BETWEEN*NESS OR AN INTERSTITIAL SEARCH FOR A SELF*[I]

***Abstract**: The constant shifting of geographical coordinates, the various cultures and languages the heroine from* Between *encounters and translates leave a mark on her (paradoxical) being in between events, places, people, yet never managing to be herself. The choice of Brooke-Rose to make the character a simultaneous translator once more emphasizes the simultaneity the heroine permanently has to deal with, as well as the condition under which she carries out her work - the lack of thinking time as to ordinate and chose the best term, the lack of access to specific /necessary tools (such as guides or dictionaries), her being annulled and excluded as a being from the event as she is reduced to a mere mediator the operates with two languages. The presence of a translator is invisible just as that of the heroine of this novel, unless interaction outside the borders of the situational context is required (such as interaction with participants), then and only then can she hope to be(come) visible. Considering these I can state that the nameless heroine of* "Between" *is a vanishing presence – she never marks lexically her textual interventions (using person-specific pronouns), nor does she claim ontological territory in the narrative.*

***Keywords**: lipogram, self, betweenness.*

Most times Christine Brooke-Rose is associated with the concept of narrative experiment (Little, 1996: 2; G. Friedman, 1995: 224), moreover she has been viewed as the exponent of the 'nouveau roman' of English origin due to her constant play with the narrative technique, her employing "experimental subjectivities" (Little, 1996: 9) in the narratives that permanently link the discourse to the grand narratives of the literary canon. The novelty of her writing has made most critics frequently associate her narratives with those employed by avant-garde writers (Carr, 2007: 131) due to the subversive textual strategies used as means of liberation from previous male canonical writing. The outcome of these experimental narrative strategies is the fact that the fictional worlds in the novels of Christine Brooke-Rose do not operate with strongly individualised characters (in the sense of clearly contoured fictional identities), rather identity is a perpetual search, it entails quest and language-torsions (into being), it generates in the discourse of characters; it is a delicate issue recurring in the construction of characters – which are encapsulated in a constant, ceaseless, and active motion throughout the narratives. Therewith, characters are so faintly built that critic Judy Little considers them mere voices that settle for the textual self "the self as a continually simulatable new word" (1996: 123). Thus I can ascertain that language has been given ontological power as it can endow and bring these (textual) voices into being. However, this ongoing quest does not end in a (triumphant) encounter; rather (most) characters seem to dissolve or vanish under the creating power of the tireless word play where "the old ego dissolves in a salty sea of puns" (Little, 1996:1). Similarly, the textual surface play of signifiers does not entail a pivotal, deep narrative structure, but rather a surface-spreading rhyzomatic one (Deleuze, 2005: 7) that does not intersect with temporal linearity. In Gilles Deleuze's view (2005: 25) (twentieth-century) British writers start to operate ever more with *betweenness* and the logic of coordination by 'and' (as opposed to that of 'or/either') – all these are means of breaking away from previous literary tradition. The authors cast out foundations and extensively linger in the middle as they refuse both beginnings and ends, they also deny

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ontological depth and prefer pragmatics to it. A natural outgrowth of this has been that language (has) gained extensively and intensively more terrain, attention, and devotion as modern writers attend ever more to the possibilities experimentation with language can materialize in fiction in all forms and layers: "It is language which speaks in literature, in all its swarming 'polysemic' plurality, not the author himself" (Eagleton, 1996: 120). In Barthesian terms (1977: 124), the same aspect is the only detectable motion (understood in the intradiegetic sense of action/plot) in modern narratives: chiefly language alone. The narrative no longer continues the tradition of meandering, layering, spreading/extending, diversifying, engulfing multiple forms of plot, it now turns to its own textuality which attains the status of only focus: "women modernists and avant-garde writers [manifest] a new interest in textuality" (Carr, 2007: 131, original emphasis). Jean Baudrillard (2005: 115) adds an even more dramatic connotation to this aspect stating that the textual play of signifiers has gone to such extent that the discourse would only be able to render nothing, but only represent itself against the nothingness replacing the message.

In this spirit, Christine Brooke-Rose's narratives heavily rely on bruising and questioning-challenging the canonicity of notions, concepts, or strategies of fiction in a somewhat militant gesture connecting these aspects to the relation between women writers and the male dominant/dominated literary culture. Thus Ellen G. Friedman notes:

> Twentieth-century women experimental writers have not required covert means to express their dissatisfactions. They explode the fixed architecture of master narrative, break – in the words of Virginia Woolf – 'the sequence' of traditional fiction, and open up a space, an alternate arena for the writing of what Christine Brooke-Rose calls 'utterly other discourse' (1995: 215).

A persistent experimenter, Christine Brooke-Rose continues the series of narrative experiments, the novel *Between* (initially published 1968) is the third one from the *Omnibus* volume (1986). What the author brings to attention in this novel is yet another formula of experiment: *lipogram* – a "self-imposed omission" (Brooke-Rose, 2002: 2). The experiment in the novel is a double lipogram – i.e. missing lexical elements from the morphological structure of the novel here are the verb 'to be' and the personal pronoun 'I'. What this experiment manages to achieve is rendering a constant movement both of the protagonist and of the textual dynamics as well, in order to pin down the experiences of a simultaneous translator of French and German. The aura of uncertainty enveloping the main female character originates in the use of other languages as well in multilingual clichés ranging from notices in trains, airplanes, or hotels to mineral water labels in languages such as German, French, Russian, English or Romanian. These sequences of discourse are not internalised as a personal discourse of the character herself, yet these micro-cliché discourses do not overlap, as Judy Little observed (1996: 1-24), they are in appositional disposition, but in this text they are occurring randomly as part of the internal/mental discourse of the character, i.e. spontaneously generating semantic lexical chains in one language or another, along with the advancing text.

The protagonist, a nameless female simultaneous translator, is in a constant movement, travelling from place to place so as to be able to attend the events (conferences, seminars) where she has to translate. In other words, she is always in between events, languages, cultures, persons; she is herself an apposition in the syntax of all these events: "Her subjectivity is a changing complex of languages and cultures,

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all appositionally accessible whenever the situation requires them" (Little, 1996: 137). Thus, her (textual) existence is but of an interjacent, interstitial nature – the character can never claim to be associated to a single language, a culture, one type of event, on the contrary she is forever on the move shifting form one language/event/ flight/hotel room to the other, still never allowing any of these to predominate, to prevail, or to subordinate the others. Her diegetic way of life is a pretty accurate fictional replica of the nowadays speed frenzy, the permanent time-crisis contemporaneousness seems to have hallmarked us with: "She travels from discourse to discourse. Or rather, the languages themselves travel, for they are personified somewhat in this novel" (Little 1996: 138).

All these aspects contribute to the creation of a "world as a plural" (McHale, 1995: 197) – unitary in its constitution and syntactic disposition, nevertheless comprising multiple and numerous variations of the same thing/concept (whether it be a form of greeting, a manner of approaching things, or a company). To achieve, capture and at the same time render all these aspects, the text employs a double lipogram – that of the verb *to be* and that of the personal pronoun *I* (except for its use in dialogues with other characters). To these lipogrammic restrictions, Christine Brooke-Rose adds the nebulous identity of the character. The nebula erases different types of identity, ranging from nominal (the protagonist had no name), linguistic (she has no mother-tongue) or geographic (she pertains to no place, but permanently moves between them never lingering in one) to cultural (there is no delineating cultural background to aid in precisely contouring of her as an individual) or textual – in the narrative she has no precise identity as her textual presence is reduced to the use of pronouns and never that of proper nouns.

Another dimension that dilates the interstitial, uncertain nature of the protagonist's identity is her lacking a name – thus she goes around nameless throughout the narrative. Not only does this mean the character has no (fictional) social identity (or perhaps she does, but this aspect is not disclosed to readers), but also that she becomes invisible to the other identities around her. Hence she is to be seen as a *volatile personality* who involuntarily and gradually fades away under the pressure and the restrictions imposed by the author – she does not employ the verb to be nor does she utter 'I'. Considering all these, I can state that the author manages to create a character that is reduced to a pragmatic, lucrative perspective – that of mere performability.

This lipogrammic narrative technique clearly makes the statement that the polarized doublet visible-invisible which appears on this level and in this novel as well is a recurrent important underlying stratum in Brooke-Rose's narratives. What is rendered visible is the multiplicity and variety of languages the simultaneous interpreter has to operate with, and at the same time what is occulted from the readers is the social identity of the character underlined by the lack of the pronoun 'I'.

The text is apparently unattributed to any diegetic source and this on two accounts: there is neither a name of a character we could attribute the discourse to, nor a first-person pronoun that would appropriate the discourse, thus indirectly attributing it to a source. In this novel (as well as in the other experimental ones – i.e. *Out, Such, Thru*), the readers are inside the consciousness of the heroine and partake/share her inner (indirect) discourse simultaneously as she does:

> In Izmir (ancient Smyrna) you will find everything for your convenience and pleasure. The city has an admirable position at the end of the bay of the same name. […] Well, if you will arrange your Archaeologists Congresses in January. True, madam, but most of us go on digs during the summer. In England for

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> example, at Stonehenge where I have special Wiltshire? How interesting. It forms a perfect centre for visiting the ancient ruins of Ephesus, Pergamon, Troy. Oh, you know Wiltshire? Quite well. (Brooke-Rose, 1986: 506).

As this fragment reveals, the discourses mingle, occur successively in an appositional relation to one another associating randomly names of places familiar to her in the given context.

The lack of the verb 'to be' from the text brings to focus the dismantling, the undermining of the existential layer of the heroine – she is in impossibility to utter herself into being by using a form of the verb. She is thus textually restricted and condemned to constantly do, say, perform, fulfil, or carry out, but most tragically never to be. This is to be found once more underlined by Brian McHale's statement, according to whom "Ontologically speaking, the makeup of the fictional world is always subordinate to the shape of the language that projects it" (1995: 198). This peculiar, experimental, lipogrammatic use of language and the author's interest in the textuality of the text which is laid bare in this novel likewise, produces to readers a nameless character, a floating, transitory voice:

> So you have grown tired of your small box your refuge your still centre within the village within the wooded countryside London and the end of nowhere strapped to your seat with a chastity-belt? […]
>
> - Yes, presumably air-hostesses, rather like interpreters, increase the statistical possibility of sudden death by flying so much. Do you think that counts as suicide? Without the actual trouble of committing it." (Brooke-Rose, 1986: 457).

The constant shifting of geographical coordinates (due to the necessity to travel from one event to another), the various cultures and languages the heroine encounters and translates leave a mark on her (paradoxical) being in between events, places, people, yet never managing *to be* herself.

Christine Brooke-Rose's choice to make the character a simultaneous translator proves yet another means employed to emphasize the simultaneity the heroine permanently has to face, as well as the condition under which she carries out her work. As a simultaneous translator, the heroine lacks thinking time as to ordinate and choose the best lexical variant, does not have access to specific/necessary tools (such as guides or dictionaries), she is annulled and excluded as a being from the event because she is reduced to a mere mediator the operates with two languages/codes. The presence of a translator is invisible just as that of the heroine of this novel, unless interaction outside the borders of the situational context is required (such as interaction with participants), then and only then can she hope to be(come) visible.

The nameless heroine of *Between* is an evanescent, volatile presence – she never marks lexically her textual interventions (using person-specific pronouns), nor does she claim ontological territory in the narrative, as she is deprived of the verb that mainly renders this:

> She lives in effect between discourses, between any given society's languages and myths that might define or hail into a steady subjectivity this continually experimenting consciousness and so give her a local habitation and a name. (Little, 1996: 138).

She therefore has the status of ontological neglect or authorial restriction neither to use the pronoun I as indexical of person, nor to be. She is an anonymous being who never has the time or chance to assert herself, to make a personal statement related to her

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being, not even a telescoped one (in formulations that include the verb to be and an adjective to render states of being, or moods). Her self/ego is restricted to an ever new way of seeing the world and the events she attends, thus the possibility to claim visibility is very faint. The translator is facing and establishing a relation with the universe she finds herself in "without a self" (Little, 1996: 138).

The character's selflessness and namelessness render her invisible, thus underlining once more the play on visibility-invisibility. She could become (socially) visible only by obtaining the annulment of her marriage, therefore gaining at least a certain social status. This way the nameless protagonist tries to obtain the annulment of her anterior married status so as to regain, or actually definitely coin and pin down her betweenness:

> The translator's ever experimenting consciousness for most of the novel (and most of her life) is in transit between her free-floating postmodern condition and her residual commitment to a life that was not so 'between' (Little, 1996: 139).

The heroine is always on the move, forever changing planes and hotel rooms, constantly translating discourses foreign to her – she is not part of those discourses, she is the mere humanoid form of a function: to transpose the signifiers of one code into another. She does not actively participate in the creation of a chain of signifiers; her job is to transpose them into another, no time for internalizing what she translates or to add a personal touch to the outcome of her work.

Another play on bipolar concepts is made evident in the events and tasks the interpreter undertakes and carries out: that between the surface and deep structures of the character (in this novel), hence everything takes place at the surface of her being, the deep ego remains unstirred. Just as in the case of the previous novels (*Out, Such*), *Between* also pictures a fictional world which in its treatment of the character's experiences is very similar to the speed, exhilaration, confusion, dizziness one can be caused to experience by a merry-go-round (Harold Bloom, 2007: 28). This is generated and achieved by means of the non-linear, appositional experiences the nameless interpreter takes part in and they only accelerate the undergoing process a of losing herself as well as her self in the interjacent, interstitial meandering space of so many events she has to move in between.

In the same manner, the self-imposed restriction of the author related to the use of the pronoun 'I' also creates the feeling of both textual and ontological invisibility "in the sense that I am not here" (Brooke-Rose, 2002: 44). This lipogram is overlapping/doubling that of the verb 'to be' in the sense 'to exist' – this omission was meant by Brooke-Rose to create the impression that the character has no identity, and that, similarly, she is not looking for one, either because nobody really has one.

According to Christine Brooke-Rose "identity is a wholly constructed and deconstructed by our world" (2002: 44) – this paradoxical statement encapsulates the mirage created by the attempt to precisely delineate and state virtual certainties humans feel the need to operate with. In this sense, Christine Brooke-Rose herself emphasizes the ontological hesitation, the existential limbo that does not make way to certainty. Still, we permanently look for precise data so as to operate with concrete notions/elements that apply equally to real life and fiction – name, origin, location, gender, status, ethnicity, nationality, social position or job. The author underlines this aspect by the choices she made for the events her interpreter protagonist has to face, i.e. permanent movement, the indefiniteness of a topographical belonging, the constant

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translation of ideas that are in no way her own in languages that are not acquired, but learned.

Echoing the author's trilingual personal history (Little, 1996: 138), the character is also form the very start of her construction in an indeterminate status: she has the mastery of three tongues (English, French, and German) and this is to bring out once more the deep-rooted betweenness that marked her experiences and professional becoming. In this light, the character's very career attribution/choice seems most proper as no other would have so poignantly underlined the uncertainty, evanescence, or indeterminacy both of her ontological and that of her topographical betweenness. To emphasize once more the constant swinging/moving amidst or amongst events, other selves, and languages, the title of the novel *Between* – another unusual lexical choice: a preposition with indexical nature to refer to space-spatiality in an ambiguous indeterminacy – attempts to pin down the ambiguity, indeterminacy and at the same time and most importantly the impossibility to ever attain a self, a language, or a place to claim and cling to so as to cement one's existential and ontological coordinates.

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