“Sometimes you vanish into a linguistic edifice you have erected”: Christine Brooke-Rose and the Postmodern Condition

The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction. But since this model cannot be closed off by a final reading, it engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability of the prior narration. (de Man 205)

Insofar as a basic premiss is at any time shown or declared to be untrue, or only partly true, or not true in the sense earlier accepted, a whole edifice collapses, an abyss remains: the real, which must quickly be filled with new idols, readjusted significance. . . . Our very capacity for being thus manipulated, either into ignorance or into sincere convictions and (equally sincere) indifference—each producing the other in turn—also helps to create, in the long run, this new consciousness we have of the real having become unreal, because brutally endowed with significance and then as brutally deprived of it. (Brooke-Rose, Rhetoric of the Unreal, 10)\(^1\)

If Beckett’s protagonists are, first and foremost, *writers*, narrators of themselves, the central subjects of Christine Brooke-Rose’s experimental novels are, first and foremost, *readers*. Thrust into brave new worlds, these subjects must decipher the shifting structures that surround them and must continually negotiate new relationships to those structures; indeed, they must adapt to a fluidity that, unlike the metaleptically *reinforced* structures of Beckett’s novels, manages metaleptically to *dissolve* structure, refusing to allow them the sort of indestructible subjectivity that Beckett’s protagonists had thrust upon them. Brooke-Rose underscores the centrality to her project of this changing relation between the subject and the (narrative) structures by choosing *prepositions* for the titles of these novels: *Out* (1964), *Between* (1968), and *Thru* (1975). Moreover, in casting her internal subjects as readers—as focalizors (who “see”) more than as narrators (who “speak”) or actors
Brooke-Rose immediately places them in the “company” of her external readers, in effect beginning with the reader-text metalepsis with which Beckett leaves off and effecting a more radical dissolution of the boundary between the diegetic reader and her extratextual counterpart. For if we extratextual readers find ourselves, in Beckett’s *Company*, as destabilized as its protagonist, we have received but a warning tremor, or an aftershock (for *Company* was published significantly later), of the metaleptically shifting tectonic plates confronted by the reader of Brooke-Rose’s “prepositional” series. Reading these novels entails participating in precisely the same disruptions, displacements, and disorientations as their focalizors experience: even as we take on the purported insider’s role of diegetic reader, we are kept Out of the secret of what’s “really” going on; we drift Between diegeses without being allowed to enter any of them; we seem to fall Thru every narrative structure we attempt to (re)construct: all effects, I would argue, whose repercussions hit the extratexual reader almost the same way and at almost the same instant as they affect the diegetic reader.

Furthermore, if Brooke-Rose ties “our” fate to that of her focalizors, this destabilizing reading process may undermine the subject status of “the reader,” beginning with its diegetic incarnation. For, lacking the sorts of realistic attributes that generally define novels’ actors or even narrators, a focalizor is a functionary, a lens, a perspective—at most, the projection of a subject behind the observations made possible by a certain position. When that position must shift continually, even the illusion of a stable subject-who-sees begins to fade. Insofar as the reader (at any level) sees with and through such a focalizor, s/he performs a similar dance—and, insofar as texts define their reader by reference to particular positions, s/he undergoes a similar dissolution. To some extent, then, Brooke-Rose’s subject seems to have found a way to achieve the self-erasure for which Beckett’s subject yearns, as these novels more pointedly deconstruct the humanist subject and generate in its place a far more fluid “being,” deprived even of the bodies that in Beckett served as painful proof of existence.

At least in part, Brooke-Rose’s more deconstructive metalepsis and the desubjectification it effects result from the specification of Beckett’s generic “human condition” as the “postmodern condition.” To Brooke-Rose, the postmodern condition is that state in which reality, truth, and the subject, the heretofore stable, transcendental grounds on which we have built any knowledge we thought we possessed, have become slippery beasts. In this realm of the play of the signifier and inevitable indeterminacy, we no sooner grab onto one “truth” than the rug is pulled out from
under us, and we discover that what we hold in our hands is just another “story,” what Jean-François Lyotard calls a petit récit. Lyotard argues that postmodernism consists of the “breaking up of the grand Narratives” that legitimate knowledge, and that, as such, it “cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities” (Lyotard 60, 15, 77). In Foucaultian terms, too, “realities” are made of discourses and the fictions they generate; both subjects and any knowledge they have of themselves and their worlds are constructed by a variety of discursive and social practices that change over time. According to such theories, “all, all is language . . . all, all is text,” writes Brooke-Rose, who includes in this vast sweep of writtenness “even the reader,” the subject who thought s/he could stand apart from the text or the world and, from the ground of some solid essence, interpret it (STT [Stories, Theories and Things] 25).

In order to allow her readers to experience the full effect of this upheaval, to train them in the vagaries of a “postmodern” subjectivity, Brooke-Rose exploits the potential of postmodern fiction to perform such a radical destabilization; for, if it does its job well, such fiction “resists the paradigms of criticism, . . . always seems to elude being mastered, . . . [and] puts aside the possibility of a determinate decision concerning its meaning” (Nealon 108). Brooke-Rose has contrasted the postmodern novel with “the totalising novel, which imposes some kind of global meaning on the reality it describes,” adding that her own “experience has been more one of groping inside language and forms” (Turner 31). In a course on postmodern fiction, my students in fact developed an understanding of the category of postmodern fiction that hinged on their own groping frustration in reading it. As I patched their definition together, it went something like this: postmodern fiction apparently refuses to allow its reader to engage with it “emotionally” in the same ways one engages with realist or modernist fiction; instead, it demands, somehow unrefusably, that the reader engage with it “intellectually.” But when one does so, one finds oneself drawn inexorably into a game of searching for “meaning”—whether a plum of truth or merely the exposed plumbing that makes the text work—only to find oneself “trapped,” “duped,” “snowed” (and so emotionally involved after all), facing only multiple and proliferating surfaces, funhouse mirrors that reflect each other endlessly in refractions of figures that cannot be hierarchized and so offer no key but only more locks (or doors?). In addressing the key question of postmodernism’s effect on the reader, this definition comprehends the unavoidable
fact that such a dismantling of knowledge unmoors the subject as well as its objects and proves particularly relevant to Brooke-Rose’s metaleptic project in the “prepositional” novels—which dissolves the boundaries among levels of readers even as it leaves the extratextual reader floating in a sea of undifferentiated narrative.

Moreover, this understanding of postmodern fiction seems consistent not only with Lyotard’s and Brooke-Rose’s conception of the postmodern condition but also with the related project of deconstruction in which many postmodern novelists and critics participate. Neither deconstruction nor postmodern fictions and their interpretations (behaving, as they do, in conformity with the paradigm de Man describes of an infinitely regressive series of figures) can escape their perpetual substitutions to arrive at a “final reading.” In demonstrating the ease with which an apparently authoritative figure or construction can be displaced by another figure, postmodern fiction, like deconstruction, aims to disrupt our common systems of understanding, beginning with the binary oppositions by which we structure our reality. These include, of course, inside and outside, those oppositions that lend the diegetic reader her constitutive difference from the extradietetic and extratextual readers—so dismantling the system I have carefully erected.

Some theorists see postmodernism as a political response to a particular historical moment, arguing that its disruption has become possible only since the invention of the atom bomb, or in the aftermath of the Holocaust, or thanks to the radical movements of the 1960s, or, in terms of parallel (or consequent) intellectual history, “at the historico/systematic closure of metaphysics” (Nealon 79). Although I would argue that politics per se do not become central to Brooke-Rose’s project until her science fiction Intercom Quartet, she does, even in the prepositional series, seem to grant the postmodern condition a clear historico-political context: the novels’ situations grow out of the sorts of explosive changes often seen as the origins of postmodernism (if not the nuclear bomb, at least the “harnessing” of nuclear energy, for instance), and they often toy with specific political structures (the racist hierarchy reversed in Out, or obstinate national borders in Between). A number of critics have also discerned in these novels a certain feminist politics, which of course, like the politics of postmodernism, aims to deconstruct a number of binary oppositions and to disrupt a traditional system of understanding.

Whatever the historico-political origins of the disruption, however, Brooke-Rose seems more interested in the subject’s resulting loss of the
intellectual and psychological stability provided by hierarchy. In the postmodern world where, according to Lyotard, the grand narratives no longer retain their power to ground us, innumerable small narratives compete for our souls and, in some sense, (re)construct those “souls,” in Foucaultian manner, as perpetually changing matrices of discursive effects. Similarly, Brooke-Rose’s characters have been deprived of the stability of a single, definitive diegesis. As a result, they find themselves constantly in the process of being reconstructed by their “daily fictions” (*Verbivore* 75), afloat in a world that lacks a graspable hierarchy of distinct ontological levels. Brooke-Rose’s “levels” of narrative now form what Lyotard would describe as “an immanent and, as it were, ‘flat’ network,” whose “respective frontiers . . . are in constant flux” (Lyotard 39).

In its most radical incarnation, this permeable network allows “subjects,” such as they are, to slide metaleptically from one diegetic arena to another, and neither they nor—most importantly for Brooke-Rose’s desired effect—*their readers* know who “really” exists or in what “reality” consists. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle explains, “There is no longer anything inside the frame: not all voices are on the same level of existence; they freely wander from one to the other”; as a result, “we no longer know who creates whom” (Lecercle 160, 163). This means, of course, that the levels of *readers* are equally unstable, for if the hierarchy of narrators rearranges itself repeatedly, the corresponding addressees must shuffle themselves as well, diegetic readers suddenly finding themselves extradiegetic and vice versa. It is this sort of instability and the provisional significances to which it gives rise that Brooke-Rose has elsewhere called “brutal” (*RU* [A Rhetoric of the Unreal] 10). And indeed, the perpetual granting and rescinding of diegetic-level (or even extradiegetic-level) existence does form a kind of metalepsis conceptually similar to the physical torture of Beckett’s fiction.

But perhaps because Brooke-Rose more often *dissolves* than *violates* (thereby restabilizing) boundaries—an erosive tendency reflected in the apparent disappearance of bodies in her worlds—the “brutality” manifests itself not physically but intellectually and psychologically, in a kind of disruption whose effects the extratextual reader, even more easily than the increasingly subjectless characters, must feel: as disorientation, insecurity, vertigo. Indeed, the power of Brooke-Rose’s metaleptic game derives from the fact that she not only produces an *image* of this intellectual destabilization but also enacts it on the reader: by depicting (mimetically) such destabilization in their focalizors, her novels illustrate its functioning in
the extratextual postmodern world, (rhetorically) giving us a new perspective on our extratextual experience; but by causing us to experience firsthand the uncomfortable instability of our object of thought, they also assault (transformatively) the reader’s own subjectivity. Furthermore, these activities tend to blend together, problematizing the very distinction between representation in “fiction” and reproduction in “reality” (and so Brooke-Rose once again explodes the tidy system I would use to contain her). Brooke-Rose has avowed her aim of enacting or inducing such intellectual and psychological destabilization, confirming that one of her goals as a novelist is “never allowing the stock response to materialize in fact. The moment the reader feels secure, you just make him think again” (Hayman and Cohen 8). But although this effort clearly resembles postmodernism’s project as Brooke-Rose describes it in the second epigraph above—secure knowledge is constantly dismantled to be replaced by new constructions—she does not fully acknowledge the “brutality” that she there attributes to this ongoing construction and deconstruction of every provisional “truth.” Yes, she admits, when she transgresses readers’ expectations “almost within a sentence,” she deprives them of their “safety” and “security”; but, she adds, “I’m surprised that readers find this difficult. They all live like this”—for the postmodern condition has permeated contemporary society (Hayman and Cohen 8, emphasis mine).

If the reaction of Out’s focalizer to such instability offers any guide, however, we “live like this” only with “difficult[y],” combating every deconstruction with an equal and opposite reconstruction. As Brooke-Rose herself explains, “We are all the time having little structures in our life, every time we deal with a situation we are restructuring it already. We are structuring the chaos of the real and everything that happens, and we couldn’t live if we didn’t do this, and then the structure goes and it’s like falling through the emptiness and you have to build a new one” (Garbero 117, emphasis mine). If we give in to it, the experience of reading either postmodern text or postmodern world will deprive us of the kind of “metaphorical totalizations” on which we rely, those deep meanings, circumscribed by our cherished metanarratives, “which on the basis of resemblance presume to name or convey the essence of an entity [and thus] protect us from the knowledge of nothingness,” from an “annihilation of the self” (Culler, *Framing*, 122).

Faced with such a threat, at least some of Brooke-Rose’s subjects—those we might designate as transitional, not yet adapted to the postmodern constructionist era—feel compelled to reframe themselves and
the world. For although the grand narratives often resulted in oppressive social hierarchies, those narratives offered up a stable, comprehensible reality with clearly defined subject positions, without which we find ourselves eternally striving to rebuild an eternally dissolving system. *Out* stresses the psychic violence inflicted by both the construction and deconstruction of hierarchies. In his painful frame-deprivation, the novel’s focalizor has no choice but to respond by resystematizing whatever he perceives. Indeed, insofar as his functional definition is “focalizor,” it might be argued that he cannot “exist” without systematizing and hierarchizing, for to focalize *is* to frame. So it happens that even as *Out*, as I will show, “displaces” its focalizor as subject, its focus on his vision and visualizing seems, subtly and almost in spite of itself, to *hypostatize* him as subject by staging the error Nietzsche elucidates in the conception of the subject: “To make a kind of perspective in seeing the cause of the seeing: that was what happened in the invention of the ‘subject’” (Nietzsche 294). In order to correct this error, the successive prepositional novels attempt to adapt to the flux of subjectless postmodernism by gradually giving up the focalizor-framer. *Between* retains a focalizor, but she refuses to frame either herself or the discursive worlds between which she floats; indeed, she highlights the absurdity of others’ frames. And by the time we reach *Thru*, both single focalizor and his/her frame *seem* to have vanished utterly; in their stead, a range of level-shifting characters focalize by turn, supplemented by visions that arise as if out of the void. As a result, the reader experiences falling *Thru* as far more unsettling, more dynamic, and more wildly metaleptic than being left *Out* or drifting *Between*.

The end of *Thru* does imply that if the focalizor-subject and its framed world have been reduced to linguistic constructs, the *language* that continues to construct them works precisely by reframing everything in implicitly hierarchical binary oppositions. In our self-perpetuating, deManian, chain deconstructions, Brooke-Rose seems to hint, we may give up the current structure of the subject, we may give up the current structure of the world, but we cannot give up structure(*ling*) itself. And yet the net effect of *Thru* remains deconstructive: despite the binarizing structure of language displayed in the novel’s (non)conclusion, the whole of the text refuses to conform, even retrospectively, to any grid of narrative levels or, therefore, to resolve itself into a final, consistent reading. Thus Brooke-Rose uses metalepsis to deconstruct both the humanist subject and the presumed stability and coherence of narrative: an ambitious and ultimately transformative project.
Out of the Frying Pan

“(imagine the damage caused by a theft which robbed you only of your frames, or rather of their joints, and of any possibility of reframing your valuables or your art-objects.)”
(Derrida, Truth, 18)

It seems to be part of postmodern aesthetics to use and tolerate a great deal of frame jeopardizing. . . . This foregrounding of framing conventions shows us that what we call reality is fully as conventionally framed as what we call painting. (D’haen 432–33)

By playing games with frames—emptying and refilling them, inverting them, dissolving them—Out highlights the manner in which the frame constructs the framed, and, consequently, the vital importance of the frame to the framer. As the first of the prepositional novels, whose titles describe the relations between their subjects and their narrative levels, Out makes the reader (at all levels) undergo, as its focalizor13 does, the sudden and shocking unframing of experience. As the focalizor encounters, and shares with us, a world he cannot interpret by reference to any of his usual frameworks of understanding, we feel, along with him, the loss of a stabilizing frame and the urgency of the need to reframe.

Out’s focalizor finds himself unmoored, in a world devastated by a sinister “malady” that has deep and far-reaching effects. As we eventually piece it together, the story of the malady begins with the same big bang of the atom bomb as some versions of the tale of postmodernity, for high-tech radiation has attacked humankind; the world’s “Coloured” people have proven immune to the resultant illness, whereas the “Colourless” are losing their bearings, weakening, and dying. So the healthy have taken over positions of power, and the kinder of them agree to hire the ailing Colourless for menial jobs; those who remain unemployed are given what appear to be antidepressants by the government and while away their time, if our focalizor is representative, in rather disoriented and defamiliarized observation of their surroundings.14

Out’s political situation, the reversal of the traditional Western white/black hierarchy, seems at first to serve as a kind of figure for the psychic destabilization of the subject. But the disruption inherent in race reversal plays only a limited role in the far more thorough untethering suffered by the focalizor; indeed, the reversal results from society’s effort to fend off such a full deconstruction. Although the Colourless find themselves disempowered, outside the power structure, “the malady” is not power-
lessness per se, but rather the postmodern condition. The overt politics of the novel read as a parable in which the oppressed inherit the earth because those best served by the prevailing metanarrative find it most difficult to adapt to its dismantling and to conceive of other possible truths. The race reversal, in such a reading, occurs in response to a much vaster upheaval of prenuclear complacency, as one of the restructurings by which those in a (psychological) position to keep the world up and running can gain control of a crumbling system.

Our window into this system, however, is an aging British ("Ukayan"), Colourless man, who, having lost the framework by which he had heretofore made sense of the world, spends most of his time attempting, rather literally and rather desperately, to reframe everything he sees, revealing in the process how much the frame “cooperates in the production of the product” (Derrida, *Truth*, 75). He repeatedly describes scenes as viewed through doorways, gates, branches, trellises, windows, fly-swatter grids, or even the peripherally visible portions of his own face that frame what he sees.

Without his accustomed framework, he has lost all sense of proportion. As a result, the “fly [that] straddles another fly on the faded denim stretched over [his] knee” (*Out* 11) looms as large as the earth-shattering changes that have resulted in his illness—indeed, the flies appear before us *larger* than life, for the Ukayan zooms in on them as he cannot on the world political situation. With his penchant for the minutest detail, which his unframing has inflated to the same priority level as everything else, the focalizor repeatedly speculates on the nature of the details that the naked eye cannot detect and that might be revealed through the proper visual tools, devices that, like frames, construct the object of vision: microscope, gastroscope, cytoscope, teinoscope, telescope, bronchoscope, telemeter, periscope, oscillograph, psychoscope, camera with telescopic lens, stethoscope, seismograph, electroencephalograph. Even as we laugh at the Ukayan’s craving for new perspectives on minutiae, the fragmentary nature of the text induces us to undertake a strikingly similar effort—to seek and interpret details about the focalizor and his situation that might allow us to (re)construct the big picture, to build our own framework for *Out* and its diegesis.

The focalizor’s search for frames (not unlike our own) apparently proceeds on both diegetic and extradiegetic levels, but, of course, the line between the two blurs mid-dialogue (hence an even greater need to search for frames). During what appears to be a job interview (perhaps merely a fantasy of the Ukayan), we find this exchange:
- I thought you said that it’s best to identify with the plants one by one?
- [...] You must learn to identify with the flux.
- It’s an article of faith, I suppose [...] it is difficult to tell who’s talking in this type of dialogue.
- If you must have your schematisations the job can go to someone else.

The last remark is ambiguous: does the interviewer refer to the “schematisations” of dialogue discussed in the preceding (presumably extradiegetic) comment? Or does he respond to the previous (presumably diegetic) discussion about schematizing plants versus “identifying with the flux”? By generating such an ambiguity, the text leaves the reader to attempt a definitive separation of the two levels; if we cannot impose a consistent structure on this passage, not only is the diegetic reader’s own identity thrown into flux (which is not to say that she can, as yet, take the apparently active step of “identifying with the flux”), sending ripples of instability outward toward the extratextual reader, but the boundary between that reader and the internal subject also blurs, as our predicament reflects that of the Ukayan, who finds flux (on both levels) where he seeks schematizations.

But, intellectually, the focalizor also knows that all truth is in the eye of the framer: “A radioisotope carbon 14 [...] might perhaps trace and measure [the table’s] prehistoric existence, but only for the human mind behind the carbon 14, the development of phenomena being correlative to that of consciousness” (O 79). Or, as the doctor who performs our focalizor’s “psychoscope” (“an abstracted absolute of [psycho]analysis” [140]) explains it, “Diagnosis provokes its own cause” or “diagnosis prognosticates aetiology” (139): in other words, we write the truth and it becomes true—or, more specifically, we construct a cause from an effect (see discussion of “displacement” below). When the focalizor protests that psychoscopic self-knowledge is “false, built up by instruments and the minds behind the instruments” (as Derrida remarks, the “gesture of framing [...] does violence to the inside of the system” [Truth 69]), he is told that it “bears a close resemblance to the real thing” (O 168)—and is as close as we can come to true knowledge. Frames create truth: as the focalizor watches through “the rectangular frame of the verandah [...] itself still held in the rounded frame formed by the line of the eyebrow and the line of the nose, [...] Mrs. Ned grows unmistakably into Mrs. Ned” (29). In
several instances, the frame defines the (“true”) color of the framed object, which, perhaps as a subtle reminder of the novel’s theme of race perception, proves to be relative, dependent on viewing conditions and preexisting knowledge. Truth itself, like the perception of color, is temporary and shifting: the next eye or the next frame may create a different one, eviscerating the first.

The diegesis of the novel is a case in point: the narrator sometimes treats it as a generic frame, to be filled in with characters or events at some future date (“Why not? says somebody or other” [O 26]). Moreover, even when the “filling” is given, it is confessedly provisional and can be erased or revised by the next sentence (“No, this would only be a thought” [52]; “The dialogue will not take place” [46]; “Oh, stop it, you know very well this dialogue will not occur” [126]; “The scene might occur in quite a different form” [26]). Such revision is possible because only a creative act of the framer, such as imagining or speaking, projects what we might normally see as diegetic “reality”—“Sometimes it is sufficient to imagine an episode for the episode to occur” (175); “Sometimes it is sufficient merely to speak . . . for the sequence not to occur” (31).

In such a universe, and in such a narrative, it becomes impossible to distinguish between the focalizor’s inner and outer realities, and the novel and its reader slide uncontrollably from one to the other. Even the extradiegetic reader, who struggles alongside the DR to sort things out, to produce a coherent diegesis, has no choice but to “become” this sickly Ukayan focalizor, as the reader’s role is constituted by the focalizor’s language and perspective. Indeed, extratextual readers themselves begin the novel as disoriented as the Ukayan, for Brooke-Rose offers us no “objective” description to ground us. We are, so to speak, “out of it,” not knowing which events occur (or don’t, after all, occur) on which narrative levels. “Mr. Blob,” a pattern the focalizor mentally constructs out of his view through the door frame (O 54), seems to converse with the Ukayan in the same way as does his wife, Lilly, or Mrs. Mgulu, her employer. Brooke-Rose sometimes shifts narrative levels retroactively, not only through erasure, as described above, but also through the intrusion, now and again, of a parodic exam question (“Explicate and connect” [53]; “Discuss and denigrate” [56]) that renders the preceding section hypothetical. With such shifting ground under us, we find ourselves, vis-à-vis the traditional diegetic levels and readerly roles, “displaced.”

And not gratuitously. For denizens of the diegetic world of Out refer to the social upheaval precipitated by the malady as “the displacement.” In
one sense, the “Colourless” have been displaced as the powerful race, but, as I have already suggested, the novel bears witness that the simple reversal of a hierarchy—while requiring a good deal of adjustment on the part of the deposed—actually changes very little in the scheme of things. One grand narrative merely replaces another, using the same frame (of racism) and filling in the positions with different colors. In this simple sense, the Colourless experience a certain loss of social identity, since they have been displaced as its determiners, and Brooke-Rose gives this notion material form on the first page of the novel, in a series of “confidential” file-folder I.D. cards, “not to be handled by” their subject, which identify the Ukayan first as a “humanist” retrained as a “fitter,” then as a “Ph.D.,” retrained as an “odd job man,” and finally as a “psychopath” and former “gardener,” currently unemployed.

But in another sense, “the displacement” refers to “the displacement from cause to effect” (O 119), apparently a reference to Nietzsche’s deconstruction of causality, which argues that we project a “cause” a posteriori from an “effect,” and that therefore the logical and temporal priority we ascribe to the cause is exactly backward. Interestingly, Paul de Man notes that this “exchange or substitution of cause and effect” is “what rhetoricians call metalepsis” (de Man 108, emphasis mine), and he argues that it transcends a simple reversal, leading ultimately to a deconstruction of the basic structure of polarity itself. For if

What had been considered to be a cause is, in fact, the effect of an effect, and what had been considered to be an effect can in its turn seem to function as the cause of its own cause, . . . [the] polarities . . . which seemed to make up a closed and coherent system . . . [have] now been scrambled into an arbitrary, open system in which the attributes of causality . . . can be deceptively exchanged, substituted for each other at will. As a consequence, our confidence in the original, binary model that was used as a starting point is bound to be shaken. (de Man 107)

Nietzsche goes on to propose that our confusion about cause and effect derives from our erroneous belief in the existence of the subject and “the subjective conviction that we are causes. . . . Our ‘understanding of an event’ has consisted in our inventing a subject which was made responsible for something that happens and for how it happens” (Nietzsche 295–96). Such a theory suggests to me a third possible interpretation of Out’s “displacement”: the theoretical displacement of the subject from its
role as the cause of events, reality, discourse, and frames to a new position as one of their effects. We may view this shift in position as the metalep-
sis that marks the postmodern condition itself, the state in which we, like all else, are constituted in and by ever-changing discourse.

In either of the last two readings, the grand narratives of Out’s world have been displaced, in a more radical alteration than the mere inversion of the power hierarchy. This metamorphosis implies a more thorough loss of identity, the loss of the autonomous, depth-model subject, and it calls to mind that “annihilation of the self” caused by the loss of one’s “metaphorical totalizations” (Culler, Framing, 122).

In Out, such an ontological displacement, no less than the political one, apparently results from the malady: in a sick person, “fantasies . . . pervade the blood-stream and increase at a striking rate” (O 68); “the imagination increases in size progressively and by no means painlessly until it fills most of the abdomen” (163); and the sufferer can no longer separate imagination from reality. But since the reader (at all levels) experiences the whole of the novel through the lens of the Ukayan’s swelling imagination, we cannot make such distinctions either. In the diegesis, medical instruments can perform the task: “An electroencelograph might perhaps separate the components of the conversation into the elements of silence, reality and unreality” (102). But, unaided, neither the Ukayan nor the reader can do so:

Either the conversation has partially occurred, the beginning for instance, the remainder being suppressed, selected, manipulated, transformed, schematised, because inunderstood. Or the conversation has wholly occurred, and been wholly manipulated, transformed, schematised, because inunderstood, . . . A corollary to that is that the conversation has wholly occurred and that Mr. Swaminathan is mad. . . . A second corollary is that the conversation has wholly occurred and is wholly sane but beyond the grasp of sick white reasoning. (108)

Since our only filter for all information, be it real or imagined, is this sick white reasoner, we are, vis-à-vis this world, sick as well, and in precisely the same way. As I have suggested above, we might well call this malady “postmodernism,” that condition which has so deconstructed our wonted hierarchies as to unmoor us from understanding.

Somewhere in the myriad layers of the psyche allegedly excavated by the Ukayan’s psychoscope lies a governmental character who asserts, “We
do not envisage anything as drastic as breaking diplomatic relations with reality” (O 136). But if any “reality” remains within our focalizor’s pur-view, neither he nor the reader can say where it begins and where it ends, for Brooke-Rose has so blurred the boundaries between levels of narrative (and their supposed degrees of “reality” and “imagination”) that they might as well be made of water. As indeed the narrator (or some authoritative voice) describes them in the following instructions to a newly created character who complains of “non-existence”:

Well of course, this is an indoor swimming-bath. Now you listen to me, there are three floors, we’re in the basement. Above us, people slide in to the swimming-pool from the same level. Above that, there is a gallery, and they dive in. Down here however, we have to go in through these round glass portholes. They’re like submarine escape-hatches, only you can swim straight across the two membranes and up through the water. The process is known as osmosis. It’s quite a long way up, so take a very deep breath, now, come along, don’t be afraid, in you go, merge, in you fool, go on or I’ll have to push you. (O 111)

Of course, the Ukayan himself also resists merging into the swimming bath of the text: he tries to stand outside of the water and to distill it, separating elements into their proper levels, solidifying the membranes. But even the focalizor’s resistance to merging suggests in this instance that he has already merged with the apparently new character, who, after all, has been introduced primarily as a perceiver (heretofore the Ukayan’s job) of the “pitch-black” world around him (110). (Although the extratextual reader may resemble one of those in the gallery who dives into the text from “above,” we, too, may identify with the new character as a perceiver who has been pushed into a pool of confusion for which we were unprepared.)

The possibility that the Ukayan projects this new character out of the materials of his self raises questions about Out’s delineation of subjects: once again, we cannot distinguish inner and outer “realities.” So we should not be surprised to find that one can “swim” across the “membranes” of the newly fluid subject as well. Given the right “truth” serum, a psychoscope can push the Ukayan into the bottomless pool of his identity.

- [W]hat is your occupation?
- Odd . . . job . . . man.
- [...] And what was your occupation before?
- I was a self-made man.
- A contradiction in terms.
- I was chosen among five thousand as the most balanced and normal of men, to be one of twelve representing my country on a special mission in space.
- What were you really?
- An analyser.
- Deeper.
- A synthesizer.
- Deeper.
- An alchemist, lick me now, said the salt.
- Deeper [. . .]
- An electrician. A builder.
- Deeper.
- A welder.
- Come, come, no false shame. Take off those identities. (O 139–40)

Even the “deepest” of these identities, of course, is but a role performed in society; the psychoscopist can peel away layer after layer, but he’ll find only constructions, the products of social discourses and one’s relationship to them (one “analyzes” or “synthesizes” the materials provided by others), the effects of others’ expectations and judgments (for no man is “self-made”). In fact, the layers seem increasingly superficial rather than deeper: not only do the activities mentioned move from thought (analyzer, synthesizer) to action (builder, welder), they also stress a more and more superficial engagement with their materials—whereas an analyzer examines an object’s composition, drilling down to some atomic level, a welder connects materials at their surface. Like the narrative itself in which one can delineate no settled diegetic levels and designate neither inside nor outside, the depth-model subject has become flattened. Whatever was once thought to reside “inside” the subject (in its “essence”) is now constructed and projected on its outside—all that was \textit{in} is now \textit{out}.

Such a conclusion suggests that although we as readers may make—indeed, in our alignment with the Ukayan are encouraged to make—concerted efforts to read in our accustomed fashion, to analyze and synthesize (and if all else fails, to work alchemy on) the atoms of this text, we must ultimately surrender to the impossibility of penetrating the truth (and fiction) of \textit{Out} and accept the novel as a sort of “beginner’s” experience of deconstruction, one that gets our feet wet (in preparation, as we shall see, for the plunge of \textit{Thru}) by removing us from our usual systems of reading.
Although, as I have argued above, the intense focus on the vision of the focalizor effectively hypostatizes him as a subject—and we do construct a fairly clear picture of him by the end of the novel—we never reach a settled understanding of what has happened in this narrative and what has not. Thus, metalepsis has begun to have a deconstructive effect on narrative—and on the reader as well, who has begun the transformation from rational analyzer to a welded mass of diegetic-extradiegetic-extratextual constructions slightly closer to being able to identify with the flux.

**Between the Lines**

If *Out* began the breakdown of what we might call a “modernist” society, as the malady “outed” its focalizor—and, if successful, its reader—from the grand hierarchies that helped him order and understand his world, *Between* (1968) brings us one step closer to a thoroughly postmodern universe and its complementary subject, for whom negotiating among “multiple surfaces” in a network of separate-but-equal “realities” has become a way of life. As someone in the novel asserts, “We live in an age of transition between one social order and another and we must effectuate that transition or die” (*B* [Between] 462). The focalizor of *Between*, a simultaneous translator crisscrossing the world as she jets from one conference to another, has adapted to the new social order to the extent that she makes her living off its very rhizomatic structure; but, to some extent a humanist throwback, she clearly misses the old order, and the novel echoes with her sense of loss of subjectivity.

This loss results in part from the postmodern (and metaleptic) flattening of hierarchy into network: in a universe of diverse discourses where “all ideas have equality before God” (*B* 398), no (discursively constructed) “world” can claim a higher reality status than any other. Whereas in *Out* the ghost of a former frame, the distinction between reality and imagination, haunted the focalizor to the point where he felt compelled to attempt its resurrection, the focalizor of *Between* has relinquished all such struggles, seeming to accept the discursivity of both worlds and subjects. But her particular predicament redoubles the loss of (humanist) subjectivity: as a translator, she does not even enter these worlds, instead floating above them, in air space which, if it knows no borders, therefore forms no attachments to any earthbound realm. She “floats in willing suspension of loyalty to anyone” (461). Although the floating consciousness is perhaps counterintuitively declared to have a body, it does not tether her to any
(mappable) physical world, and so apparently indulges in none of the usual bodily functions, as “between doing [sleeping, loving] and not doing [not sleeping, not loving] the body floats” (395, 398, 420). In thus remaining aloof from all possible discursive-ontological arenas, the translator participates in no metalepsis at all and therefore, in effect, gains no subject status. Since she is the guide of both diegetic and extradiegetic readers through or above this textual universe, and since none of its myriad, multiply looped narrative threads seems to make the least difference to her, all levels of readers drift along with her, unable to “get into” any of the stories we might otherwise be able to piece together.

Deprived of internal boundaries, the novel frequently slides mid-sentence from one language, jargon, country, airplane, menu, or hotel to another. It glides among widely diverse styles in a carnival of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, taking pages (or only phrases) out of guidebooks, phrase books, linguistics textbooks, menus, advertisements, horoscopes, and lovers’ sweet-nothing clichés, and letting them rub shoulders, or words, in an environment of “verbal anarchy which makes their allusions intertwine in the echoing” text (B 430). The “real” world has become homogenized, and all airplanes, all hotels, all conferences now partake of a generic nature. “Silences differ more than hotel rooms or menus” (417). Thus, the focalizor finds herself (along with the DR and even the EDR) in the sort of “hyperspace” that Fredric Jameson sees as transcending “the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to map its position in a mappable external world” (Jameson 44).

Moreover, even if boundaries could be rebuilt, the very fact of the discursivity of the postmodern world seems to render it empty of the sort of significance to which the focalizor might become attached. So even when her contemporaries prove, like Out’s Ukayan, unable to tolerate the postmodern flux and attempt to build new “nations,” even fortresses, of national languages or professional and disciplinary jargons, the translator continues to remain aloof from all such realms. If such blocs constantly erect newer, smaller boundaries within which to spin their newer, smaller truths, she recognizes that one cannot validate the truth claims of these alternative realities, that they present themselves as so many conflicting stories, possible but never definitive worlds: “He turns his back to the assembly . . . talking to three middle-aged ladies and one young or maybe telling stories the one about the round billiard-table unless emitting ideas that actually mean something or even just listening . . . a cigarette lighter perhaps to flame the young one with who puts her plate down on the low
long sill and draws his fire and shapes her words with gestures which weave *no doubt* a circle round him thrice” (*B* 402–3, emphases mine).

All these “truths”—hypodiegeses, as far as we are concerned—translate into similarly empty talk in the hands of an eternal outsider ever in search of “one idea that actually means something” (*B* 402 and *passim*). Not only do conference participants generally avoid “any true exchange of thought” (491)—“Information? My dear good girl . . . how naïve can you get?” asks one of the translator’s colleagues (422)—but, as a humanist subject might expect of a textual universe, any ideas that manage to get themselves expressed remain unrealized theories. “This morning we have listened to a belle fiction,” someone says. “Such a principle remains a principle, totally at odds with any real situation in the past or the renovating present” (533). The translator describes herself as “a simultaneous interpreter of ideas nobody ever acts upon” (548).

If, however, the subjects constructed in and by these languages seem as empty as their talk, (hypodiegetic) caricatures appropriate to the realms they have circumscribed for themselves, the translator, once again, proves even emptier. In attaching herself to “no field at all, just translation” (*B* 467) and so divorcing herself from all individual discursive realms (the only realms that now exist), she ensures that she can attain no subject status at all. Like the technology that Jameson disparagingly associates with postmodernism or the third stage of capitalism, the translator is a seemingly passive or transparent “machine of reproduction rather than of production” (Jameson 36). Frequently compared to an airplane whose cockpit represents “the distant brain way up translating time speed height into locality and channel and descent” (*B* 410), she sees herself in strikingly (reproductive) mechanical terms: “his words flowing into the ear through the earphones in French and down at once out of the mouth into the attached mouthpiece in simultaneous German” (398). She has, she claims, no ideas of her own, acting only as a conduit for the ideas and languages of others: “We merely translate other people’s ideas, not to mention platitudes. . . . No one requires us to have any of our own. We live between ideas” (413). Brooke-Rose has described her omission from *Between* of the verb “to be” as a private challenge that she hoped would translate into a sense of both “perpetual motion” and “loss of identity” (*STT* 7). The latter effect seems the more significant here, as it stresses again the postmodern lack of depth-model subjectivity. The simultaneous translator never “is” anything stable, a condition(lessness) also suggested by the lack of agents (that is, grammatical *subjects*) for some verbs (“It all depends where
the sleeping has occurred out of what dream shaken up” [B 396]). As in
Worstward Ho, with such an incompletely realized diegesis, the DR may
never fully “materialize” either, and the absence of verbs of being may
reflect on her as well.

Although the grammatical elision of “to be” tends to go unnoticed, Brooke-Rose figures the translator’s loss or lack of subjectivity more visibly
as two key gaps in her life: a home and a partner. Both are related to her
typically Brooke-Rosean status as a no-body as well as to her refusal or
inability to enter into any of the narratives that surround her. As she trav-
els incessantly between hotels, conferences, countries, and discursive are-
nas, she not only gives up, like Jameson’s postmodern subject, a theoretical
way of locating herself in a mappable world but also any ties to a real,
physical place, constituted as “home” by her memories and associations.
Moreover, in one “subplot,” she announces, to the shock of her friend
Siegfried, that she is selling her cottage. He responds, “Why do I feel as if
I had lost a limb? You must have gone out of your mind” (B 514–15), and
the loss thus spreads (linguistically, of course, but what other way is there?)
like a disease from home to limb to mind, each successive metastasis cut-
ing closer to what we used to call the core of the self. Brooke-Rose high-
lights the second gap, a love or sexual relationship, in many mini-segments
of the novel in which the translator attempts to get her long-past and brief
marriage annulled, to erase a narrative in which she did participate—and
succeeds “just in time for the menopause” (570), too late for any love story
to generate new (narrative) creatures.

Sexuality, that bodily expression of subjectivity, seems to be one of the
two escape routes Between offers—and then only ironically—from the
sense of lack felt by our vestigially human focalizer. It seems that the lingo
of seduction, “the same syllables of half-love and bantering allusion . . .
need no simultaneous interpreting” (B 418); for, at least in some instanc-
es, “languages flew straight across and words met loins” (554). Sex, the
focalizor rather cynically remarks, has proven the only common ground,
the only universal language, in a world where “husbands lovers wives mist-
tresses of many nationalities . . . help to abolish the frontiers of misunder-
standing with frequent changes of partners loyalties convictions, free and
easily stepping over the old boundaries of conventions, congresses, com-
missions, conferences” (437). But when all is said and . . . said, if, in
Brooke-Rose’s novels, sex is a universal language, it is also only language,
not a transcendental connection between somehow extralinguistic sub-
jects. Indeed, in the most “graphic” (if hypothetical) sexual encounters in
*Between*, the language-that-is-sex does without human subjects entirely, uniting instead reified *language* with reified *language* “in a frenzy of sensuality” (542)—“As if languages loved each other behind their own façades. . . . As if words fraternised silently beneath the syntax, finding each other funny and delicious in a Misch-Masch of tender fornication” (447). Sex, in other words, provides no entree into an embodied or real world, separate from discourse, where depth-model subjects can again thrive. Unlike the vivid physicality of Beckett’s *How It Is* or many of Carter’s novels, such verbal fornication evokes no visceral, emotional, or moral response even from the closest reader, the DR—and so in a sense refuses even the reader the illusion of a three-dimensional subjectivity.

Alternatively, then, we might renounce the hope of returning to humanist subjectivity and evolve instead into more postmodern subjects—ones who, like the younger translators our focalizor meets, can transcend boundaries with nary a regret. *Between’s* prime example of such a subject is Sandra, who “chatters happily on . . . belonging apparently to a different species altogether . . . unretarded by wars national prejudices bilingualism fraternisation sex who learn simply from existing simultaneously on all levels” (531–32). Devoid of any sense of history or of any residual depth-model concept of the self, the young translators seem to have embraced what Jameson calls the “schizophrenia” of postmodern culture, and they now experience the world as “a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (Jameson 27). Admittedly, the focalizor often seems to experience the world in a similar way, but she (and, I would say, the reader through her) finds it a rather disconcerting, sometimes disorienting, way of proceeding; Sandra and her contemporaries, on the contrary, thrive on the postmodern “breakdown in the signifying chain” and revel in the “rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers” that the breakdown has left in its wake (Jameson 26).

Unlike the focalizors of *Out* and *Between*, transitional subjects who have not yet adjusted to the metalepses by which they are constructed, the quintessentially *postmodern* subject must be naturally “metaleptic,” able to merge painlessly into any “story” and be rewritten to its specifications. The first novel of Brooke-Rose’s Intercom Quartet offers an actualization of this proposition, for Mira Enketei, the narrator of *Amalgamemnon* (1984), not only seems to recognize the new requirement discovered in *Between* but to be defined precisely in its terms. As a soon-to-be-made-redundant (that is, unemployed) classics professor, she hails from an old social order; but Mira—one of whose alter egos, Cassandra, or Sandra for
short, links her not only to the soothsayer whose prophecies no one believes but also to the newfangled translator in *Between*—finds a way of living in multiple diegeses simultaneously: she imagines them all. But, as the Cassandra connection emphasizes, Brooke-Rose’s version of the “schizophrenic” postmodern subject differs from Jameson’s in *tense*: Mira lives in the future (or “unrealized tenses” [Turner 29], those formed using “shall” and “will”) rather than in “a series of pure and unrelated presents” (Jameson 27). The effect is that of a subject-in-process, a “becoming” rather than a “being,” a formulation emphasizing the constant reconstruction of the postmodern subject. Moreover, as a woman addicted to the transistor radio that one character dubs her “lover substitute,” Mira lives the sort of life Brooke-Rose has ascribed to our media-saturated society: a “pseudo-future,” which the novelist sees as a “simulation of reality” built on endless speculation (Garbero 107).

*Amalgameannon’s* “simulating machines” (A 52) spin out multiple possible futures for Mira, a flat network of diegeses—among others, the story of a redundant professor who starts a pig farm and has an awkward relationship with Willy, the unemployment officer; the fairy tale of Fatima My Folly (the Abyssinian maid) and her various suitors; the story of the terrorists who kidnap a statesperson (who may in fact be capitalism it/herself); and the love affair with Orion, a constellation-turned-ex-Gulag-prisoner (“Characters are constellations you know, constellations of semes,” Mira will explain in *Textermination* [63]), which is complicated by the affair between Orion and Andromeda (or Anne de Rommède). Although some clearly involve Mira “herself,” none ultimately seems any more or less real than any other—in part because Mira drifts from one to another (and simultaneously from one consciousness to another, “I” sometimes referring to Orion, sometimes to the Abyssinian maid, and sometimes to the rock singer Chuck Cherryblue), as if the internal boundaries of her world, like the membranes of *Out*’s indoor swimming bath, were made of water.

In other words, she perpetually engages in metalepsis, the very “act” which, in Beckett’s fiction, constructs the subject; but of course this postmodern subject bears little resemblance to the stable, depth-model variety. For Mira’s metalepses, insofar as they enable (or force) “her” to be defined by ever-shifting “utterly other discourses” (A 20), leave “her” fluid, multiple, and indeterminate, and somehow even less substantial than *Between*’s translator, who maintains a certain role in definable circumstances throughout her novel and, because she remains above the fray,
resists redefinition by any discourse she encounters. On the other hand, some Mira invents all the diegeses that apparently reinvent her (a feat which, in the version that Thru stages, I examine in greater detail below) and so simultaneously retains (and exerts) a kind of subject-power that Between’s focalizor cannot even imagine. Thus a new postmodern subject is born.

If readers of Between floated alongside their guide above the not-quite-narratives on offer below, Amalgamemnon’s readers may find themselves teasingly engaged in its more “substantial” diegeses—both engagement and substance resulting at least in part from the parallel engagement of its focalizor, who not only “sees” but also speaks, as narrator, and potentially acts. But despite the apparent construction of a full-fledged diegetic reader (or possibly several, one for each diegesis), the EDR remains indefinitely suspended, waiting to see, and never seeing, which, if any, of these stories will “come true.” As in the earlier novels, our experience as readers of Amalgamemnon mirrors the experience Brooke-Rose suggests we undergo as postmodern subjects in a fluid world composed of myriad discourses. Judging by the strategies essayed by the focalizors of Between and Amalgamemnon, when faced with such a world, one may try to adapt either by rising above it, into the No Man’s Land of universal air space—where one escapes definition by those discourses, but then perhaps escapes all definition—or by participating in all discourses simultaneously, merging into the flux of the swimming bath, that fluid pool where, even had one the power to do the defining, nothing can remain defined for more than an instant.

Thru for a Loop

Even a dead idyll is a mise-en-abîme and . . . every chasm opens into another chasm into which it is possible to fall as into a void. (Thru 687)

In our world, it seems to me, we cannot actualize either of these options: we can neither help being sucked into the discourses that make up ourselves and our cultures nor “identify with the flux.” Instead, always already inside a matrix of discourses, we attempt to mold them into new, stable realities. But if that matrix resembles at all the churning pastiche of Thru, we will have our work cut out for us. In her final prepositional novel, Brooke-Rose draws on and mirrors theories of deconstruction in thrusting her EDR into a world that not only is discursive but, aware of
its own discursivity, cannot even pose as a world (and hence cannot produce a stable DR); through its dizzying metalepses, whereby boundaries are repeatedly built up “under” us only repeatedly to collapse, _Thru_ induces a sensation of vertigo. Here we have reached the zenith (and nadir) of metaleptic possibility, the deManian text figured as bottomless Carrollian rabbit hole.

The metaleptic games of _Out_ and _Between_ have served as mere dress rehearsals for _Thru_, which, if only in terms of metalepsis, is the Real Thing. If _Out_ compelled its readers to study, through a distorting window, the swimming bath of postmodernity, and to attempt the futile task of stratifying it, and _Between_ led us on an aerial tour of such a pool, _Thru_ tosses us into the water, where, having become “one of the elements, or effects of the text” (Rimmon-Kenan, “Ambiguity,” 31), we must either sink or swim. Indeed, even the later _Amalgamemnon_ merely _depicts_ the deconstructive metalepsis that constructs a newly fluid postmodern subject, in a partial return to a mimetic model of text-world relations; _Thru_ aims to _enact_ the dynamic more fully on its readers, transforming them, at least temporarily, into fluid postmodern subjects themselves. Our experience of _Thru_ resembles nothing so much as that of _falling_, repeatedly but always shockingly, into what may well be a “hole” of “agnosia,” _not-knowing_; this formulation appears in the acrostics with which Brooke-Rose peppers her text in vertical signification games that echo the constantly climbing and falling narrative structures (_Th [Thru] 585_).

The functioning of the acrostics, indeed, offers an instructive analogue to the novel’s overall problematization of structural boundaries. On the one hand, acrostics represent a visible verticality, a kind of material correlative of the metaphorically vertical arrangement of narrative levels, and, in their vertical meaning-making, they disrupt the notion that language’s horizontal syntax, the metonymy of sentence structure, can be relied on to keep meaning contained. Even individual letters, acrostics demonstrate, can escape their physical “level” on the page to interact with those on other levels. And, as _Thru_’s acrostics insist, such disruption has profound effects, “the truth ever escaping through swift switch of signifiers” (_Th_ 582–83) so that periodically you find that “you got it all wrong” (590–91). At some moments, Brooke-Rose’s acrostic text seems to reside on a “meta”-level (cataloguing metatextual concepts such as “trace,” “mystery,” “story,” “enigma” [584]); at other moments, it becomes a sort of “base” subtext, a parody of “subliminal seduction” (“Two white thighs do it two white legs you daddy bitch you tit bitch” [587–90]); and sometimes, horizontal and
vertical texts merge (the acrostics launch a discussion of that which has been “programmed in the memory’s wax text,” and the horizontal text takes up the suggestion, offering us, in an echo of the acrostics’ cataloguing style, “parchment wax arxi stone trace” [584]). Through this crossword puzzle game that parallels certain aspects of the text’s metaleptic dynamics, we soon discover that, in Thru, any binary opposition, even the visible and presumably substructural one between horizontal and vertical, ultimately deconstructs itself. As Rimmon-Kenan notes at the outset of her detailed description of Thru’s narratological games, the interchangeability of narrative levels leads to a type of ambiguity that “subverts the notion of hierarchy, rendering level and metalevel perpetually reversible” and thereby “collapses . . . the very distinction between outside and inside, container and contained, narrating subject and narrated object, higher and lower level” (“Ambiguity” 22; see also Glance 84).

On what we might traditionally read as the main diegetic level (though here we must, at least temporarily, arbitrarily freeze ever-shifting identities, assign them to a single level, and tentatively designate it as the diegesis), Thru is “about” two writers and professors of literary studies, Larissa Toren and Armel Santores, who are or have been married to one another; one or the other is teaching a course in creative writing and narratology in which the students are collaboratively writing a novel, which (just to demonstrate the impossibility of remaining on a single level) might well be the novel we are reading. The novel drifts from the students’ compositions, often not marked as such—that is, as hypodiegetic—until after we have finished them; to notes on or written during faculty meetings; to course schedules and grade lists; to diagrams and concrete poems, which, like the acrostics, anagrams, and other typographical games, serve as visual markers of heteroglossia; to exchanges between (Diderot’s) Jacques le fataliste and his Master; to quotations and paraphrases both literary and theoretical, “in many languages from Lucan to Lacan . . . from Phaedrus to Freud / Homer to Husserl and Locke to the Li Ki / effortlessly displacing notions with a diachronic chord” (Th 594). Thus, Brooke-Rose (and/or the writer-characters) “generat[e] a text which in effect is a dialogue with all preceding texts” (621), for “are not all idées reçues?” (680). In Thru’s intertextual web, the breaching of lateral boundaries between literary texts seems less important than the vertical metalepsis between the diegetic-level narrative and the metalinguistic discourses of various structuralist, deconstructionist, and psychoanalytic theorists. For the disruption of the vertical categories caused, as Rimmon-Kenan puts it, by the novel’s use of “the reader’s metalanguage
as its own object-language” renders the extradiegetic reader “an element of the very text he is reading, losing his secure external position,” and thereby displaces or disorients us to some extent (“Ambiguity” 28; see also Glance 76, 89).

This displacement contributes to a much more pervasive sense of vertigo, which, to a far greater extent, is induced by the amorphousness and ambiguity within the narrative. This “narrative ambiguity,” which Rimmon-Kenan defines as “the ‘conjunction’ of exclusive disjuncts” (requiring, simultaneously, two or more mutually exclusive readings) leads to a far more dizzying deconstruction of narrative levels. As Rimmon-Kenan summarizes: “The dramatized Master, the disembodied unreliable narrator, Larissa, Armei, and the Creative Writing students are all possible narrators of Thru, each having the mutually exclusive roles of inventing the others and at the same time being invented by them”; and perhaps more disconcertingly still, “the symmetrical interchangeability of narrator and narrated . . . often disappears into ‘no narrator at all but a lacuna through which it is possible to fall into delirious discourse’ ([Th] p. 54 [632 in Omnibus]), . . . giving rise to the question repeatedly asked at all levels: ‘who speaks?’” (“Ambiguity” 21, 30, 23).

If we cannot pin down a narrator who speaks, we cannot even, as we could in Brooke-Rose’s previous novels, locate a focalizor who sees. We may believe on principle that, as Nietzsche puts it, “every event is a deed, that every deed presupposes a doer” (Nietzsche 295)—here, that every image is a vision, that every vision presupposes a viewer—and yet we perceive many of the novel’s passages as a kind of cosmic fireworks, flashing at us sourcelessly out of the darkness. Perhaps in an effort to emphasize this lack of focalizor, Brooke-Rose frames the novel between two visions of a rearview mirror reflecting back either four eyes (“I”s) or, in the end, “nothing but TEXT” (which one can only “EX(I)T THRU THRU”) (Th 742). This displacement of a focalizor by a “retrovizor” (742), while seeming at first to turn the reader away from the text, to prohibit us from seeing into it, somehow implicates us, the “I”s reflected as our eyes read, in the construction of the text. Although Out, Between, and Amalgamemnon staged a gradual dissolution of the subject, each one offered us a focalizor whose perspective we could cling to—from outside if not always, for the DR, from within—as we sought some position from which to read, some window into the textual universe. Without such a guide in this universe that lacks any stable ground, not only can the diegetic reader find no secure place to stand, even the EDR can discern no persistent perspective
to adopt. Even more than the borrowing of the academic reader’s meta-
language, this defocalization exacerbates the destabilizing effects of Thru’s
narrative ambiguity.

The characters themselves, at least in their roles as creative writers and
narratologists, evince a destabilizing awareness of the vertiginous nature
of the novel. At times, they attempt to (re)stratify the narrative: Armel tells the students, “We mustn’t confuse the levels of discourse. My function here is not to narrate but to teach, or shall we say I am not a function of your narrative, and we are using a metalanguage” (Th 628). Already, Armel’s effort to steady the quaking ground gives rise to indeterminacies of level: Is he saying he is not “here” in the classroom to narrate? Or not “here” in the novel itself to narrate but only to be a diegetic-level teacher-character—or even to serve as an instructive case study, a kind of symbol? In the latter scenario, it is worth noting, his saying so makes him otherwise. Of whose narrative is he not a function? And is that because he is using a metalanguage? Since he speaks metalinguistically of Thru’s concerns and its narratives, does he somehow stand above or outside this novel? Armel proceeds to show his class Jakobson’s communication theory diagram, complete with “YOU ARE HERE” pointer indicating the level of “CODE (metalinguistic function [of language]),” but he immediately acknowledges the possibility that they may instead have “gotten imprisoned in M,” or “MESSAGE (poetic function)—in other words, have fallen through the structure into the fiction itself (629). As someone (narrators being so nebulous here that we often don’t know “who speaks”) attempts to systematize the creator-creature structure, it is possible that we are witnessing:

- Armel inventing Larissa
- Larissa inventing Armel
- Armel inventing Veronica
- Veronica inventing Armel
- Armel inventing Larissa
- Larissa inventing Marco (or is it Oscar?)
- Marco (?) inventing Larissa
- Larissa inventing Armel. (586)

This list posits a reciprocity of subject construction that itself functions on
two “levels,” referring at once to authors’ writing of characters, possibly those
in this very novel (an acrostic following the list reads “fictitious persons”),
and to human beings’ social constructions of others. It is in the latter, more “real” realm, for instance, that “the other possible permutations do not occur for logical reasons”: individuals who don’t know and don’t want to know each other have no building blocks out of which to construct one another and would tend not to attempt the feat; so “Larissa could invent Veronica [Armel’s new lover] but in a limited subjective way. . . . While Armel could invent Marco [Larissa’s new lover] . . . and vice versa but due to the double standard in practice would not stoop or merely would not have the curiosity” (586).

This mutual invention of subjects has a number of significant consequences for Thru’s narrative levels, its characters, and its readers, the net effect of which is to deconstruct certain key hierarchies of both narrative and subject construction. First, characters’ invention of each other leads to a seemingly infinite embedding of constructions, “endless statistical probabilities of texts within texts,” “codes within codes, tales within tales, codas within codas,” “the show within the show”—even student Ali Nourennin recognizes that “the process is infinite . . . within each text there is another text, within each myth another myth” (Th 677, 678, 681, 608). If such embeddings call to mind the mise-en-abîme, with its endless repetitions of the same, that image cleverly masks differences (of size, of position or degree of embeddedness) that implicitly form a hierarchy. In other words, rather than immediately flattening the narrative hierarchy as the other prepositional novels do, Thru proliferates narrative levels—creating an excessive narrative structure that sets us up for a far more precipitous fall (in a sense the very move that Carter will translate into the terms of gender). Indeed, with such embeddings, Thru builds up (or excavates) ontological levels in ways that can suddenly demote a character out of the diegesis into the bottomless pit of hypodiegeses—and, with the next turn of the spiral, promote her clear up to an extradiegetic plane. The diegetic reader who has been defined by her belief in such a character is doomed to an interrupted existence herself, and as our diegetic projection is repeatedly deleted and rewritten, we must feel the repercussions, be they intellectual, psychological, or emotional, of this disintegration of the subject.

An extended example will give a sense of the wildness of the oscillations and their effects on readers. In “an idyll” that begins by acknowledging that “within every idyll there opens out another idyll,” our sometime narrator Larissa suddenly becomes a character in a film script. At first, the script seems to be simply a new mode for our (ever-changing but somehow extradiegetic) narrator’s ongoing diegesis, although even in that guise
it seems to use the schematic form of a film script (with such explicit, framing markers of construction as “the happiness sequence,” “close-up,” “shot 5”) to disrupt any previously possible suspension of disbelief, and render the heretofore (sometimes) diegetic-level characters hypodiegetic, in the process jolting the diegetic reader who was defined by her belief in their existence. But when, at the end of the passage, the script is signed by “Neil Alder” and graded by someone, presumably Armel, its contents seem to drop yet another level (and just as the diegetic reader has adjusted to her newly assigned truth, or, alternatively, as a new diegetic reader has been invented and projected, she must shift, or be shifted, again [Th 648, 651]). This move retroactively demotes Larissa in two senses: ontologically, she has lost a certain degree of subjectivity (if subjectivity admits of degrees) in becoming a hypodiegetic construct of the diegetic-level student named Neil; and if we can even talk about her as if she somehow inhabited both her previous narrative position and her new one, she has lost social status as well—no longer a professor, she is in fact the invention of a student. Indeed, social status seems not only metonymically but metaphorically related to narrative or ontological status (as perhaps is gender status): at least according to the narrative that structures the university, professors have greater power to “construct” their students than their students do them—another hierarchy that Thru thereby deconstructs.

But within the “idyll”/film script, Larissa, if one can ascribe agency to her rather than to Neil Alder, seems fully in control of the key hierarchy of “her” medium (the one in which she creates, the one of which she is made), “separating signified from signifier as God the lower from the upper waters or Freud the latent from the manifest.” Even as she is made to “withdraw . . . into tacitactic defeat, back into the back of her creator’s mind”—that is, into a hypothetically hypodiegetic position—she manages to “talk . . . to her publisher waiting strategically to re-emerge one day, fully armed, after a Trojan disc-horse war” (Th 650–51). In other words, she camouflages herself as the discourse that she is in order to re-assume the reins of the narrative and with it her higher social and ontological status, which gives her the power, it would seem, to generate and control discourse.44 Insofar as the diegetic reader is a textual structure, she has now been dissolved and reformulated several times, and inasmuch as she is also a projection of the extratextual reader, we are left with our heads spinning, having been forced repeatedly to project new representatives onto different screens.
This is not the first time that Larissa has fallen through (multidimensional) levels, and it gives us an inkling of how she has managed, rather discreetly, to climb back up—so that it can again come as a shock to us, the extratextual readers trying valiantly to keep our place in the face of internal disintegration, when she falls, despite the curious fact that the climbing takes place (at least in part) within the hypodiegesis that, by its final (and, one would think, therefore framing) signature, demotes her. Earlier, we encounter Larissa in the middle of a faculty meeting where she launches into a feminist tirade about double standards and the quasiliberal male intellectual’s exploitation of women, all of which (tirade and meeting) in retrospect turns out to have been an “essay” by a student named Doreen (Th 635–37). (Doreen receives the criticism, presumably from Armel, that the “levels of discourse are a bit mixed up” [637], as versus the praise, presumably also from Armel, offered to Neil Alder, that “I like the mixture of levels” [651]—the double standard here rendering the now-hypothetical Larissa’s critique of the quasiliberal male intellectual specifically applicable to Armel and so less hypothetical than it seemed.) Within the frame of this essay, in addition to highlighting the failure of the feminist movement to dislodge the deep-rooted social hierarchy of the sexes, Larissa, accused of “turning this place into a carnival,” embraces that characterization and spells out its politics: “Carnival has its own structure . . . all hierarchy reversed” (635).

As we saw in the discussion of Out, above, this reversal of hierarchies may be a necessary strategic move in the process of any deconstructive project, since we cannot seem to escape indefinitely our accustomed (and inherently hierarchized) binary thinking. Larissa, even if she is Doreen’s Larissa, recognizes these fundamentals of deconstructive practice, and “her” authoritative statements about hierarchies and reversals seem somehow to empower “her” to subvert the creator-creature hierarchy even after Doreen asserts her own dominant diegetic-level position (and Larissa’s therefore subordinate one) with the belittling line, “That’s, that’s all. I—I meant to develop it a bit more but I didn’t have time” (Th 636). Which is why we can, some pages later, again “believe in” Larissa as not only diegetic but possibly (somehow) extradiegetic, when Jacques’s master worries that “it is clear that Larissa is producing a text. But which text? 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” (644). If Larissa becomes extradiegetic here, our heretofore unsteady projection, the DR, may, in a weird and perhaps theo-
Of course, on at least some level and possibly several, Larissa is also producing Armel, but, as we have seen, Armel is also producing Larissa, and he, too—or some higher-level narrator working in cahoots with him—can (re)reverse hierarchies at will. We are at one point introduced to Armel as a self-described “author,” but one who first meets Larissa when he comes to see her to discuss her book, on which he has “taken all these notes” (Th 639). On the one hand, he wants to put her down for “run[ning] away into language” rather than holding on to “the very essence of things” which he believes she sometimes manages to “touch on” (640)—to which Larissa appropriately responds that “language is all we have to apprehend reality, if we must use that term” (642). But on the other hand, the scene casts her as the creator, him as a mere(!) critic, and, despite his attempts at seduction, she ultimately gains the upper hand and sends him packing.46 (Moreover, the near-anagrams formed by their names, as they themselves recognize, leave Larissa Toren with her “I”—the only letter contained in her name that is not also in Armel’s—rendering her a subject to Armel Santores’s object-case “me”—the only two letters that he holds exclusively.47) This first-meeting scenario and its implied hierarchy (Larissa as writer, Armel as critic) are cast into doubt, however, when we come upon a self-described “fan-letter” written by Larissa to Armel (“Mr. Santores”)—she is, again appropriately, “working on a structural analysis of [his] poems”—and wants to meet him. In this revision, Larissa, now the student/critic/admirer, pursues Armel, at first (yet again appropriately) through letters in which she tells him “I love you already . . . I mean . . . I love . . . your words” (660, emphasis mine).

So the round-robin of subject construction generates a constantly shifting hierarchy, ceaselessly demoting and promoting (or killing and resurrecting?) subjects, and occasionally oscillating so rapidly that a given subject seems simultaneously made of discourse and its maker—which, of course, all subjects now “are.”

There are two more important ramifications of the mutual invention of subjects, both of which contribute to the novel’s deconstruction of narrative structure and the depth-model subject. First, the text implies that the very reciprocity of this process leads to relationships that, while possibly balanced, are built on illusions, on our projections onto the screen of the other;48 in a novel, that reciprocity renders impossible any of the usual lateral relations between characters. As characters continuously shift levels
in a game of narrative-power one-up-manship, becoming the authors of each-other-as-texts, they begin to fear that they’ll prove unable to cohabit any one level long enough to see eye-to-eye: “If Larissa invents Armel inventing Larissa, Armel also invents Larissa inventing Armel. Thus there can be no communication between them” (Th 686). Ultimately, this is a social as well as a literary concern: if Thru represents (and indeed enacts on the reader) the narrative construction of subjects in which we always engage, we might well conclude that the metalepsis necessary for authoring another destroys any possibility of interacting with that other as an equal subject rather than as one’s “object” (a conclusion explored in greater depth by Angela Carter, who also insists on the differential gendering of the subject and object)—or, by extension, of achieving subjectivity oneself: as Larissa remarks, “Whoever you invented invented you too. That surely is the trouble, we do not exist” (631). Insofar as the diegetic reader both dissolves along with her diegetic-level counterparts and periodically swaps places with the extradiegetic reader who has read the diegetic level and its reader into existence to begin with, “the reader” becomes a self-contained system of mutual invention and apparent non-existence mirroring the one that Larissa describes.

We might view this reciprocity as one reason for the second ramification, the ongoing nature of the subject-construction process, which brings us back to Beckett’s vicious cycle (“One has to reinvent [Armel] all the time. I mean . . . Larissa had to,” notes one student [Th 729]): writing the other demotes her to the level of our story; she reasserts her subjectivity by reversing the hierarchy and stepping out of the story to (re)write us, whereupon we must do the same, and so on “ad neurotic infinitum” (631). But perhaps more significantly, this continual production characterizes even our self-construction, as Larissa, borrowing from Lacan, describes it, for as “the reader” has just demonstrated, we (like the Unnamable) reproduce in “ourselves” the subject/object split: “What matters . . . are the innumerable and ever-escaping levels of utterance by the I who is not the I who says I . . . Which is why we have to reinvent it continually, rehandling the signifiers in constant reinvestment” (631). Unlike Beckett, however, who emphasizes repetition and the distinctly reconstructive effects of metalepsis, Brooke-Rose envisions this kind of eternal reconstruction (of the subject, of the postmodern world) in terms of open-ended change and a more deconstructive metalepsis; she concludes that, far from stabilizing the agonized subject, such a subjectification process leaves “everything . . . open in an infinite displacement, . . . an infinite game of mirrors, an infinite taking flight” (RU 47).
Furthermore, as I’ve suggested, *Thru* plays this game of perpetual, level-swapping reconstruction with (or against) the reader. In part, as Rimmon-Kenan points out, by incorporating within it our strategies for reading it, and in part, as I have shown, by blurring the boundaries between levels of readers, the novel not only writes us into its script but undermines any interpretive authority we ETRs might otherwise fancy we had: “One could say, paradoxically, that the reader does not only read the text but is also read by it, consequently becoming himself a text, forever changing positions with the text creating him and created by him” (Rimmon-Kenan, “Ambiguity,” 31). By taking the estrangement of *Out* and the suspension of *Amalgamemnon* to their logical extremes and deconstructing our readings even as we produce them, the novel causes each consecutive level of “reality” to crumble under us, and we find ourselves, as Brooke-Rose argues we do in the postmodern world, with no ground of truth, no “last word” upon which to rest (*RU* 50). While my (and Brooke-Rose’s) use of narratological terms like “diegetic levels” and “metalepsis” bespeaks an effort to immobilize the structures long enough to map out their violation and the subject construction it effects, *Thru*’s relentless climbings and fallings achieve something as close as I can imagine to a thorough deconstruction of narrative hierarchy. We have been thrown into Thru’s “hyperspace,” which, as we recall from Jameson, transcends “the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to map its position in a mappable external world” (Jameson 44). Indeed, it is the (extratextual) reader who, deprived of any focalizing surrogate, “has to be prepared for the undeicidable”—Ali Nourennin’s pun on “deictic,” as in *pointing out*, emphasizing the almost-physical displacement or disorientation (un-point-out-ability) effected by such undecidability (*Th* 608, emphasis mine). The novel thus exemplifies metalepsis’s transformative effect as it actualizes metaleptic interaction with the reader, leaving us changed, however fleetingly, in intellectual ways that are not, I would argue, without their emotional and psychological consequences.

*Thru* tests the limits of the deconstructive process, as it inverts, re-inverts, and disrupts hierarchies of professor/student, man/woman, writer/written, reality/fiction. On one “level,” Brooke-Rose seems to acknowledge that because even *Thru*’s nonexistent, shifting narrator must locate itself in its discursive universe in order to narrate at all, the text must rehierarchize, however temporary its structures turn out to be. If the novel’s (“metaphorical”) politics are anarchist or revolutionary in spirit, *Thru* also recognizes the need for much more limited, evolution-
ary reforms in the power structure. Toward the end, it declares, in the form of a concrete poem, that both the “REVOLUTION” (asserting itself both backward through the “generatioN Of an Increasing vasTness fULL Of what neVER/ the mOre/ dwIndles/ To a/ structUred/ eLite” and climbing upward [and therefore backward too] through its ranks, so undermining both horizontality and verticality while simultaneously participating in them) and the “show within the SHOW . . . must go on” (741–42). In more readable terms: even in the face of what should be crippling revolution (read: deconstruction)—and perhaps in part because that revolution must dismantle the system from within (must partake of the logic and structures it attempts to undermine)—governments and people (and language and human thought) will continue to do their jobs, to constitute a new system, construct new hierarchies, rewrite the text, restage the show. And, after all, although we never gain a firm grasp on any “true” narrative hierarchy in Thru, never determine who wrote whom or what, if anything, “really” happened, “we” do rise phoenix-like from the diegetic ashes to regain a sense of security in our extradiegetic and even extratextual status.

The novel’s final acknowledgment of the imperative to reconstruct, however, takes the form of another self-deconstructive game. Even as the narrator of the moment clearly constructs a hierarchy in granting “degrees of presence” to all conceivably relevant subjects in a grand grade roster, he/she/it calls into question the binary opposition present/absent, both by insisting on gradations in between the extremes and by “marking” some “characters” “x” for absent while, in the mere inclusion of them on its roster, rendering them present. Moreover, the exercise again reverses some of the key hierarchies in the novel: first, the grades, or rather “Portraits,” are given “by the Student Body” (Th 741); second, exactly those subjects we considered most present (Larissa, Armel, the Text, the Narrator[s]) are marked absent (the reader, unfortunately, does not register on the list). Of course, the roster’s own immediate frame “remarks” on its inscription of the very sort of hierarchy it theoretically aims to disrupt, noting that it presents names “alphabetically/ marked in columns that support the / proepigrammed lin-guistic edifice / of marked and un-re-marked” (737, emphases mine). But in paradoxically encompassing both construction and destruction, this last move of Thru presents itself as the epitome of deconstruction, whose very name accomplishes the same paradoxical yoking. Thus, the prepositional series ends still in the midst of undermining narrative’s “essential” boundaries. And we end still uncertain of who inhabits which narrative plane.
But just as Beckett’s subject can’t not write itself into existence, perhaps even Brooke-Rose’s fluid, postmodern subject can’t not restructure, rehierarchize, remap its world in defensive response to deconstruction. In the more grounded, more traditionally structured novels of the Intercom Quartet, Brooke-Rose seems to grant the full force of the sort of reinscription of hierarchy enacted by the grade roster in a world where the “text” to which all has been reduced cannot escape the structure of the language of which it is made. The author does gesture at removing this roadblock in two of her later novel titles: following up on another piece of the REVOLUTIONary acrostic puzzle—the neologism “textiVORE”—she goes on to publish Verbivore and Textermination. But, although her Intercom Quartet moves from the stable if sci-fi world of Xorandor, which, despite its title meaning “wholly ambiguous or wholly indeterminate,”52 contains no metalepsis,53 to the baldfacedly and intertextually metaleptic Textermination, ultimately the frame resurfaces, and the verbs are not vored, the texts are not terminated.

Brooke-Rose has dragged her reader through bedazzling acrobatics—from Out, which rousts us from our accustomed frameworks of understanding, to Thru, which strands us in a seemingly groundless hyperspace. In Brooke-Rose’s postmodern worlds, there is simply no safe place for us to stand. As soon as we “feel secure,” she makes us “think again,” and we discover that we must not identify too closely with the frameworks we construct (for, time and again, we “vanish into a linguistic edifice [we] have erected”), but, like Out’s Ukayan, “must learn to identify with the flux” (Hayman and Cohen 8; Th 703; O 63). If Brooke-Rose succeeds, she has demonstrated to the reader what it feels like to live in a discursive universe; she has allowed us to view the postmodern flux from outside, from above, from within, and if we have come thru, it is only thanks to the talent she has fostered in us for letting go of our old habits of reading long enough to open ourselves up to the essentially destabilizing experience of self-undermining, metaleptic narrative. Carter will ultimately aim to induce a similar experience, but since her deconstruction serves a feminist agenda, she must first return to the scene of the violent, embodied, Beckettian vicious cycle of construction and spell out its social and political implications via a rhetorical use of metalepsis. It is only by recontaining the subject in its material trappings—and, relatedly, by restratifying the fluid levels of the reading subject—that she can endow it with the wings to soar, if only momentarily, more freely than the Between translator could ever do.