Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 338

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers





Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 338

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-8503-4 ISBN-10: 1-4144-8503-4

ISSN 0091-3421

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Preface

amed "one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years" by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*) series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today's reader.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- Reprinted Criticism is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete Bibliographical Citation of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief Annotations explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of Further Reading appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

Swiss-born English novelist, poet, critic, short story writer, essayist, and memoirist	1
Hiromi Goto 1966	. 70
Elias Khoury 1948- Lebanese novelist, journalist, critic, and playwright	163
Phaswane Mpe 1970-2004	211
Fred Wah 1939- Canadian poet	273

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 357

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 477

CLC Cumulative Nationality Index 499

CLC-338 Title Index 515

Christine Brooke-Rose 1923-2012

Swiss-born English novelist, poet, critic, short story writer, essayist, and memoirist.

The following entry provides an overview of Brooke-Rose's life and works through 2010. For additional information on her career, see *CLC*, Volumes 40 and 184.

INTRODUCTION

Brooke-Rose is regarded as an author of highly experimental and intellectual postmodern fiction whose work demonstrates strong influences of French literary theory. A prolific writer, Brooke-Rose had written poetry, criticism, and four novels before her trademark experimental style was displayed in her fifth novel, Out (1964). In this work, Brooke-Rose established a unique type of narrative that would characterize much of her later work when she utilized a narrative voice that lacked a narrator. Her fiction focuses on language itself, specifically, on the disconnection between language and meaning, between language and reality. Incorporating into her narratives such techniques as punning, the mingling of multiple languages, invented words, and scientific language, Brooke-Rose heightens the distance not only between language and reality, but also between reader and writer in her works. Although Brooke-Rose did not achieve bestselling author status in her lifetime, she is regarded as a highly respected, creative, and innovative postmodern novelist and critic.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born in Geneva, Switzerland on January 16, 1923, Brooke-Rose was the younger of two daughters of a Swiss-American mother, Evelyn Blanche Brooke, and a British father, Alfred Northbrook Rose. Brooke-Rose resided with her mother in Brussels after her parents separated. Her father died in 1934, when Brooke-Rose was eleven. In 1936, Brooke-Rose, her sister, and her mother moved to England, where Brooke-Rose was sent to an English boarding school. During World War II, Brooke-Rose joined the British Women's Auxiliary Air Force and worked as an intelligence officer. She

married twice, first in 1944 to Rodney Ian Shirley Bax, whom she divorced in 1948, the same year she married her second husband, Polish poet and novelist Jerzy Pietrkiewicz; they divorced in 1975. Brooke-Rose studied English philology and medieval literature at Somerville College, Oxford. She received her B.A. degree in 1949, her M.A. in 1953. She earned a Ph.D. in 1954 at University College, London. Brooke-Rose published her first volume of poetry, Gold, in 1955 and her first novel, The Languages of Love, in 1957. She worked as a freelance journalist and literary reviewer in London from 1956 to 1968. In 1962, she suffered a long illness resulting in kidney surgery. Out was published not long after and its experimental narrative form has been described as a product of the period of reflection Brooke-Rose underwent during her recovery. In 1975, she began teaching at the University of Paris and also served, beginning in 1975, as a professor of English and American literature and literary theory. Brooke-Rose was married again briefly, to Claude Brooke, from 1981 to 1982. She retired from teaching in 1988 and settled in Provence, France, where she continued to write, publishing four more works from 1996 to 2006. She died on March 21, 2012, at the age of eighty-nine.

MAJOR WORKS

Brooke-Rose's early works are overshadowed by her later, experimental novels. Earlier works, such as The Languages of Love, while following conventional narrative modes, nevertheless reflect the erudite nature of all of Brooke-Rose's writing and contain evidence of the author's abiding fascination with language. However, it was not until she wrote the novel Out that Brooke-Rose began to explore experimental fiction. In this novel, the present tense is used to convey the consciousness of the story's elderly protagonist. The character, a white man in a post-nuclear society, faces racial discrimination because pale skin indicates radiation sickness while dark skin is associated with health. The protagonist remains anonymous throughout the novel, and the author does not even use a third-person pronoun to refer to him, thereby making the reader feel as if the book is being narrated by a disembodied consciousness. This sense of disconnection characterizes much of Brooke-Rose's work, including Such

(1966). In this work, she utilizes metaphors pertaining to astrophysics to tell the story of a psychiatrist who awakens from death and subsequently perceives people in the way a radio telescope perceives the stars. The notions of outer space and inner space merge in the protagonist's consciousness. In the novel Between (1968), Brooke-Rose avoids the use of the verb "to be." A present-tense narration alternates between dialogue and explorations of European languages, as it relates the story of an unnamed female translator. In the novel *Thru* (1975), Brooke-Rose conveys a series of images as seen through the rearview mirror of a car. The self-reflexive work toys with the reader's grasp of time and is a pastiche of fragments and typographical devices that reflect the work of creative writing class students, and their teacher, among others. Multiple consciousnesses in this metafictional narrative discuss the novel itself and provide excerpts of their own writing. Later works include the third-person autobiography Remake (1996) and the mystery novel Next (1998). Brooke-Rose's final work, Life, End of (2006) eschews the pronoun "I," except where it appears in dialogue, and explores the role of an active mind trapped in a decaying body.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

While popular success was elusive for Brooke-Rose during her lifetime, many critics have expressed admiration for her experimental writing style, especially in her later work. This focus on Brooke-Rose's innovative writing style has also led critics to reevaluate her earlier experimental fiction, including Out. For example, Karen R. Lawrence compares Out and Such, and applauds Brooke-Rose's innovative narrative techniques. Lawrence details the author's use of the narratorless narrative voice and describes her use of the present tense as scientific because of the way it is rooted to the observations of a particular consciousness rather than being tied to an omniscient narrator. Lawrence also traces the influence of French experimental writer Alain Robbe-Grillet on Brooke-Rose's work. In another essay, Lawrence focuses on the 1968 novel Between and again commends Brooke-Rose's use of a narrative form characterized by the distinct absence of a narrator. In examining Brooke-Rose's 1975 novel Thru, Andrew Williamson, like Lawrence, centers his evaluation on Brooke-Rose's narrative technique. Williamson, surveying the critical response to the novel, outlines common misunderstandings about the work before exploring the novel's use of multiple and ambiguous narrative voices. The critic further characterizes the text as writerly, that is, focused on the writer's concern with form and

language, rather than readerly, or concerned with the reader's grasp of technique, theme, plot, or character. The nebulousness Williamson describes is a characteristic commonly cited in assessments of Brooke-Rose's work. Mara Cambiaghi, in examining the 1996 autobiography Remake, similarly identifies ambiguities in this volume, including ways in which Brooke-Rose utilizes her shifting sense of placement or belonging among various cultures. Brooke-Rose's appropriation of scientific language and themes, highlighted by critics such as Lawrence, is further explored by Stefania Cassar, in her study of the 1999 novel Subscript. Cassar explores Brooke-Rose's treatment of evolution and genetics, describing the author's approach as thoughtful, playful, and postmodern. In analyzing Brooke-Rose's 1991 novel Textermination, Lawrence describes Brooke-Rose's metafictional techniques. The critic explains that this book highlights Brooke-Rose's attitude toward language and fiction, in which the distance between fiction and reality, between language and meaning, becomes both theme and form.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Gold (poetry) 1955

The Languages of Love (novel) 1957

A Grammar of Metaphor (criticism) 1958

The Sycamore Tree (novel) 1958

The Dear Deceit (novel) 1960

The Middlemen: A Satire (novel) 1961

Out (novel) 1964

Such (novel) 1966

Between (novel) 1968

Go When You See the Green Man Walking (short stories)

A ZBC of Ezra Pound (criticism) 1971

Thru (novel) 1975

A Structural Analysis of Pound's Usura Canto: Jakobson's Method Extended and Applied to Free Verse (criticism) 1976

A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic (criticism) 1981

Amalgamemnon (novel) 1984

*The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus: Four Novels (novels) 1986

Xorandor (novel) 1986

Verbivore (novel) 1990

Stories, Theories, and Things (essays) 1991

Textermination (novel) 1991

Interpretation and Overinterpretation [with Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty, and Jonathan Culler; edited by Stefan Collini] (essays) 1992

Remake (autobiography) 1996

Next (novel) 1998 Subscript (novel) 1999

Invisible Author: Last Essays (essays) 2002

Life, End of (novel) 2006

*Contains Out, Such, Between, and Thru.

CRITICISM

Karen R. Lawrence (essay date January 1997)

SOURCE: Lawrence, Karen R. "Saving the Text: Cultural Crisis in 'Textermination' and 'Masterpiece Theatre." *Narrative* 5, no. 1 (January 1997): 108-16.

[In the following essay, Lawrence compares Brooke-Rose's Textermination with a skit by critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, analyzing the way both pieces work as metafiction and serve to comment on their own fictitious and unrealistic nature.]

In an essay entitled "Where Do We Go from Here?" Christine Brooke-Rose borrows a definition of "metafiction" from Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's The Mythopoeic Reality—The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel (1976): metafiction, she quotes, is "ultimately a narrational metatheorem whose subject matter is fictional systems themselves [. . . It] exults over its own fictitiousness,' and its main counter-techniques are flat characterization, contrived plots, antilinear sequences of events, all fore-grounded as part of an extravagant overtotalization, a parody of interpretation which shows up the multiplicity of the real and the nâiveté of trying 'to reach a total synthesis of life within narrative'" (161-62). By this definition, both Brooke-Rose's own latest novel, Textermination (1991), and Gilbert and Gubar's latest criticism, Masterpiece Theatre: An Academic Melodrama, the 1995 publication of a skit that they first performed at the 1989 MLA Convention, would classify as "metafiction." The word "narrational" might require some stretching in the case of Masterpiece Theatre, since it is written in the form of a script, but as text, I would argue, it conforms to Zavarzadeh's definition in its extravagant fictitiousness, exposure of systemeticity, and parody of totalizing interpretations. Furthermore, the stage directions and block dialogues under the heading of a speaker are themselves stylizations; like Joyce's weird script for the Nighttown chapter of Ulysses, this script is narrativized for a reader of a text rather than dramatized for a theatrical viewer.

But if both texts exult over their own fictitiousness and unreality, they also deliberately invoke the "real" by presenting themselves as responses to cultural crisis. Not content to remain securely within their own playful quotation marks, both texts are metafictions in the wilderness, jeremiads that warn us of the dire predicament of literature and literary criticism in the postmodern age. One could say that it is Cassandra who presides over both these parodic, paranoid texts, revealing that the prophetic urge is alive and well and living in women's metafiction, despite its skepticism toward grand models of interpretability and monuments of unageing intellect. What both metafictions lament is a loss of cultural memory, specifically, the "forgetting" of the literary text amidst a melee of critical and political agendas that characterize the contemporary Anglo-American and Continental cultural scene. Although richly comic, both metafictions participate in a prevalent contemporary rhetoric of witness and survival that evokes shades of World War II, that most "real" of twentieth-century political events—perhaps most explicitly in the title, Textermination, and the title of Gilbert and Gubar's final chapter, "The Final Deletion."

Brooke-Rose's novel is set in the San Francisco Hilton, at an annual convention of literary characters from centuries of narratives in various, mostly Western, traditions. It begins with Emma Woodhouse, Emma Bovary and Mann's Goethe sharing a carriage, as both conventional vehicles of the imagination (fiacres and carriages), and newer conveyances, such as the "aerobrain," whisk the characters through time. At the convention, which strangely resembles the one MLA Brooke-Rose attended, the characters assemble for a Prayer for Being to the Implied Reader, hoping, the narrator tells us, to "recover, after an unimaginable journey, to savour what remains of international ritual for the revival of the fittest" (8). Their Darwinian predicament is symptomatic of the fate of reading and criticism in our time: the characters are "ghosts" (19), languishing from "lack of involved attention" (2) in an age of popular culture. They suffer as well from the effects of contemporary theory and literary criticism, which have led to a dereification or "dissolution," as Brooke-Rose called it in a 1987 essay. As the beleaguered characters begin to pray, they are interrupted by twelve turbaned terrorists, demanding equal time for their own rituals and threatening to kill all the congregation. (Their main purpose, however, seems to be to assassinate Rushdie's Gibreel Farishta, who attends the Convention.) Calvino's "Non-Existent Knight" (35) saves the day by beheading the terrorists, further prayers are cancelled, and the convention continues. Near the end of the novel, the characters

are subjected to a dual apocalypse: a book-burning that transforms the Hilton into a Towering Inferno, which, in turn, collapses when an earthquake hits the San Andreas fault. The unstable ground of the California setting only exacerbates the chronic vulnerability of fictional characters who suffer the life and death consequences of critical fashion and reader interest. However, like O. J. Simpson and others in the star-studded cast of the movie *The Towering Inferno* (and O. J. Simpson in his legal battles as well), characters miraculously appear from within the rubble, somehow surviving the apocalypse. Slowly, they proceed back to their textual homes, as the novel comes full circle, with Emma entering her carriage.

Gilbert and Gubar's "academic melodrama" likewise stages the cultural scene in apocalyptic terms. The Prologue, set in 2088 at a virtual branch campus, begins with a dialogue between the Curator of Print Culture and a Professor of Past Modern Studies, among others, who screen for their beginning students "fin-de-mod-siècle" episodes of Masterpiece Theatre. The historical drama the students view in these episodes is a 1980's war story—a culture war story, that is. "The Perils of the Text; or, Campus Capers," the first episode of this docudrama, presents the melodramatic predicament of the literary text, an amnesiac who has forgotten her own identity, and with it the meaning of her existence. The young female text has been abducted and tied to the railroad tracks by a murderous villain, who may be either a chain of being (code words for right-wing culprit) or a chain of signifiers (code words for left-wing culprit). The text is befriended by the "heroine," Jane Marple, a young assistant professor and namesake of her aunt (Agatha Christie's detective), who attempts to save the text. Instead of literary characters, the major characters in this melodrama are mostly "real" literary critics, celebrities of the profession including Fish, Bloom, Vendler, and Christian, along with government players in the culture wars, such as Bennett and Cheney, and movie stars like Madonna. All aggressively attempt to discover the text's identity and significance; all project onto the text their own theories and interests. Ultimately, when the text disappears, all are held culpable by Marple, à la Murder on the Orient Express: "You all had motives, you were all to blame. Some of you wanted money, some political power, some professional advancement, some philosophical hegemony, some language games, some just general destruction" (183). As in Textermination, Arab terrorists escalate the crisis; they threaten to exterminate the text because they are convinced it is The Satanic Verses (the terrorists, however, turn out to be impersonated by Isabelle Allende, Buchi Emecheta and Bharati Mukherjee, working undercover as counter-terrorists). The novel ends when one Rose McGuffin, a professor of history and "astronautics," absconds with the text and flees the planet by space ship to ensure its survival.

In this essay I will explore the nature of cultural critique in these metafictional texts, examining how they gesture toward the "real" while always reminding us that we are enmeshed in illusion. The presence of such gestures toward an historical moment provides a counter to a common assumption about metafiction: that it is an exercise in literary narcissism, devoid of the power to evoke history. This prevalent doubt about the efficacy of fantasy and self-conscious artifice is a contemporary example of a longstanding suspicion, apparent, for example, in Lukács's work on the novel. Yet although both Textermination and Masterpiece Theatre urge the reader toward an act of historical witness, I believe Brooke-Rose displays more faith in fantasy's resources for evoking historical consciousness. She locates the many forms of resistance to textermination within the elements of fiction, embodied, most prominently, in the stubborn reality of character.

Textermination presents the wild and crazy underside of T. S. Eliot's "historical sense"; characters from past and present physically and dialogically jostle one another with both comic and unsettling results. Humbert Humbert leers at an unsuspecting Maisie; Middlemarch's Casaubon goes to hear a paper on himself, only to find, to his bitter disappointment, that the subject is another Casaubon, the one from Eco's Foucault's Pendulum. As George Eliot's Casaubon discovers, the canon is a zero sum game; realist characters from two hundred years of literature find themselves displaced by the more up-to-date "real" of popular culture, signaled by the invasion of television actors, as well as characters, at the conference (Peter Falk is the detective on the case of the terrorists). JR and Bobby and Steve McGarrett shout "we are eternal, we're real! . . . We are the ones people want and know and love!" (58). As Brooke-Rose says of the predicament of serious literature in "The Dissolution of Character," "the human need for fictions has been channeled into the 'popular' genres" (191). Characters from contemporary fiction are even more threatened by the reader's snub than poor Mr. Casaubon, since they have never become canonical. Even Mira Enketei from two of Brooke-Rose's own recent novels finds herself on an index of names of characters forgotten by readers (either from the nonavailability or noncanonicity of the works in which they appear or from a lapse in readers' memories of their particular role in a canonical work). She promptly disappears from the novel.

But probably the major threat of textermination comes from academic critical practice, particularly the narrow theoretical and political axes that critics grind. As one character puts it, those characters who are read by teachers, scholars and students are "analysed as schemata, structures, functions within structures, logical and mathematical formulae, aporia, psychic movements, social significances and so forth" (26). This plethora of agenda bewilders the erstwhile heroine of the novel, Kelly McFadgeon, a young "Interpreter" attending the meeting, who bemoans her failure to master the right lingo of the profession. But the real danger of this balkanization is emblamatized by the machine-gun packing terrorists who search for Gibreel Farishta, Rushdie's character from The Satanic Verses, their political agenda emblematic of a certain kind of cultural terrorism that confuses fiction and politics.

Textermination brings literature to the brink of extinction, thematizing the various "deaths" that have become such critical commonplaces—of the author, of character, of the novel (and since the reader is an unseen god to whom the characters pray, she, too, is included in this hit list). Yet I think it is Brooke-Rose's strength to reinvent, rather than to exhaust, the resources of fictionality. Raiding the available resources provided by literature, she explores the "afterlife" of textuality. Through her "ghosts" (19) or "constellations of semes," as they're called at one point (63), she focuses on the ontology of fictional being, a persistent theoretical concern since her first critical study, A Rhetoric of the Unreal. Textermination mines fiction's resources to test theory's preoccupations, by combining "inquiry" and "ink-worries" (significant puns that are found in the text, [67]). For example, before the apocalyptic climax, a quieter "textermination" is staged. It occurs in chapter 11, not an accident, I think, in a metafictional novel, for here, the novel is brought to the brink of bankruptcy. Two fictional (and female) narrative presences we have come to rely on disappear suddenly—Kelly in chapter 9 (after suddenly discovering she, too, is fictional) and Mira Enketei in chapter 10. We feel the loss of Kelly, in particular, for her bewilderment in the face of such rampant intertextualities mirrors our own predicament as readers. (Unlike Rita Humboldt, "star" professor of CompLit and organizer of the conference, Kelly admits her inability to recognize every personage: "She feels ashamed and rattled. Gaps, so many gaps in her reading, she'll never catch up" [22]). Despite her lack of complexity, or context, or individuality in a novel in which she is one name among many, we nevertheless fasten onto her consciousness with relief, and, thus, her "textermination" is experienced as a loss. Next, Mira takes over in chapter 10, only to vanish from the

novel herself (realizing that she is on the list of forgotten characters, she feels that "[s]he can't go on. She doesn't exist" [105].) It is at this point that chapter 11 introduces the fictional voice of the author, Christine Brooke-Rose. "If she can't go on, I suppose I'll have to . . . I too, like Mira, have no idea how to go on. I must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on (Beckett, The Unnameable)" [sic] [106-107]). Strangely, the novel is "rescued" with a deus ex machina updated. The new technology is an old convention revised—authorial intrusion. Interrupting the narrative progress, the "author" discusses her relationships to the characters she has just invented and her difficulties as an author. The spectre of Beckett hovers in every admission of defeat and renewed bid for control. "I have thus created a fiction too difficult for me to handle. So I omit what I don't know. A double absence. All authors omit, texts are full of double absences" (107). Characters, narrators, and authors all submit to the self-destructions of the text.

In the thought experiments that are Brooke-Rose's novels, criticism, character and theory converge as points of speculation, as all engage in testing the imaginative life of an idea, in this case "unreality." In the process, the conventions of fiction, like the convention in California, are undermined. But the illusion of art is subverted in order to save the illusion. Thus, what we witness is not nostalgia for the good old days of realist fiction and its faithful readers, but a call to revitalize both fiction's powers and its vulnerabilities. One of the ways in which Brooke-Rose does this is by reminding us of the "unbearable lightness of being" that is always fiction's link with death. Describing the difference between a dramatic and fictional character, one of the convention organizers says that fictional characters

appear gradually out of the reading process, the letters on the page, mere words, not made flesh but creating phantoms in the very varied minds of each solitary reader. It is in this imaginative build-up that we're threatened, I mean that the characters of fictional narrative are threatened, in a way far more profound and more eroded by time than is possible with dramatic characters, at every moment made flesh before our eyes.

(120)

The speech suggests that it is not only in "postmodern fiction" that fiction "theorizes" its own vulnerability; indeed, realism itself constructs such phantoms of the imagination, who demand the reader's faith. Realism's "mirror" is always the prop of an illusionist. In a meeting between Kundera's Tomas (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) and Austen's Emma Woodhouse, Brooke-Rose even stages an acknowledgment that reality and unreality are wed in *both* "realism" and "post-