seem to be the most prominent feature of the second reflection) juxtaposed on the primary reflection approximately at the hairline. This is the literal image which the novel's opening words describe: "Through the driving-mirror four eyes stare back." The other characteristic of rearview mirrors equipped with anti-glare devices is that at night they sometimes double the pair of headlights of the car behind, producing what Brooke-Rose describes as "dancing hoops" (p. 119). From this image she develops the "black recumbent street" (still seen through the mirror) as "very short and fat for a magician" juggling the hoops, until (changing the setting but not the scene) the magician walks off "leaving me alone on stage to cope somehow in the glare of lights that hits the mirror" (p. 9). The fat magician recurs in the dreams of a girl whom the male narrator tells the female narrator that he really does not want (p. 25). The four eyes in the rearview mirror generate the two main narrators of the novel, a man and a woman, Armel Santores and Larissa Toren. As another character in the novel discovers, "the names are anagrams. Except for ME in hers and I in his" (p. 69). That is, the two names have eleven letters in common. These eleven letters plus the two letters in the word "me" form the name Armel Santores; the same eleven letters plus the letter "I" form Larissa Toren.

The problem of narration in *Thru*, however, is a very complex one. The "floating I" in fiction—a first-person narration in which the "I" that narrates sometimes refers to one character and sometimes another—has been a

⁴"An Interview," p. 4.

recognized possibility since the publication of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de rendez-vous* in 1965.⁵ Much of *Thru* is told in the first person, and often the "I" is either Larissa or Armel. Both characterizations are extremely fluid. Larissa and Armel are both listed as instructors of university-level courses in literature. The first time the reader is sure that an "I" refers to Armel, he is writing a letter to Larissa while attending a faculty meeting. Later we come across a letter from Larissa to Armel in which she is a graduate student writing a dissertation on his poetry and hoping to meet him. On another occasion Armel, now darkened into an Arab through the properties of the retrovizor, interrupts Larissa while she is writing a novel, wanting to discuss her previously published novels with her. Early in the novel Larissa seems to be with a Marco or a Stavro rather than Armel. Later a possible explanation is given: "As to the first name, well of course she could have changed whatever original name she gave to the man she was inventing, maybe it was Marco or Stavro" (p. 68). But near the end of the novel Larissa arranges for Armel, from whom she is separated but to whom she has been married for fifteen years, to meet Stavro and give her his opinion of him. There seems to be no doubt that one invents the other: ". . . if Larissa invents Armel inventing Larissa, Armel also invents Larissa inventing Armel" (p. 108). Occasionally the master of Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste* takes over the narration, sometimes in his own right and sometimes as Armel. Midway through the novel he decides that "it looks mightily as if [Larissa] were producing this [novel] and not, as previously appeared, Armel" (p. 66), which, as he tells Jacques, transforms their relationship, since Jacques's master is being changed into a mistress (pp. 66-67). In addition, it often appears as if the novel were being written by a creative-writing class, perhaps taught by Armel, perhaps by Larissa.

The confusion is Brooke-Rose's method of illustrating the untrustworthy nature of the role of the narrator in contemporary fiction, the "absently unreliable or unreliably absent narrator" (p. 96), as she terms him, or "a speaking head on a platter, narrating yourself to an earful of crabs at the bottom of the ocean or shouting in the wilderness with a mouthful of locusts and wild honeybees" (p. 97). Even the creative-writing students who are writing at least parts of the text realize "this is the text we are creating it verbally we are the text we do not exist either we are a pack of lies dreamt up by the unreliable narrator . . . absent in the nature of things, an etherised unauthorised other" (p. 155).

Yet Larissa and Armel both are clearly aspects of the author. Brooke-Rose has spoken of talking to herself in French, of addressing herself either as "je" or "tu" ("I" or "you");⁶ in similar fashion Armel refers to Larissa as his "second person singular" (p. 27). The two characters complement each other. We are told, reversing the stereotype, that Larissa's "mental diagrams seem to be also a good deal more complex than [Armel's] though his emotional ones seem more complex than hers" (p. 68). Elsewhere Larissa tells Stavro (who may be Armel), "you have your list of women, children and languages, I have my list of publications" (pp. 142-43). Just as the two pairs of eyes in the opening image are the reflection of one person, Larissa and Armel together (the one intellectual, the other emotional) seem to form one complete human being, perhaps in many respects Brooke-Rose herself.

⁵Bruce Morrissette writes about "the floating 'I,' who replaces at will any or all of the other narrators," *The Novels of Robbe-Grillet* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 250.

⁶"An Interview," p. 17.

Writing is a creative endeavor, and Brooke-Rose is not the first to describe it in sexual terms. She does, however, stress it throughout the text, in addition to providing both a male and a female narrator for the novel. The "winedark sea of infratextuality" (p. 106) recurs some fifteen pages later as the "wine dark sea of infrasexuality" (pp. 120-21). Plagiarism is described as a form of false "paternity" (p. 49). Linguistics is defined in terms of sexual relationships, "the double standard" for male and female adultery, she tells us, "is useful even in semiotics" (p. 83). There are several references to "heterotextuality" (pp. 67, 102), a term that seems perfectly coined to describe the fictional creation of this piece of fiction. *Thru* is a generative textasy.

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Theme and Myth in E. M. Forster's *The Life to Come*

Ten of the 14 short stories in E. M. Forster's posthumously published collection, *The Life to Come*, deal in one way or another with love between males. They vary widely in tone and setting, from the Ruritanian farce of "What Does It Matter?" to the grim realism of "The Other Boat," from the English domesticity of "Arthur Snatchfold" to the exotic locale of "The Life to Come." What binds all these stories together is the basic myth or fable which underlies them, and which seems to have recurred often to Forster's mind throughout the five or more decades of their creation. We wish here to explore that myth and some of its implications for Forster's view of life, as he saw it in the perspective of homosexuality, and to explore his attitudes toward the possibilities and qualities of homosexual relationships.

The myth may be simply described as that of the Gay Noble Savage. In all the stories the male protagonist, usually young, English, and middle-class, is involved with another male who is as different from him as the context of the tale will permit. Sir Richard Conway, successful businessman, has a hurried liaison with the local milkman, Arthur Snatchfold, in the story of that name. In "The Other Boat," the affair is between a young English officer, Lionel March, and a native boy, Cocomat, whom March describes as a "dago" and as having "[m]ore than a touch of the tar brush."¹ In the title story of the collection the relationship is between a young English priest and a native (tribal) chieftain, Athobai. He is an excellent example of the Gay Noble Savage—a character who is completely innocent, who trusts the missionary from Western civilization, and who is destroyed by him. He offers unlimited, honest, and guiltless love which the missionary cannot resist, but cannot face or accept in Athobai or in himself either. It is typical of these stories that this love and this openness cannot flourish and indeed doom the character to ruin and catastrophe brought on by society's opposition to homosexual love.

¹E. M. Forster, *The Life to Come*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (New York: Norton, 1972), p. xii.