

# De-gen(d)eration: Writing *Thru* the Seriously Playful

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## Abstract

This essay explores the experimental nature of Christine Brooke-Rose's narrative *Thru* and its attempts to break down the conventions of the genre of the novel. Reflecting on the singularity of this text that refuses to obey the laws of its genre but at the same time insists on forming part of it, the article discusses how this text should be approached and how it may be read. Through a close reading of the first few pages of *Thru* it links the question of genre with that of gender, and demonstrates how Brooke-Rose's text exposes and deconstructs the gender hierarchy through its play with language, narrative structures and print conventions. This play creates a multiplicity of meaning that resists any attempt to reduce the novel to one single authoritative reading. Instead, it constantly supplements the many readings it makes possible, always allowing for an 'other' meaning, another interpretation.

**Keywords:** *Brooke-Rose, language play, genre, gender, multiplicity*

## 'Breaking' the Genre

Over the years the response to the novels of Christine Brooke-Rose has been one of critical neglect. Studies of her work have been rare and have for the most part consisted of reviews, passing mentions in encyclopedias of contemporary fiction, and a few journal articles.<sup>1</sup> The resistance shown towards this author's work is likely due to the experimental nature of her writing. As Sarah Birch has pointed out, "Brooke-Rose's novels are generally thought of as difficult" and her work "has [...] been the victim of the unwillingness of many readers to allow it to alter their conception of what fiction is and what it might be capable of doing". Faced with novels that challenge the conventions of this genre, both through their content and structure, "readers and critics alike have balked at the intellectual effort demanded by her work" and "the world of publishing and reviewing has found her novels difficult to process according to the expectations of a book encoded in its practices" (1994, 162-63).

One of the most experimental texts produced by Brooke-Rose over the years has been her 1975 novel *Thru*. This "perfect deconstructive text in the Derridean sense of the term" (Canepari-Labib, 2002, 149) walks a fine line between experimentalism and obscurity, and, some might argue, teeters on the edge of complete unreadability. Indeed, Brooke-Rose herself realised that perhaps she had "gone too far" (Tredell, 1990, 30) and, following the publication of this work, made a conscious effort to render the rest of her writing more accessible and readable.

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<sup>1</sup> There have also been two full-length studies of her work, namely Sarah Birch's *Christine Brooke-Rose and Contemporary Fiction*, and Michela Canepari-Labib's *Word-Worlds: Language, Identity and Reality in the Work of Christine Brooke-Rose*.

Brooke-Rose has described *Thru* as “a novel about the theory of the novel... a narrative about narrative, a fiction about fictionality, a text about intertextuality” (1991, 8). Self-reflexive to the core, this text attempts to identify and question the conventions and characteristics of the novel, playfully uprooting the foundations of this genre in an attempt to push its buttons and puncture its limits. Indeed, apart from simply questioning the conventions of fiction, it also incessantly undermines the very structures it sets up for itself, “constructing itself and then destroying itself as it goes along” (Hayman, 1976, 4). Written in a manner that is ‘seriously playful’, this text constructs narrative structures only to immediately dismantle them and plays with a multiplicity of meaning and an ambiguity of form that allows for no single or univocal interpretation.

In assuming such a depth of self-reflexivity and play, this text occupies the uneasy space of a work that is so self-referential it risks annulling itself. Discussing the nature of literature and the law of genre, Jacques Derrida has noted that “a literature that talked only about literature or a work that was purely self-referential would immediately be annulled” (Derrida, 1992, 47). Exploring the paradoxical nature of what he refers to elsewhere as “the law of participation without membership” (228), Derrida explains that “to become readable”, the singularity of literature “has to be *divided*, to *participate*, to *belong*. Then it is divided and takes *its part* in the genre [...] It loses itself to offer itself” (68).

Seemingly unwilling to compromise in its self-referentiality, *Thru* walks a tightrope on the boundaries of fiction, stubbornly attempting to ‘break’ the genre or at least write its very limits. Derrida has argued that “as soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind” (224). It is these norms that Brooke-Rose repeatedly attempts to undercut in her work, writing in a manner that is other to the established conventions of the genre and the interdictions levied against it, reveling in a constant play with language, narrative structure and print conventions that allows the reader no respite.

As a result of this experimentalism, readers and critics are often uncertain how to read this text. Disoriented by the unconventional print tactics used by Brooke-Rose and her experimental play with language, one is often literally unsure in which order or in which direction to begin to read. Equally, readers and critics find themselves questioning whether this can in fact be classified as a novel and subsequently whether it should be read as one. Standing resolutely outside of the conventions of traditional narrative while at the same time directly addressing these conventions through its playful nature, *Thru* is at once eccentrically and ex-centrally outside of the genre that it insists on placing itself within. One wonders therefore whether to read *Thru* as a novel, as some ‘pseudo’ or ‘faux’ novel, as a parody, or even as an exercise in literary criticism or theory. Indeed, as Birch has pointed out, much of this text is based on structuralist and poststructuralist theory – it “models many of its narrative strategies directly on the writings of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, and more indirectly on those of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida” (90). As Birch notes, this text ‘mimics’ these theories, it “draws out their implications, and ultimately demonstrates their limitations” (89).

Faced with questions such as these, readers and critics must choose to respect the multiplicity of this text and resist the urge to classify or categorize it. Rather than attempting to read *Thru* as a novel, as a parody, or as an exercise in theory, one should just read the text as it is – read it from *within* its multiplicity. A successful reading of

this work is indeed one that does not try to make it fit into a genre, but one that recognizes and explores why *Thru* can never be reduced or pinned down to just one category or one interpretation.

## Re-writing Gender

The playfulness and experimentalism exhibited by *Thru* – indeed its attempts to break out of the categories of its genre – are neither frivolous nor gratuitous. In “The Law of Genre”, Derrida notes in passing the curious link between ‘genre’ and ‘gender’, two words which share a common etymological root. Elaborating on this relationship, Lidia Curti has proposed that the refusal to adhere to the conventions of a genre, particularly the novel, reflects a rethinking of the question of gender and an unwillingness to accept stereotypical assumptions on the nature of sexual difference. Identifying Brooke-Rose as a female novelist who attempts a “de-generation of the genre” (1998, 30), Curti argues that “the denial of a rigid gender dichotomy [...] is connected to the refusal of a rigid law of genre through displacement, transference, ambiguity and multiplicity” (xii).

Much of Brooke-Rose’s work, including *Thru*, may indeed be read as an attempt to question and deconstruct phallogocentric assumptions on the nature of gender and language. Much has been written on the dichotomy between man and woman and the efforts to overturn and eliminate the hierarchical structure that has governed it. Questioning the logic inherent to certain “feminist” literature or criticism”, Derrida has rightly pointed out that “without a demanding reading of what articulates logocentrism and phallogocentrism, in other words, without a consequential deconstruction, feminist discourse risks reproducing very crudely the very thing which it purports to be criticizing” (1992, 58-60).

Derrida has described the attempt to escape phallogocentric logic as a ‘double gesture’ or a “double writing [...] that is in and of itself multiple” (Derrida, 1981, 41). This “double play” (6), does not simply involve a phase of ‘overturning’ that recognizes the ‘violent hierarchy’ at work in classical philosophical oppositions in which “one of the two terms governs the other [...] or has the upper hand” (41), but must also, equally importantly, involve “the irruptive emergence of a new “concept”, a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime” (42).

The attempt to subvert phallogocentric structures cannot be a simple inversion of a hierarchy or an overturning of an opposition but must rather be involved in a play that dismantles these very notions. As Luce Irigaray has argued, “it is not a matter of toppling that [phallogocentric] order so as to replace it – that amounts to the same thing in the end – but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an “outside” that is exempt, in part, from phallogocentric law” (1985, 68). An escape from the metaphysics of phallogocentrism “cannot be a matter of substituting feminine power for masculine power” (128), or of “elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*”. This escape must rather take the form of a “jamming [of] the theoretical machinery itself” (78).

This ‘jamming’ or ‘suspension’ that the deconstructive double gesture is involved in must, according to Irigaray, consist of a certain ‘language work’ in which “nothing is ever to be *posited* that is not also reversed and caught up in the *supplementarity of this reversal*”. Indeed, “if this is to be practiced for every meaning posited – for every word, utterance, sentence, but also of course for every phoneme, every letter – we need to



This flaw in the mirror does not automatically replicate everything it reflects. It is only the man's eyes that get reflected in this manner – 'eyes' that often find themselves within the course of the narrative conflated with the 'I's of the various narrators.

Upon describing these reflected eyes suspended in the mirror, the text immediately asks: "Who Speaks?" – a question that is answered with "le rétro viseur", and then on the following page, "or the vizir looming grey eminence behind the consultan listener". The reference to the 'vizir' and '(con)Sultan listener' is an allusion to *The Arabian Nights*. Indeed, the passage continues:

the vizir looming grey eminence behind the consultan listener how  
many times leaning a little to the right to peer into how many  
rectangles a thousand and one in which there is a flaw? (579-580)

The 'consultan listener' may be said to refer to the Sultan Shahrayar who every night listens to the stories of Scheherazade, while the 'vizir' is of course Scheherazade's father who every night provided the Sultan with a fresh wife, only to take her life the following day. Through the transposition of *The Arabian Nights* into this text, the rear-view mirror that is 'peered into', becomes the thousand and one 'rectangles' of the stories Scheherazade narrates. Like the mirror, these rectangles may contain 'a flaw' and therefore can reflect "the second pair of eyes less pale veiled by/the reflected hair crinkly khaki flecked grey" (580).

This second pair of eyes is veiled by the actual or 'real' reflection of the grey hair of the vizir and may be said to refer to the veiled *I* of Scheherazade that is never given a direct voice and is never allowed to reflect itself in the text, but is instead veiled and hidden in the third-person narrative. Scheherazade is not a first-person narrator of her stories but rather the 'tale-bearer' (580) whose very (textual) life depends entirely on her story-telling abilities. As *Thru* explains later on, Scheherazade's "very life is to narrate and [her] narration gives her life" (618). Were she to falter in her telling of the tales, were any flaw to show up in the 'intensity of illusion' (583) that she must create and reflect, were she to waver from the satisfying of the Sultan's desires, she would pay with her life. Scheherazade exists not to narrate her own desires and wants but rather to reflect and satisfy perfectly and with no remainder the desires of the Sultan listener on whom her life depends.

This rear-view mirror is thus linked to the veiling of the eyes/*I* of Scheherazade – an 'I' that never reflects itself or sees itself, but rather operates as the material support or 'tain' of the tales that man reflects himself in. As Sarah Birch has argued, the image of the rear-view mirror in *Thru* is not simply linked to the Lacanian mirror but also to "Irigaray's version of the specular (imaginary) experience". According to Birch, the 'other eyes' in the rear-view mirror "represent the non-specularizable "I" behind the discourse, the "other author" who is never present in the text. This absence also figures the male definition of woman as lack, as an inverted image of man, as a hole in the male economy of signification" (98).

Within this interpretation, the rear-view mirror of *Thru* comes to represent a male story or male version of reality – a male reflection of the world in which woman is effaced into nothing more than a material base that cannot reflect itself. However, in *Thru*, the image of the rear-view mirror is also self-reflexively made to represent the textual surface of the novel itself, symbolically bringing together the two notions of gender and genre that this paper is concerned with. Following the scene in the car where the mirror is juxtaposed with *The Arabian Nights*, the narrative tumbles through a series

of shifts between different possible narrators and narrative levels, creating constant transgressions on the narrative surface and frustrating the reader's attempts to identify any one narrator. Following this series of transgressions, the image of the mirror crops up once more as the text turns back to the scene in the car where a "mistress of the moment" "shifts the mirror to her rearward glance" only to have the driver exclaim "hey put my mirror back". The subsequent passage reads: "So it needs adjusting. Why at this point introduce this or that? Intensity of illusion is what matters to the narrator" (582-83).

What is initially a statement about the mirror in the car, transforms into a self-reflexive comment about the very narrative we are reading. As Sarah Birch has argued, "the phrase "so it needs adjusting" is an a-posteriori justification for a failed narrative coup" (95) that serves to link the image of the mirror with the textual surface of the narrative itself. Like the mirror that contains a flaw and thus reveals the hidden (female) eyes/I of its tain, this textual surface is also marred by flaws and transgressions that violently disrupt the mimetic surface of the text and the 'intensity of illusion' that a narrative is expected to create. Through these flaws on its textual surface, or what we previously referred to as this text's efforts to 'break' its genre, *Thru* punctures holes in the 'male stories' or 'male mirrors' of phallogocentric discourse in an attempt to represent or indeed "write" the other(s) that they repress.

### Hystery/His-Story/My-Story?

Having introduced the motif of the mirror and the notion of effacement, this novel digresses further into what may be said to be a self-reflexive speculation on its own textual strategies. Playing with the spatiality of the page and writing both horizontally and vertically, 'properly' and acrostically, the text reads:

	never		the lesS	
	this is		noT	
			nO	
			(My)	
	the		h Y s T e R y	of The
				Eye
becAuse I would noT			S e E thY	cRuel Nails
boaRish				fAngs
		pluck ouT		hIs
	pooR old	(E Xtract)		(Cruel
Cruel	nAils)	uPon	These	eyEs of
tHine				
I'll set	(C	R u El		fanGs)
	my	foOt Poo R old eyes		
These	eyEs	hIs eYes		
pooR old eyes				
beAm				Mote
Cruel		fanGs		
Eyes		cRuel		fAngs
		boArish		
		beaM		
		Moat		
		Etc		
		alreaDy	(all read eye)	

naIls  
Nails

upon These  
eyes of tHine I'll  
sEt

the re Mote sTone  
Wide Eyes wEt?  
pArch Ment waX  
arXi stOne Trace  
dRy  
papYrus  
eye 'S (584)

Erupting into the text after the initial 'mirror' scene, the first part of this extract may be said to read: despite the flaw in the mirror and the exposing of an effaced eye/I, this text "is not no (my) the hystery of the eye". Commenting on the first few lines of this passage, and focusing on the use of the term '*hystery*' that is formed out of a portmanteau of 'history' and 'hysteria', Sarah Birch has argued that this "'crossword" [...] weaves together voices from a number of other texts in a "hysterical" imitation of male story-telling" (99). As she points out, this extract alludes to Bataille's "L'Histoire de l'oeil" – "a story of enucleation, which is, of course in Freudian terms equivalent to castration" (100). According to Birch:

The "Histoire" of Bataille's title has been appropriated by the female voice which turns it into "hystery" – a 'bad copy' of the original, and an enigmatic, repressed female story, a mystery. The passage could be read as "this is not *my* "Histoire de l'oeil", but a male story that I have been subjected to", or as "this is not "L'Histoire de l'oeil" but my story of the eye which is not a his-story but a hystery, i.e. a female story. (100)

Both readings point towards the movement of effacement exposed in the previous scene in the text. If 'this' is that which has preceded this extract, the rear-view mirror reflects the 'male story' that has effaced woman – a 'his-story' that woman has been subjected to. Alternatively, 'this' text that we are reading is not a 'his-story' but rather a 'hystery' or 'female story' that has finally found a voice with which to speak. According to Birch's interpretation, in its playful duplicity this extract refers either to the effacement of woman by phallogocentric discourses or to the possibility for woman to escape through a writing of that which is other. Birch also notes the play of double (or even triple) negatives in the text: "The play of negatives: "never", "not", "no", causes an additional ambiguity. Is "no" added to "not" for emphasis, or do the two negatives cancel out each other?" (100) If indeed the play of negation creates emphasis, then the two above interpretations remain intact. If, on the other hand, the negatives cancel each other out, then the two meanings postulated by Birch still remain, simply in reverse order – either this *is* a female story or a rewriting of the story, or else it is a male one.

However, this highly ambiguous passage may be said to permit numerous other readings that do not pertain to an either/or dichotomy. Contrary to what Birch suggests, the passage may also be read simply as 'this is *not* my/the hystery of the eye' or 'this is *not* the mystery/hystery of the eye' – in other words, this is *not* what the text will later refer to as "a hysterical rewriting of history" (Brooke-Rose, 654). Birch, noting the link between 'eye' and 'I', acknowledges that "the passage could also be read as "this is (not) the (hi)story of a hysterical subject"", however she goes on to note that "not

surprisingly, this indeterminacy is itself the main characteristic of "hysterical" discourse" (100).

Following the first part of the 'crossword' that Birch interprets, the passage weaves into itself 'extracts' from the third act of *King Lear* that further enrich the play of meanings and interpretations possible in this text. Read conventionally, from left to right, the text reads: "This not no (my) the hystery of the eye because I would not see thy cruel nails boarish fangs pluck out his poor old (extract) (cruel cruel nails) upon these eyes of thine I'll set (cruel fangs) my foot". The reference is to Scene VII where Gloucester, facing the plucking out of his own eyes, chides Regan for the ill-treatment of her father that, as Lear himself suggests, '[shakes his] manhood' (Foakes, 1997, 55-57) and, robbing him of his sanity, unleashes the '*hysterica passio*' (289) that 'swells up toward [his] heart' (246).

Speaking through the voices of Gloucester and Cornwall, this passage juxtaposes the emasculating of Lear by his daughters with the 'hystery of the eye' that we have been discussing above. Read in this manner, the text states: This will not be a hystery of the eye/I – a hysterical re-writing – that would, like Regan and Goneril in *King Lear*, pluck out 'his poor old eyes' and emasculate and reduce to hysteria he who was previously king. Such a 'hystery' that Birch interprets as a 'female story' or re-writing would not simply voice its otherness but would attempt to overturn the gender hierarchy. According to this interpretation, such a 'hystery of the eye' would indeed be "a story of enucleation" (Birch, 100) – a hysterical re-writing that attempts to castrate man and rob him of *his* eyes/I. Violating man and reducing him, like Lear, to a figure of madness or even hysteria, such a 'hystery', rather than escaping the oppressive hierarchy that has victimized women, would simply overturn it and reinstate it, maintaining an uneven dichotomy by means of which the inferior term would once again be associated with the lack and madness previously brought to bear against woman.

Indeed, as the text itself states, this is not such a hystery because: "*I would not see thy cruel nails boarish fangs pluck out his poor old*" eyes (my italics). The narrating voice 'would not see' this happen – will not allow it. Equally, however, the narrating voice 'would not *see*' this happen – would be blind to it. This will not be a 'hystery' because, if it were, 'I' – the narrating voice – would be blind to the violence being committed against the other. Reinstating a hierarchy that would simply overturn the opposition between man and woman would lead to the same violence and effacement of phallogocentric discourse being committed once more. Such a hystery would be blind to the other it may have effaced. Indeed, like Brooke-Rose's text that plucks the word 'eyes' out of its quotation from *Lear* and replaces it with the word 'extract', such a hystery would pluck out the 'eyes/I' of the other in a swift movement of elision and effacement.

## The Seriously Playful

I have read the above-quoted extract as a self-reflexive comment on the necessity of escaping a hysterical re-writing that would simply overturn metaphysical hierarchies. Sarah Birch has read the same extract as a reflection on the effacement and stigmatization that has been brought to bear against women and the possibility of a writing that would overcome such repression. As Birch has indeed pointed out, each of these interpretations, however multiple, are problematized by the further multiple

negation that marks the text. Is this *not* the/my hystery of the eye, *is it* the/my hystery of the eye, or is it not no hystery of the eye?

Within a text such as this that revels in the mark of undecidability and ambiguity, a multiplicity of readings and interpretations is nothing short of necessary. Indeed, the text itself playfully teases the reader and his or her desire to uncover or arrive at the proverbial ‘figure in the carpet’ – an authoritative or final interpretation that would give fixed meaning to a text. As one looks closely at the extract quoted above, one sees that, as suggested by Birch’s description of the text as a ‘crossword’, several words and phrases are woven acrostically into the passage. Reading from top to bottom in our desperate search for some hidden meaning, all we find are tantalizing references to deconstruction and psychoanalysis that simply reflect back the reader’s attempts to unveil the ‘enigma’ or ‘mystery’ of the text.

Irreducible to any one authoritative reading and refusing to be pinned down or contained, this text constantly folds and unfolds upon itself, always allowing for one more meaning, one more layer of signification. Through its experimental use of language, narrative structure and print conventions, this novel tries to ‘break’ the conventions of its genre and push it to its limits. At the same time, the playfulness of this text also escapes the strict hierarchies of gender and power that it works to expose, and creates the possibility of an ‘other’ that does not pertain to the dualities and dichotomies of the either/or. Assuming this otherness, the text may be said to begin to enact what Derrida has postulated as the possibility of a “neutral genre/gender [...] or one whose neutrality would not be *negative* (neither... nor), nor dialectical, but affirmative, and doubly affirmative (or... or)?” (1992, 243).

The ‘doubly affirmative’ does not exclude – it does not draw tight boundaries and limits around itself so as to shut the other out. Such a movement of double affirmation must necessarily permeate and infiltrate, breaking down boundaries and crossing lines of ‘demarcation’, always allowing for a multiple other. Risking ‘impurity, anomaly or monstrosity’ (224 -25), it breaks away from the tight confines of genre and gender and creates an otherness that continues to supplement itself. It is such a ‘de-gen(d)eration’ that Brooke-Rose’s *Thru* truly enacts. At once degenerating the limits of genre and gender, the novel also engenders and generates the possibility of a multiple other – an other that is written precisely out of what remains, that announces its very singularity in the remainder of the multiple.

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## **De-generația: Scriitura *Prin/Thru*, joaca serioasă**

Articolul explorează natura experimentală a narațiunii lui Christine Brooke-Rose *Thru* și încercările sale de a sparge convențiile legate de problematica genului în roman. Reflectând asupra singularității textului care refuză să se supună legilor genului, dar în același timp insistă să facă parte din el, articolul discută cum ar trebui să abordăm textul sau cum îl putem citi. Printr-o analiză atentă a primelor pagini din *Prin (Thru)*, leagă chestiunea genului literar (*genre*) de cea a genului gramatical (*gender*) și demonstrează cum textul Brooke-Rose expune și deconstruiește ierarhia genului (*gender*) printr-o joacă la nivelul limbajului, al structurilor narative și al convențiilor de tipărire a textului. Această joacă creează o multitudine de sensuri care rezistă oricărei încercări de a reduce romanul la un singur tip de interpretare. În schimb, aceasta dă posibilitatea unor lecturi multiple, întotdeauna permițând un nou sens posibil. .