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Literary Criticism

CLC

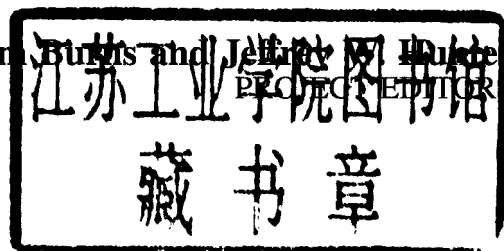
184

Volume 184

Contemporary Literary Criticism

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

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Preface

Named “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.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- 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 works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- 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*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Christine Brooke-Rose

1923-

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

The following entry presents an overview of Brooke-Rose's career through 2003. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 40.

INTRODUCTION

Brooke-Rose has earned an international reputation as a postmodern novelist whose fictions are highly influenced by poststructuralist literary theory. Though written primarily in English, her novels are closely associated with French literary theory, drawing comparisons to the mannerist novels of Iris Murdoch and the nouveau roman style of Alain Robbe-Grillet. Beginning with her fifth novel, *Out* (1964), however, Brooke-Rose developed her own distinctive and experimental prose style. Her subsequent narratives are highly self-conscious and anti-realist works, continually reinforcing the notion that fiction is ultimately about language and does not reflect reality. Brooke-Rose emphasizes these ideas through a range of verbal pyrotechnics, such as puns, wordplay, invented words, and the intermingling of multiple languages. She is also fascinated with scientific language, and her novels utilize scientific jargon as metaphors for various elements of human experience. Though by no means a popular or best-selling novelist, Brooke-Rose has become highly respected as a creative novelist-critic and an alternative to male-authored postmodern fictions.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Brooke-Rose was born in Geneva, Switzerland, on January 16, 1923. With her English father, whose last name was Rose, and Swiss-American mother, whose maiden name was Brooke, Brooke-Rose grew up in a household where three different languages were spoken. While French was Brooke-Rose's first language, the family also spoke English and German. Her parents separated in 1929, and her father later died in 1934. After the divorce, Brooke-Rose moved with her mother to Brussels, Belgium, where they lived with her maternal grandparents. In 1936 she moved with her mother to England. During World War II, Brooke-Rose worked on assessing intercepted enemy communications for the

Allies. She was married in 1944, but the marriage lasted less than a year and was later annulled. After the war ended, Brooke-Rose attended Somerville College, Oxford University, earning a B.A. in English in 1949. In 1954 she earned a Ph.D. in Middle English from University College, London. While still a student, Brooke-Rose married Jerzy Peterkiewicz, a Polish writer and professor. The couple later divorced in 1975. During a period in 1956 when her husband was suffering from a near-fatal illness, Brooke-Rose began writing her first novel, *The Languages of Love*, which was published in 1957. From 1956 to 1968, she worked as a freelance journalist and literary reviewer in London, contributing to such publications as the *New Statesman*, the *Observer*, the *Sunday Times*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. In 1962 Brooke-Rose suffered a long and serious illness and underwent kidney surgery, from which she emerged with a new perspective on her fiction writing. *Out*, the first of her experimental novels, was the product of this period of reflection and re-evaluation. She began teaching at the University of Paris in 1969 and, beginning in 1975, she served as a professor of English and American literature and literary theory. After retiring from teaching in 1988, Brooke-Rose settled in Provence, France. Her fictionalized memoir, *Remake* (1996), recounts her multi-national childhood, her experiences as a young woman living in London, and her later successes as a novelist and professor.

MAJOR WORKS

Brooke-Rose's early novels, such as *The Languages of Love* and *The Sycamore Tree* (1958), are social satires of romantic intrigue among intellectuals in London. Her third novel, *The Dear Deceit* (1960), is a somewhat experimental narrative in which a man traces the life of his deceased father backwards from death to birth. *Out*, a futuristic tale set in Africa, addresses issues of racial inequality. Taking place in the aftermath of a nuclear war, pale skin is now viewed as an indicator of radiation poisoning while dark skin connotes health. Subsequently, a social hierarchy develops in which dark-skinned people rule and light-skinned people have become the underclass. *Out* is narrated by a pale white protagonist, one of the so-called "colourless race," who is unable to find work due to discrimination. The narrative of *Out* has been compared to Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1957 novel *La Jalousie*. *Such* (1965) concerns a

psychologist named Larry—a reference to the biblical character Lazarus—who reflects on his life and career as it runs through his mind during a hallucinatory episode in the final three minutes before he dies. Larry works in an astrophysics lab, and astrophysics functions as the novel's central metaphor for human relationships. Other elements of the narrative serve as metaphors for conscious and unconscious states of mind. The protagonist of *Between* (1968) is a professional translator belonging to a team that travels throughout the world attending various international conferences on translation. *Between* is structured as two intersecting narratives. One narrative strand is expressed in the present tense in several different languages and describes the breakdown of the protagonist's marriage. The second narrative strand presents a series of love letters written in medieval French. Brooke-Rose does not use the verb "to be" anywhere in *Between*, having explained that it functions as an expression of the narrator's disoriented sense of personal identity. *Thru* (1975) is Brooke-Rose's most self-consciously narrated novel, exploring further the author's role of engaging the reader in games of language and meaning. The story centers around a university creative writing course in which the students collectively construct a narrative, thus giving the text no central unifying "consciousness." Instead, *Thru* is comprised a series of fragmentary texts, such as student essays with handwritten changes superimposed on the typed text, musical notations, mathematical formulas, diagrams, and resumes, among others. *Thru* begins and ends with a view from the rear-view mirror of a car, exploring language and experience as a fragmentary, ever-changing, backward reflection.

Brooke-Rose gave the collective title "The Intercom Quartet" to her next four novels—*Amalgamemnon* (1984), *Xorandor* (1986), *Verbivore* (1990), and *Textermination* (1991). These novels are unified by Brooke-Rose's thematic exploration of the impact of information technology on science, literature, and humanity. *Amalgamemnon* is narrated through the consciousness and imagination of Mira Enketei, an insomniac woman who sits in bed reading Herodotus while her lover snores beside her. Mira makes use of various forms of wordplay and imagines herself in the role of the mythical Cassandra. *Amalgamemnon* explores the tensions between fact and imagination as well as probing the status of women in relation to traditional epistemological hierarchies. Additionally, Brooke-Rose avoids all use of present-tense verbs in *Amalgamemnon*. *Xorandor* and *Verbivore* cast a series of inanimate but sentient stones as the central characters. *Xorandor* is narrated entirely in the form of dialogue between a pair of twin "whiz kids," Jip and Zab, and their computer. The twins discover a stone, which they name Xorandor, that feeds on radiation. Xorandor, a sort of naturally occurring computer chip, has the ability to absorb communication technologies, from computers to radio broadcasts, and

to communicate with the twins through their computer. Xorandor leads the twins to believe that he is from Mars, but later reveals that he originated on Earth five thousand years ago. Xorandor has the ability to reproduce, and one of his offspring—due to a "syntax error"—takes control of a nuclear power plant and threatens to create a nuclear bomb. *Xorandor* explores the impact of communications technology on modes of narrative, as the children find that they do not understand the now-antiquated concept of storytelling. *Verbivore* includes characters from both *Amalgamemnon* and *Xorandor* and concerns a breakdown in technological communications systems that forces everyone to communicate in writing. *Textermination* is set at an annual conference in San Francisco, attended by fictional characters out of the pages of literary history. Characters from the works of Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, George Eliot, Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, and Salman Rushdie, among others, populate the novel as they gather to petition potential readers with the help of literary critics who "interpret" them for the masses.

Remake is a highly self-conscious fictionalized memoir in which Brooke-Rose explores the workings of memory and imagination in the formation of narrative. In this attempt to "remake" her life by retelling it, Brooke-Rose asserts that adaptations are never as compelling as the original. Critics have also referred to *Remake* as a meta-biography or anti-biography. *Next* (1998) focuses on the homeless population of London, featuring twenty-six narrators, each of whose names begin with a different letter of the alphabet. Written in a conversational mode, *Next* is notable for its diverse range of accents and dialects among London's ethnically diverse inhabitants. Omitting the verb "to have" from the novel, Brooke-Rose emphasizes the material deprivations of the homeless. Her next novel, *Subscript* (1999), explores the birth and development of human life and language from prehistory to the present. Brooke-Rose has also published several works of literary criticism, including *A Grammar of Metaphor* (1958), *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (1981), *Stories, Theories, and Things* (1991), and *Invisible Author* (2002).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Brooke-Rose has been recognized as one of the few modern writers whose critical perspective successfully informs her fictional narratives. As Karen R. Lawrence has observed, Brooke-Rose's novels are "radical experiments in which theories inform fiction and yet fiction intervenes to dramatize theory's limitations." Critics have commended Brooke-Rose for skillfully utilizing the precepts of poststructuralist theory to create narratives that playfully demonstrate the "fictionality of fiction" in a critique of realist notions of literature. Maria

del Sapio Garbero has noted that, "[t]he problematic relationship between language and reality is nowhere posed more radically than in Christine Brooke-Rose's work." Brooke-Rose has also been praised for engaging readers in extended games of wordplay as a means of deconstructing realist notions of the relationship between the reader and the text. Susan E. Hawkins has commented that *Amalgamemnon* "does what most innovative writing should do: it challenges the audience in terms of accustomed modes of perception, interpretation, and reading strategies—in short, challenges readerly ideology." Feminist critics have celebrated Brooke-Rose as an innovative female novelist whose narratives offer an alternative to dominant male modes of post-modern fiction. Ellen G. Friedman has ranked Brooke-Rose among a handful of twentieth-century experimental women writers—including Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein—whose novels "explode the fixed architecture of the master narrative." However, most reviewers have agreed that Brooke-Rose's novels are challenging to readers, with some arguing that her works are needlessly dense and almost incoherent to readers unfamiliar with her frequent textual allusions. Such critics have complained that the effort required to understand Brooke-Rose's writings diminishes their impact on audiences.

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) 1965
Between (novel) 1968
Go When You See the Green Man Walking (short stories) 1970
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 and criticism) 1992

Remake (memoir) 1996

Next (novel) 1998

Subscript (novel) 1999

Invisible Author: Last Essays (essays) 2002

*Includes *Out*, *Such*, *Between*, and *Thru*.

CRITICISM

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (essay date winter 1982)

SOURCE: Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. "Ambiguity and Narrative Levels: Christine Brooke-Rose's *Thru*." *Poetics Today* 3, no. 1 (winter 1982): 21-32.

[In the following essay, Rimmon-Kenan addresses the question of "Who is speaking?" in the narration of Brooke-Rose's *Thru*.]

Whoever you invented invented you too

—*Thru*, p. 53

Visual exercises such as Wittgenstein's famous "rabbit-duck" figure (1969: 194)¹ or Escher's "white birds/black birds" interlacing (1972)² have often been evoked in studies not distinguishing between ambiguity and other types of plurisignificance (e.g., Wright 1976: 506-508). Attempting to develop a more sharply focused definition, I have identified the same puzzle pictures with ambiguity alone, differentiating it from cognate phenomena on the basis of the logical operation involved (1977: xi-xi, 3-26). Ambiguity, according to my narrow definition, is the "conjunction" of exclusive disjuncts, whereas double and multiple meaning are based on the conjunction of compatible readings, irony on disjunction, allegory on equivalence, and indeterminacy on the absence of any necessary logical operator.³

In narrative, the exclusive disjuncts are what I call the "finalized hypotheses" (i.e., the hypotheses the reader has attained at the end of the reading process), and their conjunction is the most abstract equivalent of the coexistence of two mutually exclusive *fabulas* in one *sjuzhet*. Closer to the surface of the text this "conjunctive disjunction" takes the form of the coexistence of mutually exclusive systems of gap-filling clues (Perry and Sternberg's term, 1968: 263-293; see also Rimmon, 1977: 27-58). Thus, as demonstrated in my study, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* yields two mutually exclusive finalized hypotheses—"there are real ghosts

at Bly" vs. "there are no real ghosts at Bly"—both of which can be equally supported by highly complex clue systems in the text, so that the gap remains open and no choice between the conflicting hypotheses is possible (Rimmon 1977: 116-166).

Ghosts vs. no ghosts, black birds flying in one direction vs. white birds flying in the other, rabbit vs. duck—all become ambiguous because of the logical relations created between their components when applied to the same object (contradictories or contraries). But there is another equally famous work by Escher which is no less ambiguous, though far from constituting a contradiction, its components are in fact mutually generating, interchangeable mirror images. These are two pencil-holding hands, identical in form, each appearing to have just finished drawing the other. Neither contraries nor contradictories in themselves, the two hands become mutually exclusive because of their interchangeable structural position. In order to make sense of the puzzle, the observer must be able to construe one hand as drawing the other, but Escher ingeniously subverts the notion of hierarchy, rendering level and metalevel perpetually reversible. The subject of this paper is a parallel type of narrative ambiguity which, to my knowledge, has not yet been analyzed.

The type of ambiguity I am concerned with here is one arising from the interchangeability of narrative levels. As such, it has an evident affinity to other techniques which render the discreteness of levels problematic, such as analogies established among them (e.g., the repetition of the plot of *Hamlet* in the play within the play) or their intermingling (e.g., asking the reader to help Tristram Shandy reach his bed)⁴, but it goes one step further in that it collapses—through reversibility—the very distinction between outside and inside, container and contained, narrating subject and narrated object, higher and lower level. In order to examine this ambiguous interchangeability of narrative levels in its most acute form, I have chosen a highly complex and self-conscious text as an example: Christine Brooke-Rose's *Thru* (1975).

My purpose here is to describe the various techniques used in this text to create the ambiguity of narrative levels, to relate these techniques to some underlying assumptions about the nature of narrative, and to define their status within the mimetic and nonmimetic functions of ambiguity in literature. Since this is a study in descriptive poetics, I shall not attempt an evaluation of the book, aside from what is implied by the very act of choosing it for analysis.

Thru is a text about texts. It is both about every discourse—including itself—being constituted by previous discourse (hence the abundance of quotations and allusions in it) and about society, love, personality, the

human body as texts (hence the frequent references to French structuralist and poststructuralist theories in this book). Full of repetitions and mirror structures, *Thru* reflect[s] nothing but

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(p. 164)

Glimpses of "reality," the bribes of traditional narrative, are offered only to be subsequently effaced in this self-destructive construction. Everything in it is *posé et déçu*, as Barthes said about Robbe-Grillet (1964: 198-206)—everything—including the ambiguous structure I am about to analyze. A preliminary *caveat* is thus in order: the symmetrical interchangeability of narrator and narrated does indeed exist in *Thru*, but it often disappears into "no narrator at all but a lacuna through which it is possible to fall into delirious discourse" (p. 54), governed by "the principle [. . .] that you don't follow the principle" (p. 76), moving "from one disembodied voice to another" (p. 59), and consequently giving rise to the question repeatedly asked at all levels: "who speaks?" (pp. 1, 22, 35, 42, 59, 89, 107, etc.).

Who is it, then, who speaks in *Thru*? One could perhaps identify the speaker with the Master borrowed from Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste* and functioning here as a kind of dramatized narrator (Booth's term, 1961: 152). Although the Master appears only three times in *Thru*, his conversations with his servant and alter ego, Jacques, concerning the composition of a text, occur around the beginning, middle and end of the novel (pp. 16-17, 60-70, 149) and can thus be grasped as representing the overall act of narration. The text they compose is presumably the one we read, since its main characters—just as in *Thru*—are a couple by the names of Larissa Toren and Armel Santores. However, Larissa herself is also in the process of composing a text. "But which text?" asks the Master. "It looks mightily as if she were producing this one" (p. 66). If both Larissa and the Master are said to be writing the text we read, their roles as narrators become interchangeable. Not only does this mean, as the Master jokingly puts it to Jacques, "that the narrator I transformed into Larissa am no longer your master but your mistress" (p. 66); it also means that the object of the Master's narration is transformed into the narrator of the text we read and thus possibly becomes the inventor of both Jacques and the Master. No wonder the Master is bewildered and enraged that "this woman Larissa has [. . .] usurped my place as narrator" (p. 67).

Moreover, in the middle of writing her text, Larissa is interrupted by a visitor called Armel, a friend of her neighbor's, a black writer from Timbuctoo, whom she

does not know, and who gives her naïve criticism of her previous book (pp. 61-65). Armel, we remember, is also the name of Larissa's husband (later ex-husband), and there is an early suggestion, rejected later, that he may be black (p. 46). If the interrupter Armel is identical with the husband Armel, then the scene between him and Larissa is probably a flashback, perhaps their first meeting. And occurring where it does, this scene reinforces the blurring of fictional levels, since Armel, who formerly appeared as a character in the Master's narrative, like Larissa herself, is now promoted to the first degree of functionality where he converses with "Larissa Toren, author" (p. 64), who may have invented Jacques and the Master (or rather borrowed them from Diderot) as dramatized narrators for her text. On the other hand, it is also possible that the whole scene between Larissa and Armel is a part of the text composed by the Master.

But in order to bring the conversation with Armel to a close, Larissa "acquire[s] a sudden husband as a last minute escape" (p. 67). The Master, who makes that comment, is also convinced that "Of course her husband if true would have to be Armel" (p. 67). This is confusing, in view of the fact that she tells Armel about a husband who—according to the Master—must be Armel. So perhaps the two Armels are not the same person, and the confusion may be an example of textual auto-destruction rather than ambiguity: "that's a coincidence"—the Master explains at this point to the perplexed Jacques—"they do happen despite the critics" (p. 67).

In addition to the dramatized gentleman narrator, *Thru* is replete with references to "the unomniscient unprivileged unreliable narrator" (p. 32), who may have been created by the Master for the narration of the story of Armel, Larissa, and the others, but may also be a narrator above that one, posing the Master and his servant as narrating agencies for his own narrative. Like the dramatized narrator, this disembodied voice is also confusingly equated with Larissa, either through analogies or through explicit identification. The minutes of a staff meeting state that "Larissa Toren is opposed to all horizontal coordination which, according to her, would degenerate into useless chatter" (p. 96), and later we hear that "[. . .] the horizontal coordination degenerates, according to the narrator, into useless chatter" (p. 147). Similarly, Larissa is accused by Armel of having invented him and withdrawn "indifferent, paring your fingernails" (pp. 25-26), a Joycean attribute of authors often applied in *Thru* to the unreliable narrator (e.g., p. 87). Is Larissa then the narrator in whose narrative she appears as a character? She herself sometimes considers this possibility:

Whoever invented it is the absent narrator or you in love with the unreliable narrator who is in love with

the implied author who is in love with himself and therefore absent in the nature of things.

(pp. 137-138; see also pp. 96-97)

Whoever the narrator is, one of the objects of his narration is a radical university, with students from all over the world, where Armel and/or Larissa seem to be teaching.⁵ This institution of learning is said (by whom?) to have been "dreamt up by the unreliable narrator of the moment who however will be tactfully dropped without scene or motivation" (p. 55). And since that narrator often merges into his dramatized counterparts or into Larissa, the radical university could, by the same token, have been invented by either of the latter. But who, in that case, can tactfully drop the unreliable narrator without scene or motivation? If he is himself dreamt up by the dramatized narrator or by Larissa, he can obviously be dropped by them. But if he is either equivalent to them or their creator, who can dispose of him "from above"?

An interesting possibility emerges here, for the academic course most often focused on in this narrative is Creative Writing, where a collective text, rather uncannily similar to *Thru*, is being composed. Hence it is quite possible that the class is the collective author inventing and dropping the unreliable disembodied voice as well as Larissa and the Master as narrators. "After all it's our text, isn't it? for us only," the teacher says (p. 75). But if the class composes the text and sets up its narrators, how can it also be dreamt up by the very narrators it invents? One of the students is disturbingly aware of this double bind:

What are you talking about Ali 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 in love with the zeroist author in love with himself but absent in the nature of things, an etherised unauthorised other.

(p. 155)

Nor do the complications stop here. The Creative Writing class is probably taught by Armel, and Larissa's name in the schedule as well as her comments in the staff meetings could be a part of the collective composition or of Armel's own novel. On the other hand, since Larissa herself also writes a text (writes *Thru*?—whether she teaches at the same university or at another—it is quite possible that she transforms Armel (and the class) into characters in her novel, or even that she transforms herself into Armel.

Since Armel and Larissa are both teachers and characters in the collective narrative composed by the Creative Writing students, the following conversation among the students is particularly perplexing:

You're mad, all of you. You're talking about all these people as if they really existed.

Oh shut up Ali we're having fun inventing.

(p. 154)

As characters in the students' composition, Armel and Larissa do not really exist. On the other hand, as teachers they do exist, but—another turn of the screw—even as teachers they exist only as fictional characters within *Thru*. Imagine Armel, the teacher, listening to (and perhaps even participating in) the lively exchange among the students about him as character:

[. . .] if it weren't for that illiberal and catastrophic chapter in which you reinvented him as an ideal husband, articulate and cruel to be kind, in order to dialogue lunatically with yourself.

What do you mean? That was real.

[. . .] Already Myra slipped him into the wrong rectangle as a black man last term.

(pp. 150-151)

Or about his ex-wife, Larissa:

So what do you think, should we kill off Larissa?

She sure asks for it.

(p. 150)

The collective narrative is not exclusively oral. Some of its sections are submitted by the students as written exercises, but the same interchangeability of levels that governs the oral composition operates here, too. Rather than signaling the nature of such segments in advance, *Thru* presents them first as if they were the narration of primary fictional events (possibly told by the absent or the dramatized narrator) and only later, when we reach the teacher's comments or the class discussion, do we realize that these events are a fiction within a fiction, that is, parts of a student's composition (e.g., pp. 45-48, 58-59, 71-73). Armel's comments on these written segments reinforce the ambiguity of levels, for they could also be said of *Thru* with equal justification. "The narrator could in fact disappear entirely though you've woven him in quite well," he writes to one student (p. 48), and to another: "Very good. I like the mixture of levels" (p. 73), thus promoting again the students' compositions within *Thru* to the level of the very text in which they appear and whose structural principles they share (or create).

Armel and Larissa, we have seen, play two hierarchically incompatible yet interchangeable roles: they are both university teachers and characters in a collective narrative composed by Armel's students. If we leave this ambiguity of levels aside for a moment and examine the relations between Armel and Larissa at each level separately (though we never know which is which), we soon realize that another form of reversible hierarchy is introduced even when the two are expected to be on a par. This form of hierarchy is realistically motivated both by the kind of people Armel and Larissa are said to be (and this applies to them both as primary fictional

characters and as inventions in the students' narrative) and by their being writers who fictionalize each other in their work (which again applies at both levels).

As people (that is, as fictional characters at one level or another) Armel and Larissa are capable of relating to each other only by creating an image of themselves (a kind of persona) for the other and an image of the other for themselves. Thus, in Armel's letter to Larissa, he asks: "Have you not carefully invented the person you have become?" (p. 26) and—at a different narrative level (unless the letter is also a part of the collective composition)—the students ask the selfsame question: "But Larissa? and our Larissa? Has she not carefully invented the person she has become [. . .]" (p. 151). As Armel realizes, he himself could also be said to have created Larissa, an invention which she fully reciprocates: "and perhaps it was after all I who invented you though you would not admit this. Certainly you invented me and withdrew [. . .]" (p. 26). The students also see Larissa—now a character in their fiction—as creating an image of Armel for herself: "That's precisely why one has to reinvent him all the time. I mean that's why Larissa had to" (p. 151). This mutual invention, with a few more characters added, is tabulated by one of the possible narrators of *Thru* before any of the characters have been "properly presented":

unless Armel inventing Larissa

or Larissa	" Armel
" Armel	" Veronica
" Veronica	" Armel
" Armel	" Larissa
" Larissa	" Marco (or is it Oscar?)
" Marco (?)	" Larissa
" Larissa	" Armel

(p. 8. The same table is then repeated counterclockwise)

Such a table is, by its nature, endless: "It follows therefore that if Larissa invents Armel inventing Larissa, Armel also invents Larissa inventing Armel" (p. 108) and so on *ad infinitum*.

Just as they fictionalize each other in their fictional lives, so they fictionalize each other in their fictional fictions. In what seems like the first *tête à tête* meeting between Armel (future husband or stranger-interrupter?) and Larissa, various elements (e.g., "the man from Porlock," the remark about the white lines formed on the black hands) are "repeated" from the text Larissa composes as he enters. It is as if her text anticipates the "reality" between Armel and herself, just as—according to the students—it does in relation to Stavro, her lover, after the separation from Armel:

they'd meet for a drink on the castle terrace [Larissa, Stavro, and his new girlfriend] and Larissa would say

well tell me how did you two meet closing the manuscript in which she'd be inventing the whole episode before she knew it would turn out that way.

(p. 153)

Larissa herself talks to Armel about Stavro both as her lover and as a character in a text she is writing: "That's why I transferred the whole narrative to Rome, the International Theme you know, as well as the psychosis" (p. 132). And just as she (re)invents both Stavro and Armel in her writing, so she encourages Armel to do with her: "Write your text and reinvent me in the present tense, which is a convention like any other tense [. . .] Whoever you invented invented you too. That surely is the trouble, we do not exist" (p. 53).

Moreover, Larissa's novels do not only transfer her fellow characters to a further degree of fictionality; they also parallel the governing structural principles of *Thru* in which they are contained. This is particularly evident when Armel (the husband or the other?) criticizes Larissa's book in terms that could apply to *Thru*, and her answers become an in-built defense of *Thru*, disarming its potential critics in advance. Two examples will suffice to clarify my point. Armel wonders why the publisher advertises Larissa's book as funny: "Of course it's not funny you are weeping all the time it is one long cry of anguish" (p. 62) and she answers:

So, I'm weeping all the time and yet I'm merely amusing myself. But isn't the only thing to do with a long cry of anguish to amuse oneself? In my country we never separate the two. I take it as a compliment. But you seem to utter these phrases as reproaches.

(p. 63)

Like Larissa's novel, *Thru* is a combination of witty self-amusement with a cry of anguish, and it is impossible to know whether its author is sad to be glad or glad to be sad—she certainly does not separate the two. Another aspect Armel attacks is the "fall into language":

Why this flight? [. . .] what I mean is there are moments when you touch on the very essence of things and then brtt! you escape, you run away into language.

(p. 62)

And Larissa answers—for herself and for all critics of *Thru*—"You mean that when I touch on the essence of things, in that text, it's not by means of language? What is it then?" (p. 62), and "Language is all we have to apprehend reality, if we must use that term" (p. 64).

With this parallel between Larissa's text and *Thru* we have come full circle to the possibility envisaged in the beginning of this study, namely—in the Master's words—that "It looks mightily as if she were producing this one and not, as previously appeared, Armel, or Armel disguised as narrator or the narrator I disguised

as Armel, That's not clear" (p. 66).⁶ It is indeed unclear both because Larissa may be producing this text but may also be invented by its dramatized or undramatized narrator or even by the students' collective composition, and because it deprives the reader of the possibility of distinguishing between container and contained, outside and inside, higher and lower narrative levels, plunging him into a situation not far from Russell's paradox of "the class of all classes which are not members of themselves." As is well known, Russell solved his paradox by the theory of logical types, postulating that a class is of a higher type than its members and should not be confused with them (Whitehead & Russell 1964: 37-66). But it is precisely the hierarchy which solves Russell's paradox that becomes ambiguously reversible in *Thru*, blocking all possible resolution.

Applied to semantic antinomies, which do not have a logical-type hierarchy, similar paradoxes (e.g., the man who says "I am lying") were solved by Carnap (on the basis of Russell's own insights in his introduction to Wittgenstein) by the distinction between object-language and metalanguage (1937). *Thru* integrates this distinction within its own discourse when the student Ali writes, in an obvious takeoff from Lacan, "Ça parle. Who then, the Other or the metalanguage?" (p. 35), and when the teacher reminds the class that "we must not confuse the levels of discourse [. . .] I am not a function of your narrative and we are using a metalanguage" (p. 50). This is followed by Jakobson's six functions of language and an appended comment:

There should be placards saying: Danger. You are now entering the Metalinguistic Zone. All access forbidden except for Prepared Consumers with special permits from the Authorities.

M-phatically.

(p. 51. See also p. 126)

"Placards" are precisely what *Thru* omits, and the integration of the notion of metalanguage within its own discourse subverts the very usefulness of this notion, for it employs the reader's metalanguage as its own object-language. The reader thereby becomes an element of the very text he is reading, losing his secure external position.

If, as Lacan says, "il n'y a pas de metalanguage" (1966: 11), the identification of narrative levels remains forever ambiguous. Furthermore, when each level is interchangeable not only with the contiguous one but also with the all-inclusive level which is the text we read, all hierarchical distinctions within reality or fictionality collapse into the only true reality, that of the text itself: "A text is a text is a text" (p. 57). This variation on Gertrude Stein is perhaps the only solution to the ambiguity, but if it solves it, it does so not by opting