

The Literary London Journal

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G. N. Forester and M. J. Nicholls, eds., *Christine Brooke-Rose. Festschrift Volume One*, hardback and paperback, 303 pages, Verbivoracious Press. ISBN: 978-9810794064; ISBN: 978-9810794071; £19.99 plus postage; £9.99 plus postage.

Reviewed by

Mike Freeman
(Freelance, UK)

The Literary London Journal, Volume 11 Number 2 (Autumn 2014)

The Verbivoracious Press, doffing its cap to Christine Brooke-Rose's novel *Verbivore* (1990), has published a *Festschrift* more various than most of its kind. No mere sombre ensemble of learned articles this, but a festive homage to Brooke-Rose: an *omnium gatherum* of scholarly analysis, imaginative incursions into the territories she mapped out, reconstructions as well as deconstruction of her fiction, literary pastiches and theoretical paradigms, tussles with her critical theorising, and records of interviews and encounters. Not least it reprints fugitive pieces by the Brooke-Rose herself, including her long poem *Gold* from 1954, using the form and idioms of the fourteenth century *Pearl* where she melds the traditional dream-vision, debate-poem and elegy to build a requiem for the immolations and ideologies of the twentieth century. A deliberative structure and style deployed to scan contemporary tectonics, it seems she was setting her stall out early in her career.

The editors of the *Festschrift* have managed to delineate both her critical writings and her novels without collapsing the one into the other, a temptation prompted by the close parallels and intersections between the two. At the same time it is clear from the tone of many of the contributions that there is a fascination with her personality as well as with her writings, so the editors have allowed ample scope for both sorts of 'reader response'. Her last essays, *Invisible Author* (2002), like her semi-autobiographical novel *Remake* (1996), suggest that she presented her own subjectivity as a self-reflexive construct where the borders between the contingencies of her actual experience, the critical theorising and polemic, and the novels are all too porous. The author isn't all that 'invisible'... *Aka* the paleolithic Wordwoman in the

closing chapters of *Subscript* (1999) turning up for the Clan Congress, falling into a cave-system, then struggling to interpret the cave-paintings and what in the world they represent is going to be read, however tendentiously, as *also-known-as* Christine Brooke-Rose.

This collection effectively, though not sequentially, offers three inroads to her work. As to be expected there are several critical analyses of the novels *per se* and in relation to her own criticism and the French literary and academic ethos in which she became an edgy immigrant-worker. By contrast there is a set of inventive cross-genre pieces in a quasi-Brooke-Rose spirit by other hands, a sort of collateral homage. Then there is a trio of contributions by Jean-Michel Rabaté, Nicolas Tredell and Maria del Sapio Garbero, this last an interview from 1991, which together get to the core of her work and stance. (Nicolas Tredell's 1990 interview with the author in his *Conversations with Critics*, and Lorna Sage's of 2000, re-printed in *Invisible Author*, add up to an indispensable *vade mecum*.)

Three facets of her fiction are touched on but might have been allocated further attention. One is the 'first period' of her fiction, before she took her avowedly 'experimental' turn, particularly *The Sycamore Tree*, *Go When You See The Green Man Walking*, and *The Dear Deceit* that quietly push at the formal conventions of character and narrative structure; there are continuities as well as the break between these early and the later novels. Deserving more attention, too, is the pervasive comedy in her work. As an editor I was often faced by her anxious questioning whether her jokes and ironies had 'come across enough'. One of her essays reprinted here, entitled 'Ill Wit and Good Humour', picks over the boundaries of irony, humour, comedy and satire in a characteristically sharp, wryly comic fashion. Often the humour in the fiction was satirical, but it became, not least in her final novel despite its title, *Life, End of...* (2006), a weapon of stoical resistance against her illness and what she saw as the error of self-imposed 'exile', a term she uneasily dissected in *Invisible Author*.

A third issue is simply—for all the appropriate attention paid to the formal innovation of her novels—the seriousness of their subject matter. It may sound quaint in such a context to invoke so old-fashioned a term as 'subject matter', but her fictions are about social, political, cultural, ideological issues; and 'about' amounts here to reflecting and refracting, diagnosing and dissecting cultural formations even at geo-political and geo-historical levels. This is most prominently marked in the period of her work from *Amalgamemnon* (1984) with *Verbivore* (1990) and *Next* (1998). There's a plausible case that her non-realistic, non-mimetic modes were precisely the appropriate mimesis for exposing and exploring the crises besetting the world as she saw it. If 'grand narratives' are supposed to be buried, Brooke-Rose was prepared to excavate them. Her extraordinary novel *Subscript* takes on *the* grand historical narrative, from pre-biotic chemical conditions to proto-consciousness to humanoid collective development to the roots of individualism, art, 'the code' (Bletchley pre-figured) and the ur-forms of cultural frameworks. Intending to help *Subscript's* readers she produced a periodic-stylistic schema, rather like Stuart Gilbert's tabulations for *Ulysses*, but decided not to publish it as part of the novel. It sets out the time-spans, the paleo-periods, the 'creatureliness' at each stage of the text and the stylistic/grammatical constraints she imposes strictly on her narrative for each

period. These constraints aren't OULIPO lipograms; they are—again—mimetic. Relegated to an end note in *Invisible Author* there is an admission that, invited by Raymond Queneau to be a member of the OULIPO club, she refused 'for fear, perhaps, of being drawn into such attractive *games*' (my italics). The basic stance, then, is to be continually inventive and frequently comic but for serious purposes, not games.

Her novels and her critical theory are often enough seen as closely related to—staking their claims alongside and against—the varieties of the nouveau roman and modern French literary theory, though she herself is at best ambivalent and often resistant against being assimilated into such a framework; besides, the in-house politics of the Vincennes faculty meant she performed high-wire acrobatics on the theoretical front-lines in Paris. But it is worth entering two footnotes for a couple of Russian and English critics. Her critical essays make several references to Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theories, and his terms of the carnivalesque and dialogism provide a paradigm for the strategies and heteroglossic (*pace* Bakhtin) voice-play within many a Brooke-Rose novel, its inter- and meta-textualities. From a very different quarter, William Empson is another guest at the table. Even her first critical book, *A Grammar of Metaphor* (1958) is Empsonian in its heady mix of rough-and-ready typology, types not of ambiguities but of the grammatical and syntactic forms on which metaphors are deployed; this is an Empsonian structure of complex metaphors to be teased out across an Empsonian delight in a sheer heterogeneity of texts (though she scolds him in a footnote for not knowing enough about liturgical traditions). She also saw him as a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*: 'For the later Structuralists he'd have been chaos [even if they'd heard of him, which they hadn't], Barthes thinking he'd invented 'polysémie'...Empson was the first to think creatively about form' (Brooke-Rose, letter to this reviewer 2002). She reiterates this point in *Invisible Author*, stressing that he had been thirty years ahead of the French in teasing out pluralities of meaning. And of course they both enjoyed, often provoked, a sharp street-fight in the academic city-blocks. This said, Bakhtin and Empson weren't the necessary or sufficient conditions for her fiction—just as Barthes and Robbe-Grillet, Sollers and Kristeva, and the 'gangs' ('Letter from Paris', 1976, viii) weren't either. CB-R wasn't a horse from anyone's stable, and wouldn't be reined in by a jockey club's rules.

As will be apparent, this isn't a disinterested review. I came to know Christine while an editor for Carcanet during the publication of *Amalgamemnon* and then as a friend for the rest of her life, a relationship marinated in that wicked-enough delight in polemic and in her unabashed incorporating of friends into her fiction. Staying with her at Lou Jas for a weekend meant I was told to spend the first sleepless night making notes for her on the current chapter of *Life, End of...* (2006), then the following morning being admonished for failing to acknowledge the humour in the draft and for mis-understanding Roman Ingarden's reader-response theory. A week later I was sent the next section: this ruminated on our visit, with my wife and me all too recognisably chewed into the chapter's cud. Later there'd be a warm letter: 'But you didn't mind, did you?' and I'd find some passing argument of mine had become catechised in the text, first dismissed, then developed into an insight in the narrator's *sic et non*. Others will tell similar tales. Others will also know how telephone conversations in the closing

months of her life were bedevilled by your wondering whether she was hallucinating or simply working you up (both senses) into the next novel.

Maybe what is published here as a *Festschrift* is really her posthumous novel, its contributors merely characters in her final Bakhtinian exuberance, brimming with the *carnavalesque*, just as in *Textermination* [1991] where canonical authors and their fictitious characters stake their claims at an international and inter-textual convention, writers and critics hugger-mugger in a Brooke-Rose cyber-site, all busily interrogating each other's status and the status of literature as it approaches its end. Brooke-Rose herself began as a medievalist and ended as a post-Post-Modernist. Gabriel Josipovici, whose own experimental novels shared the Carcanet fiction list with her, doesn't refer to her in his *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (2010), but her work offers a distinctive and resonating answer to his question.

To Cite this Article

Mike Freeman, 'Review of: *Christine Brooke-Rose. Festschrift Volume One*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 11, Number 2 (Autumn 2014): 92–95. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/autumn2014/freeman.pdf>.