"Groping inside language’: translation, humour and experiment in Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Between* and Brigid Brophy’s *In Transit*"

‘We live in an age of transition wouldn’t you agree and must cope as best we can …’ [[1]](#endnote-1)

Published within a year of each other at the end of the 1960s, Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Between* (1968) and *In Transit: An Heroic –Cyclic Novel* (1969) by Brigid Brophy both seemed to revel in what Kingsley Amis termed, with characteristic causticity, ‘experimental tomfoolery’.[[2]](#endnote-2) Moving between fourteen languages including English French, German Italian, Czech and Dutch and set in the liminal spaces of planes, hotels and the peripatetic world of international conferences, *Between* is a lipogrammatical text written entirely without the verb ‘to be’. Working as a simultaneous translator, the unnamed, female narrator travels from one country to another digressively weaving her meditations on language and translation between two non-linear, framing ‘stories’. The first of these describes the course of a marriage annulment, the second, follows an exchange of love letters written in Medieval French. A year later, Brigid Brophy published her post-Joycean anti-novel, *In Transit*, a similarly ‘difficult’ experimental text that darts mischievously between languages and genres parodying fairy tales, pornography, opera and detective fiction. The indeterminately gendered Evelyn Hilary (Pat/Patricia) O’Rooley is a figure stranded between genders. Marooned in an airport transit lounge, rummaging in his/her corduroy trousers for proof of gender membership, Pat/Patricia is bewildered by the rigidity of the signs and modes of masculinity and femininity prompting numerous comical ‘unsexings’.

Both *Between* and *In Transit* share an intrepid, even, some might say, reckless, interest in formal innovation wherein the idea of the novel is set on its head, the conventions of realism blithely discarded with a bracing, even impish, sense of the comedic, sometimes bordering on the farcical. Both Brophy and Brooke-Rose are interested in the possibilities of the slippery intricacies of language that quietly organise and corral our worldview and subjectivity. Their examinations of the gendering inherent in everyday language, in each case examining the marked feminine of Romance languages ‘long lost code of zones lying forgotten under layers of thickening sensibilities (*Between*, p. 468), reveal how women must always learn to translate themselves into the logic of the universal masculine ‘he’. In different ways then, both (anti) novels enact what Brooke-Rose described as ‘groping inside language and forms’ to find, not mastery, but a thoughtful exuberance.[[3]](#endnote-3)

**How to be both**

In a 1958 review of the English translation of Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnameable*, Christine Brooke-Rose (1923-2012), at the time the author of relatively conventional novels, found herself so exhilarated by Beckett’s writing that she began to see the potential of novelistic form beyond mimetic realism and advocates giving the post-war British novel a ‘thorough beating’ or, at the very least a ‘good airing’. Reading Beckett, Brooke-Rose began to understand the novel as possessing an inherent mobility--the ability to work against itself, to decompose or decreate itself, even in the very act of composition. In her review, she advises turning the novel ‘inside out’ in an effort to leave behind what she calls ‘straight’ writing’ whose ‘main concern is to tell a story about persons recognizable as human beings in recognizable situation’. ‘It seems necessary’ she says, ‘to the development of the novel or the play that every now and then anti-novels or anti-plays should be written’. [[4]](#endnote-4) Now beginning to receive the critical attention her work incontestably merits, Brooke-Rose’s experiments with the novel began, albeit rather tentatively, with her 1960 novel *The Dear Deceit*. Though it cannot plausibly be described as an anti-novel or even experimental, it does show the early stages of her exploration of the possibilities of novelistic form. Based on her father’s life, the novel is mostly realist but notable for its reversal of the temporal order of the plot, a technique unexceptional today, but innovative enough for its time. A humorous but emphatically non-experimental novel, *The Middlemen: A Satire* followed in 1961 before Brooke-Rose endured a prolonged period of serious illness during which she fell out with her habitual reading practices, describing how, at this time, she ‘couldn’t read novels, good or bad, about love-affairs, class-distinctions and one-upmanships’. Her attention now turned from fiction to scientific texts, a move unsurprising perhaps for someone whose keen analytical skills earned her a job as a code-breaker in Bletchley Park during the war. Finding science books full of ‘their own curious poetry’, they seemed to act as the bridge, a hitherto absent connection, between her critical work on the poetics of Ezra Pound, the *tropismes* of Natalie Sarraute and the austere precision of Alain Robbe-Grillet, and her creative writing that seemed in many ways to be lagging behind her critical interests.

Beckett’s second novel *Watt* (1953) was also extremely influential for her at this ‘turning point’ in her practice. [[5]](#endnote-5) For Brooke-Rose, Beckett’s writing seemed to bring together two worlds:

The almost mathematical precision of language, the humorous play with all the possible permutations of the simplest situation, as if each had its own philosophical existence, the mock ‘scientific’ but also in some way truly scientific attitude behind the poetry […] seemed to me to be the only way of dealing with both inner and outer reality in this age of the uncertainty principle in physics.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Not for her, then, the rigid demarcations between literature and science, that of the ‘two cultures’ model propounded by C.P. Snow in 1959 who declared that ‘intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly split into two polar groups’ [[7]](#endnote-7) And so it was, after Beckett, that Brook-Rose’s writing begins to challenge ‘the reality behind the appearance’, becoming something intrinsically *between*; between science and art, and criticism and fiction.[[8]](#endnote-8) Furthermore, Brooke-Rose sees another level of ‘in-betweenness’ in the novel, believing that the two modes of writing, realism and its opposite, can be present at the different times in the same writer --‘There is,’ she says, ‘room for both’. [[9]](#endnote-9) For her, experimental writers and what she calls the ‘consolidating writers’ are both concerned in their own ways with testing how far language can express the world. Unlike B. S. Johnson, whose vehement dislike for realism was well known and publicly expressed, Brooke-Rose did not despise realism and in fact professed her admiration for many realist writers, both past and present. What troubled her was not realism itself but what she regarded as the encouragement of a simplistic, ‘very diluted’ act of identification with characters. This was, she thought, a problem with the rather stagnant cultures of reading in post-war Britain rather than with literature itself.[[10]](#endnote-10) She also notes that the term realism is often mishandled and used to indicate the complete aesthetic antithesis to experimentalism. To experiment can be to try out new versions of realism. Lest we forget, she says in ‘Illiterations’, the *nouveau roman* was originally called ‘nouveau realisme’ when it was first encountered by critics.[[11]](#endnote-11) Karen Lawrence describes Brooke-Rose’s writing as a determined quest to find ‘survival strategies for the genre of the novel.’[[12]](#endnote-12)Rather than thinking of literary experimentalism as ‘as “merely” formal tinkering’ should, she says, think rather of ‘the link between innovation and a completely different way of looking’.[[13]](#endnote-13) As well as these acts of naïve ‘identification’ Brooke-Rose regarded the extremely rigid conventions of genre as a fundamental obstacle to exploring the possibilities of novelistic form. She was particularly drawn to the potential science fiction as a genre: ‘One of the main attractions of science fiction is in its structuring paradox in that it both beautifies and neutralizes our fears of science’s dehumanization and displays the inexorable “necessity” of science with the “freedom” of fiction’.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Moving to Paris in 1968 to take up an academic position in the English department at University of Paris VIII, Vincennes at the invitation of Hélène Cixous, Brooke-Rose left Britain disheartened with the parochialism of an indigenous literary culture in which her work was received with almost complete indifference; ‘Not for the English’, said Frank Kermode, ‘the sophisticated epistemology of the new French writers’.[[15]](#endnote-15) Her better-known contemporary, B.S. Johnson (1933-1973), often called somewhat misleadingly, a ‘one man avant garde’, compared this aesthetic and intellectual narrowness in the British novel against post-war literature in Europe, particularly in France, that had seen the rise and fall of the existentialist novel, the widespread influence of post-structuralism, the advent of the *nouveau roman* and the beginnings of deconstruction: ‘Only when one has had some contact with a continental tradition of the avant garde does one realise just how stultifyingly philistine is the general book culture of this country.’[[16]](#endnote-16) The hostility expressed towards experimental writers in Britain in the 1960s was mostly aimed at the typographical capers of Johnson who made, as Glyn White notes, ‘a conspicuous target and perhaps it is not surprising that hostile critics prefer to attack the perceived experimentalist position in the person or work of Johnson [as] Brooke-Rose and her novels are much more elusive.’ [[17]](#endnote-17)

By that time she moved to Paris, Brook-Rose had already written *Out* (1964) and *Such* (1966), *Between* (1968), with *Thru* coming later in 1975.[[18]](#endnote-18) Each of these works moved further ‘In one way or another,’ says Kermode, (a long-term admirer of her work) from the ‘comfortable tacit agreement between author and reader as to the relation of fiction to reality.’[[19]](#endnote-19) All four novels renegotiate this relationship between language and reality, and between reader and writer, clearly anticipating Roland Barthes’s ideas of the *lisible* and the *scriptible* in *S/Z* (1970) and *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973). The lipogrammatic constraint avoiding the verb ‘to be’ in *Between* is, of course, echoed a year later in Georges Perec’s *La Dispartiton* (1969) written without the letter ‘e’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Brooke-Rose’s apparent allegiance to poststructuralism and the OULIPO-style constraints she sometimes imposed on her writing have been emphasised in the critical reception of her writing helping to categorise her as a wilfully difficult writer, one whose ‘whose work could take artful pains to dispense with seemingly indispensable linguistic foundation stones’.[[21]](#endnote-21) There has been however, as Adam Guy has recently noted, a tendency to overstate the influence of post-structuralism in her work and to focus on the more mechanically linguistic aspects of her experimentalism at the expense of overlooking the warmer, wittier tones in her writing.[[22]](#endnote-22)

**The task of the translator**

Kinsgsley Amis thought the failure of experimentalism in Britain was because ‘its intake of human stuff was so low’; in other words, he saw any kind formal innovation in the novel as a linguistic jousting contest that abjured human interest in favour of showy aesthetic pyrotechnics. For Amis, then, innovation in form was always at the expense of content.[[23]](#endnote-23) But Brooke-Rose was no mere dabbler in difficulty; she did not pursue experiment frivolously for its own sake or to impress her Parisian narratatologist friends (though she did, she admits, sometimes consider this too). A ‘firm believer in fiction that has content, information’--for her ‘it was important to get everything right’, [[24]](#endnote-24) Brooke-Rose wrote that ‘people are, and will always be, the stuff of the novel’ and in this way, her work demonstrates that innovation need not be hostile to the ‘real’ world (Friedman and Martin, p. 12). In *Between*, there is a human story occurring both at the personal and historical level, and this takes place around various acts of translation. The bi-lingual translator, who has lived between two languages and cultures both during and after the war, now makes her living ‘passing on other people’s ideas’.[[25]](#endnote-25) In this way then, Brooke-Rose examines the profession of the translator in order point up the woman’s (and all women’s?) dual role as both a passive receiver of language and as an active agent of meaning, not unlike the activity of a writer. Although the word she uses are not her own, it is up to the “I” to decide what she says in her final translation; she is thus responsible not just for finding strict equivalences but also for a kind of neutral re-writing. As Sarah Birch notes, ‘While she awaits her birth in her own voice, she can only speak though the voices of others, but this “speaking though” also constitutes her struggle to get out.’[[26]](#endnote-26) It might also be said that the personal story is a translation of the wider European post-war histories in which she involved, chequered pasts that require her rewriting of wartime sins, cleaning out the dark areas in an act of linguistic whitewashing. To qualify as translators, she and her German lover Siegfried must obtain a “Persil-Schein certificate denazifying us whiter than white’ (*B*, p. 473). Words she has during the war, such as ‘Schweinnhunde! Kommunisten! Sozialdemokraten! Homosexuelle Juden!’ must be forgotten, cleansed from her memory: ‘You will understand these things later my child, but remember now, your uncle did only his duty as a Party member.’ (*B*, p. 526)

*Between* opens in the transitional, provisional halfway space that is air travel. Between ‘the enormous wings’ of a jet plane, the body floats’ between ‘doing and not doing’, between countries and lovers; between ‘two social orders’, and, above all, between language and body. The narrator, an unnamed woman who work as a simultaneous translator, is in perpetual transit between European cites, (Prague, Rome, Paris, Athens) attending conferences trying to find equivalences for words across cultures, peoples and places. She works listening, translating, interpreting, reformatting. All the while relaying the words of others, her role requires her to be invisible--a transparent, neutral in-between channel connecting two parties whose motives are often not clear and at times pernicious. The narrative cuts back and forth from the interior of the plane to a conference translation booth to various hotel rooms to thoughts of a marriage annulment, sightseeing trips in a variety of European countries, a dialogue in love letters between the translator and the balding, paunchy Siegfried and a house (‘que voulez-vous dire “un cottage?”’) in Wiltshire. All of this occurs across multiple languages and cultures, suggesting that seeing one’s life from fluctuating perspectives and grammatical fissures is another act of translation. As Karen Lawrence has suggested, in Brooke-Rose’s writing ‘external grammar is never merely a question of relationship between parts of the sentence but a technique for exploring fixings and releasings of positionality.’[[27]](#endnote-27)

*Between* might refuse plot in the conventional sense of beginning, end and all linear points in between but that is not to say that it des not have a human ‘story’. Circuitously, we learn that the ‘I’ is a bi-lingual woman, born in France before the Second World War to a French mother and a German father. Her father leaves when she is very young and she is sent by her mother to study in Germany and to live with her father’s relatives but then war breaks out and she finds herself trapped in Germany, caught between two cultures and languages that now are now understood not as geographical neighbours but terms of allies and enemies. She is never to see her mother again. After the war is over, ‘I’ finds herself in the French Zone in the newly partitioned Berlin. Now married to an English airman, she must account to the authorities for her wartime ‘between–ness’. Carefully explaining her linguistic dexterity to the monolingual Americans who are suspicious of her wartime translation work from French to German: ‘What did you do. You will excuse these questions Fraulein but in view of your nationality we must make sure of your undivided loyalty total ignorance dissidence change of heart’ (*B*, p. 487). She is now considered a politically suspect citizen, as she has been constantly moving (in transit) between the language of both ally and enemy. What is it that has she actually heard? Her interrogators view ‘other’ languages (that is, not English) as simple mechanisms able to be unlocked in the act of translation and to deliver direct equivalences, an approach which ignores the idea that perfect translation is impossible and that there might exist at the heart of every language a certain level of untranslatability. *Between* suggests that we need understand untranslatability, not as an obstruction to communication, but as an always-dynamic condition of active difference that compels the listener as well as the translator to be active to the question ‘what difference does it make?’, a repeated refrain in the novel. As Lawrence Venuti notes, translation is ‘constantly engaged in signalling those differences to constituencies and institutions in the receiving situations, and constantly inventive in finding the linguistic and culture means to make as productive difference in that situation.’[[28]](#endnote-28) So, even when we think we know the most reliable translation for a particular word we must remain vigilant of the slippage between a translated word and what it might means in different places and contexts. The margin for error is considerable: ‘If you read a word in your own language, it can come out like a pun: “lecheria,” in Spanish, for example, which means milk shop, but of course, she (the translator) reads it as “lechery.”’ that kind of disorientation ‘says, Brooke-Rose is ‘very personal’. The idea of home, the rural house in Wiltshire, is constantly translated, becoming increasingly unreal as she attempts to explain it in different languages: “que voulez-vous dire, un cottage?’ is a repeated refrain. Can it truly be the case, she wonders, that the word cottage has no equivalent outside of English? Is it a ‘piccolo chalet’, or a ‘box a refuge a still small centre within the village within the wooded countryside within the alien land’ (*B*, p. 418). The otherness of other languages (not English) ‘block the text’, suggests Brooke-Rose, ‘rather like the ideograms in Pound’, arresting our attention around ideas of semantic, linguistic and affective equivalence

Translation is at once an intellectual and physical activity. Siegfried, her lover and also a translator, uses his brain, eyes, hands, ears and voice in the act of translation:

He lip-reads the speaker on the dais through the small glass booth and in the next split second hears the expected English syllables of problems we should consider today for the sake of mutual understanding the advancement of learning the true state of things that pour into the earphones through the distant brain way up and out into the mouthpiece in simultaneous German (*B*, p. 407)

‘On one level,’ the translator notes, ‘one hardly ever listens. On another one has to understand immediately you see because the thing understood slips away, together with the need to understand’ (p.429). The novel suggests that mishearing, mistranslation and misinterpretation are often at the heart of human relations and problems, both at the intimate level of love and at in the discourses of enmity and diplomacy. What do we really mean when we speak? We do not always say what we mean. And vice versa. But we must remind ourselves that behind the rules of *langue*, the syntax and the grammar, exists the ‘Misch-Masch of tender fornication’ that is the unruliness of the *parole* where words ‘fraternized silently beneath the syntax, finding each other funny and delicious’ ‘(*B*, p. 447).

The act of translation is crucial at this important moment where peace in post-war Europe depends on so many fragile lies and truths: ‘we must surely acknowledge that these vital lies have more energy than so many of the fragile truths that surround us in this supposedly rationalistic age so dominated by masculine upward myths’ (*B*, p. 505). Relatively new after the War,[[29]](#endnote-29) by the 1960s, simultaneous translation had been used routinely in the many international conferences and congresses set up in the processes of the reparation and modernization of Europe post-1945. The translator works for the Agricultural Aid Commission, a Conference of Irrigation Engineers, and Congresses of Semiologists and Demographers. In the ‘bombed out hallowed structures’ of post-war Europe, accurate communication and a consensual version of ‘truth’ are urgent matters. Language, the novel suggest, possesses a powerful ability to collaborate in the pursuit of truth. ‘Structures of power, even when they appear to depend on physical force, in fact depend on the assistance and cooperation of innumerable individuals for the administration of physical force’ (*B*, p. 509). The act of translation and interpretation always requires a bridging of (at least) two human worlds-- that of the speaker and the audience, with the translator a silent meditating presence in between. Running to keep up with herself, words need to be found immediately, equivalences secured and meanings expressed, *Between* examines the differences between two (or more) things, often languages, and how these might may be bridged, may be made less different, more equivalent, but without the semantic violence of erasure or exclusion: ‘We live in age of transition between one social order and another and we must effectuate that transition or die.’ (*B*, p. 462).

But the translator finds it hard to translate her own being into the world. In a text that rejects the verb ‘to be’, the narrator has difficulty knowing who she is, she cannot say ‘I am…’: ‘she doesn’t know who she is, she is always translating from one language to another and never quite knows to which language she belongs’. Without the expression ‘to be’, all becomes activity rather than being, suggesting that we can, in fact, live without saying definitively ‘I am’ this or that. The status of being in the solid continuous present tense is put into question; if you cannot say what something is, then you must describe it by its function, what it does in the world. Thus, we get the whole consciousness of the novel, what McHale calls its ‘interior discourse’ [[30]](#endnote-30) ascribed to the voice of the ‘I’ but only in terms of doing than than being. This concept is also played out in the constant appearance of a bedside bottle of mineral water. It is always water and mineral and in a bottle but is designated by a shifting series of names on the labels in several languages: ‘Vichy water’, ‘*eau de Vichy*,’ *Vichywatten*,’ ‘*l’eau qui petille’*, and ‘Spa Monopole’. In this way then, she describes things in the world avoiding saying ‘it is’ or they are’. Likewise, describing a door without saying this ‘is a door’, we read, ‘Ausgang. Exit. Push, Tirez. Drücken.’ We know this refers to a door, but we learn of this object in the world through its doing rather than being. The door only comes into meaning, that is, into being though a shared familiarity with its action not through its sign in the world.

**One of our members is missing**

While Brooke-Rose’s work becomes increasingly ‘difficult’, the key to reading and understanding the more abstract aspects of her writing is often to be found in her use of humour deployed to help her readers to apprehend, what she called, the ‘swift live thing’ at the heart of her work.[[31]](#endnote-31) ‘One thing I have against the French school is, on the whole-I don't want to mention any names-but on the whole there is very little humour.’[[32]](#endnote-32) In her dexterous multilingual wordplay and the liberal use of punning, humour is key to Brooke-Rose’s work and the pun is the cornerstone of this humour: ‘The pun is free, anarchic, a powerful instrument to explode the civilization of the sign and all its stable, reassuring definitions’. Puns ‘open up’ she says, [ … ] a different dialectic with the reader’ (*Thru*, 607). Not unlike the solver of cryptic crossword puzzles (or should that be the inventor of them?), punning shows off the speaker’s facility with language, both native and second and third, forcing the listener/reader to engage with something other than language as information. A kind of queering of everyday language, the polysemous nature of punning arrests language as metaphor; things just cannot be like something else and this, in turn has a potent effect on narrative momentum. Punning is deliberate non-meaning or, sometimes perverted meaning, compelling words to be read as encrypted code rather than as flow, slowing down the reading process in order to think of the variations upon which the author is playing and to work out for herself which of these meanings is the ‘real’ one. Arresting the logical flow of language, punning is a refusal to go anywhere in terms of dialogue and narrative progression. Karen Lawrence suggests that *Between* is a ‘scandalous’ text for its refusal to really ‘go’ anywhere in narrative terms, a refusal taken much more literally in Brigid Brophy’s 1969 novel, *In Transit* in which an airport lounge becomes the unlikely cauldron of linguistic and gender revolutions, and the fertile ground for much punningly cunning badinage around the hunt for a missing member.

Called by Brooke-Rose the ‘brainiest women in Britain, Brigid Brophy’s oeuvre was heterogeneous to say the least. She wrote plays, novels prose, essays, literary reviews all the while campaigning for the rights for animals and writers. *In Transit* takes the form of a bawdy airport farce, fairy tale parody, detective novel and miniature opera. A baroque marriage of Joycean badinage, typographic experiments, Steinian punnery and Sternean metanarrative digressiveness, Brophy’s writing is wilfully eccentric and, as Annagret Maack says, breaks, ‘with every convention of the traditional novel.’[[33]](#endnote-33) It is a riotous and baroque text; one so unruly, in fact, that one critic declared it to be devoid of any meaningful gender politics. Representative only of the novel’s ‘move towards anarchy’, *In Transit’s* puns and metafictional conceits thwart any possibility, suggests Magali Cornier Michael, of a meaningful engagement with gender politics.[[34]](#endnote-34) Brain McHale does not agree with such an assessment of the conflict between form and content. Drawing comparisons between *Between* and *In Transit*, he suggests that Brophy’s anti-novel puts into ontological practice the more theoretical ‘plurality’ of *Between* by ‘dissolving the unitary real into a number of competing alternative realties governed by different physical laws.’[[35]](#endnote-35) McHale regards the gendered mutability of the central character Pat/Patricia O’Rooley as part of a longer tradition of ‘the inverted and exploded body’ that can be ‘traced back through such early-twentieth-century precursors of postmodernism as Alfred Jarry.[[36]](#endnote-36) Bodies in one form of transit or other, he suggests that have been an important part of literary explorations of the borders and limits of selfhood and language. The inversion and explosion of the Pat/Patricia’s body involves not only corporeal misplacement but also a surrendering to the semantic vagaries of circumstances. Losing the gender of your main protagonist poses certain fundamental problems for the writers, which are, in the first place, chiefly pronominal ones. However, if we cannot say he or she it does not follow then, Brophy suggests, that we cannot say ‘I’:

I . . . could hardly (could I?) commit myself to a main character at whose

every appearance in my narrative I would be obliged to write he/she,

his/her, etc. For which reason

I have

dear Sir/Madam

to remain

Your

I

(*IT*, p. 69)

For the first sixty-nine or so pages, until section 2 entitled ‘Interludibrium’, we are not told the gender of the speaker—in fact, we may not even notice that we do not know this until the narrative voice, always in search of an interlocutor, tells us, ‘You’ll notice that I […] have trickered you off with mirror effects. For instance, if I were not an I, it could not be I who would be committed to a he/she.’ (p. 69) We do not learn of a gender for O’Rooley until much later (and even then, it oscillates) but in the meantime it becomes clear that the reader first must challenge the authority of narrative voice. Who is the ‘nanny interlocutor’ that inhabits the conventional third person realist narrative? What is this ‘shameful hold’ that the quest for ‘compulsive interlocution’ exerts on modern literate man’? (p. 14). ‘How authors squirm, how they sidle from foot to foot to avoid that compulsion to narration […] They say they are seeking to alienate you. They take aim to fling you an open-ended fiction the book lands legs akimbo, pages open at the splits, less a book than a box of trick tools, its title DO IT YOURSELF KID (p*.*14). Do not be fooled by genre, who knows when a detective novel might veer suddenly into a romance or a Western or by the narrator who professes both knowledge and ignorance:

But it is clear at the period of thoughts and events recounted in Section 1 I could perfectly recollect which sex I belonged to […] Am I therefore trying to produce an *effect* of verisimilitude by the non-realistic method of pretending that I cannot now remember remembering what, it is admitted buy internal evidence, I did at that time remember quite clearly (p.70).

In Brophy’s novel, it seems that gender follows genre. If the latter is clear, then perhaps Pat/Patricia’s identity will soon resolve itself into some clearer sign of membership (all puns intended) member in his/her corduroy trousers. But s/he soon discovers that this is no thriller, or detective fiction nor romance. More worryingly for Pat/Patricia, it transpires that in this particular book, ‘External war has been declared between content and this form’. The novelist tries but fails to rein in the character and the plot: ‘he cramps and clamps his characters in order to cram them inside his narrow story lines’ (p. 44) but they will always, suggests Brophy, try to escape from their designated spaces.

After contracting a bad case of ‘linguistic leprosy’ (p.11), all meanings become unmoored from things in the world and beleaguered O’Rooley finds all signification absconding from him/her. There are no useful words, at least initially, to describe his or her gender. All signs of sexual difference have been evacuated from the body, or at least have become invisible, a body that had, until very recently been the site of some essential(ist) truth, a reliable depository of the markers of sexual difference which boils down to having or not having possession of the phallus. No longer Evelyn Hillary O’Rooley but Hooligan, he/she becomes a semantic delinquent, and who ‘by night has crept into the hall of sculpture’ and ‘vandalised the exhibits’ by chopping the torsos in two and swapping the Venus de Milo’s bottom half for Hermes top half. (p.74). Signs become increasingly fugitive and O’Rooley begins struggle to translate even the over-simplified, infantilised, environment of the airport-, in that represents ‘the true pure feel of the twentieth century’ (p. 23) -- a space that relies, above all, on the functionality of signs. O’Rooley finds him/herself radically estranged from the surrounding environment, all at once unable to read even the simplest of signs and stuck in the present tense of being perpetually in transit. As in *Between*, the punning reveals a more serious point regarding supposition and meaning. ‘We are all simply persons slit, split and filleted on a point of logic of our own perceiving. We noticed one day that it is merely arbitrary to suppose any nation or class superior to the rest simply because we happened to be born into it.’ (p. 27)

Palpating his/her body and clothing for signs of gender is a long and often arduous process for O’Rooley as amongst the folds, clefts and contours there is no real sign of obvious sexual difference. As all signs become open to translation, interpretation, and challenge, gender too, is reduced to a matter of interpretation, requiring a reader or an interlocutor to define what is masculine and what is feminine. The clue to gender identity comes only in a bewildering conversation with Betty Bouncer and her husband who finally establishes that O’Rooley is male and was Betty’s first date. As Betty appears to be ‘obviously heterosexual as she observes the ‘heterosexual conventions of speech […] I quite clearly am, must be and can only be A MAN (p. 111). Consciousness here becomes the search for an interlocutor, a reader of your own signs to help you with the meaning making activity of narrative. But when Patricia, now reconciled to being female, finds herself on a bizarre gameshow called WHAT’S MY KINK? taking place somewhere in the airport, she strategically changes tack and ‘resolves to be Patrick again’. She goes on to win the contest ‘coolly and decisively’ (p. 135), only as a man, it seems, can one win the game.

Interpolated into the main narrative that oscillates between Pat, Patrick and Patricia is that of L’HISTOIRE DE LA LANGUE D’OC, the title a punning take on *Histoire d’O* (19), described (just like *In Transit* itself) as a ‘misprinted mistranslated overestimated sadomastubatory pornofantasy-narrative (p.143).[[37]](#endnote-37) In conversation with the professor emeritus, Och, the heroine who only speaks only to give her consent to erotic degradation in the original *O*, becomes a complex, thinking subject who muses on the possibilities of the liberation of the imagination:

“To be absolutely frank, what I should most like to resemble is a small but powerful and concentrated bomb. My ambition is to explode and shatter the rules.”

“Splendider and splendider! You have the true violent spirit of the creative artist. It is by the setting off of bombs inside the existing framework of the arts that new artistic forms come into being.”

“And yet for all my creative energy I feel impotent,' Och sadly said. 'I can't find

anyone who will teach me the rules. So how can I make sure of breaking them?” (p. 193).

O’Rooley discovers that, at best, the rules governing gender are often a matter of convention and convenience. One might lose one’s member but this has little effect on the essential subjectivity: ‘Identity, however, is unloseable […] I have doubted often what I am, but never who’ (p. 44). This surely gestures to *Orlando,* VirginiaWoolf’s ‘writer’s holiday’, in which Orlando learns how to be both: ‘Orlando had become a woman-there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing what- ever to alter their identity.’ (p. 138). [[38]](#endnote-38)

While the farcical atmosphere of bawdy fantasy is different to the more poised textual disposition of *Between*, both texts share a common interest in examining the rules of novelistic form and of the possibilities of absence in fiction: both texts look at characters who are ‘increasingly not there.’ While the results produced in both *In Transit* and *Between* are frequently humorous and ‘punny’, they also reveal language’s power to shape the social order and, more dangerously, its susceptibility to ideological abuse and ability to whitewash itself with its own sly manoeuvres. If both Brophy and Brooke-Rose retained certain scepticism towards contemporary feminism, both wrote passionately about the power of language to act as society’s enforcer in the subjugation of women. More difficult to dismantle than a physical prison in the linguistic prison ‘(t)here are no bars’, around women’s cages now, and it ‘appears as if the cages have been abolished’ but language keeps women in their ‘natural’ place. ‘Discouraged from growing a “mind like a man’s”, women are encouraged to have thoughts and feelings of a specifically feminine tone […] So brilliantly has society contrived to terrorise women with this threat that certain behaviours is unnatural and unwomanly that it has left them no time to consider –or even sheerly observe—what womanly nature really is’ (p. 41, 43)[[39]](#endnote-39) In *Stories, Theories, Things*, Brooke-Rose tells an anecdote in ‘Woman as a Semiotic Object’ in which she recounts her despair at making Umberto Eco see the gendered nature of a particular linguistic construction. Despairing of Eco’s inability to see how gender is so deeply embedded into our language, she wondered if even semioticians, usually alive to all shades of linguistic nuance were ‘unconsciously nostalgic for nice, deep, ancient, phallocentric, elementary structures of significance’ (p. 249). While both Brophy and Brooke-Rose were wary of hastily ‘signing up’ to the feminist movement, each writer recognised that the invisible cage of language would be one of women’s most intransigent enemies in the struggle for even the most rudimentary gender equality.

In its task of translating versions of worlds to us, the novel is always, it seems, in transit from one mode to another. ‘The nature of the novel, William Gass says, ‘will not be understood at all until this i*s: from any given body of fictional texts*, *nothing* necessarily follows and anything plausibly may.’ The novel can be, and can do, many things at once. That is, it can accommodate many means of telling and not telling, showing and hiding, thinking and feeling-- ‘all methods work,’ says Gass, ‘and none do’.[[40]](#endnote-40) The recent revival of critical interest in the work of Brigid Brophy and Christine Brooke-Rose and more generally in mid-century experimental literature, illuminates a transitional, in-between spot in the history of the post-war British novel.

1. Notes

   Christine Brooke-Rose, *Between*, (Manchester, Carcarnet Press, 1986), p. 476. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted in J. Vinson ed. *Contemporary Novelists*, (London: St James Press and NY St Martins Press; 1972), p. 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. While there is no evidence that the two writers ever met, there is substantial correspondence between them archived in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at The University of Texas, Austin. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Samuel Beckett and The Anti-Novel’, *The London Magazine*, December 1958, 5.12, p. 3-46, p. 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In *Utterly Other Discourse: The Texts of Christine Brooke-Rose* Ellen G. Friedman and Richard Martin, eds. (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Freidman and Martin, p.11. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. C. P. Snow, The Two Cultures, with an introduction by Stefan Collini (Cambridge and New York, 1993), p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Dynamic Gradient’, *London Magazine*, March 1965, pp.89-96, p. 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Adam Guy, ‘that’s a scientific fact’: Christine Brooke-Rose’s Experimental Turn’, *The Modern Language Review* 111. 4 (2016), pp. 936-955. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. ‘Maria del Sapio Garbero, ‘A Conversation with Christine Brooke-Rose’, in *Christine Brooke-Rose Festschrift Volume 1*, (Singapore: Verbivoracious Press, 2104), pp. 144-166. P. 154. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Illiterations, in in *Christine Brooke-Rose Festschrift Volume 1*, (Singapore: Verbivoracious Press, 2104), pp. 41-59, p. 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Karen R. Lawrence, *Techniques for Living: Fiction and Theory in the Work of Christine Brooke-Rose*. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), p. 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. ‘Illiterations’, p. 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. ‘Science Fiction and Realistic Fiction’, in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Times Literary Supplement*, 1963. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. B.S. Johnson, Introduction, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs*? (London: Hutchinson, 1973), p.19. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface: The Presence of the Book in Prose Fiction (*Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005), p. 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. All subsequent references to these texts will come from *The Christine-Brooke Rose Omnibus, Four Novels*: *Out*, *Such*, *Between*, *Thru* (Manchester Carcanet, 1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Frank Kermode, *LRB*, 28 No. 7. 6 April 2006, p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See Warren Motte, *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *New York Times*, Margalit Fox, April 10th 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/10/books/christine-brooke-rose-experimental-writer-dies-at-89. [accessed October 13th 2106] [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Adam Guy, ‘that's a scientific fact’: Christine Brooke-Rose's Experimental Turn’ *The Modern Language Review*, 111. 4 (2016), pp. 936-955 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. David Lodge, *The Novelist at The Crossroads and other Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p.18-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Frank Kermode, ‘Flinch, Wince, Jerk, Shirk’, *London Review of Books*, 28.7, 2006, [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Sapio Gerbero, p. 154. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Sarah Birch, *Christine Brooke-Rose and Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p.81 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Karen Lawrence, ‘“ Floating on a Pinpoint”: Travel and Place in Brooke-Rose’s *Between’*, pp.76-96, p. 86 in Ellen J. Freidman and Miriam Fuchs eds. *Utterly Other Discourse: The Texts of Christine Brooke-Rose* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. ‘Translation, Empiricism, Ethics’, MLA, *Profession*, (2010), pp. 72-81, p. 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. The first time that simultaneous translation was used extensively was at the 1947 Nuremberg Trials. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Brian McHale, ‘I draw a line between one solar system and another”: The Postmodernism(s) of Christine Brooke-Rose’, in Friedman and Fuchs, pp. 192-213, p. 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Christine Brook-Rose, *A ZBC of Ezra Pound* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1971), p.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. David Hayman and Keith Cohen, ‘An Interview with Christine Brooke-Rose, Contemporary Literature, 17, (1976), in *Utterly*, p. 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Annagret Maack, ‘Concordia Discors: Brigid Brophy’s *In Transit*,’ *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 15.3, (1995): pp. 40-45, p. 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Magali Cornier Michael, *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse: Post World War Two Fiction*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), p.30 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. *Utterly Other Discourse*, p. 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987) p. 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. On the challenges of translating gender pronouns *In Transit* see Ina Shabert, ‘Translation Trouble: Gender Indeterminacy in English Novels and their French Versions’, *Translation and Literature*, 19. 1 (1970), pp. 72-92. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, 1928) p. 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Brigid Brophy, ‘Women’ in *Don’t Never Forget*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York, Chicago and San Francisco, 1966, pp. 38-45, p. 38, 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. William H. Gass, ‘The Concept of Character in Fiction’ in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, Michel J. Hofmann, Patrick D. Murphy, eds. (Durham and London: Duke University Press), pp.113-121, p. 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)