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## **Indeterminate Brooke-Rose**

Abstract

Christine Brooke-Rose is fascinated by the notion of indeterminacy, and throughout her career draws parallels between the science of uncertainty and the shifts in thinking engendered by quantum theory and the experimental literature of the sixties and seventies. Indeterminacy is an ambiguous term when applied to the literary text. If we call a text indeterminate we might mean that it has contradictory meanings or is open to multiple, equally weighted, possible interpretations, ones which the text itself does nothing to resolve. Here I offer a reading of Brooke-Rose's novel *Such* (1966) which argues that the novel is less indeterminate than it is about indeterminacy; that it does not so much present ambiguous or contradictory interpretive lines as offer a reflection on what the act of interpretation does, and what it might make happen; that it does not withhold knowledge from the reader so much as make the reader question the ways in which knowledge is itself implicated in the world around us. In the end the novel offers us what amounts to an ethics of indeterminacy, suggesting that we should be wary of all acts of interpretation, and alert to their potential for malignity or invasiveness.

Keywords: Christine Brooke-Rose; indeterminacy; quantum theory and literature; *Such*; literary interpretation

I approve, myself, dark spaces between stars;  
All privacy's their gift

*William Empson, 'Letter I'*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Empson, *Collected Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977), p.

Q: But you did make a conscious decision at one point in your career to write the indeterminate novel, rather than something realistic?

Christine Brooke-Rose: What a strange opposition. The realistic novel has its own indeterminacies. But anyway, it didn't happen that way at all. It was much more negative than that. I was simply dissatisfied with what I was doing [...] So it wasn't a decision to write indeterminate novels as such. It was simply a decision not to go on writing as I used to write.<sup>2</sup>

Christine Brooke-Rose did not decide to write indeterminate novels *as such* – nevertheless she does, in *Such* (1966), write a novel about indeterminacy. Brooke-Rose is more often thought about in terms of constraint than indeterminacy, due to her decision to write most of her novels under certain rules of exclusion or grammatical limitation, a decision which means that her work is often determined, in particular ways, before she starts writing.<sup>3</sup> Typically there are constraints at work in *Such*, namely her 'main narrative constraint', the 'pronounless present tense' and the 'metaphoric constraint' of astrophysics.<sup>4</sup> But it is largely against this notion of constraint that I want to read *Such*, and her writing more generally, as 'indeterminate'. I use this term both to indicate that she is engaged with a particular kind of scientific discourse about uncertainty and indeterminacy, and as a way to read her figurative imagination. Indeterminacy evokes both epistemic ambiguity and a muddy opacity, and *Such*, without itself being formally indeterminate 'as such', offers us a vision of what a sense of unconstraint might do elsewhere: to human relations, to epistemology, and to the human subject.<sup>5</sup>

She wrote in 1988, summing up much of her career, that:

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<sup>2</sup> 'A Conversation with Christine Brooke-Rose', in *Utterly Other Discourse: the Texts of Christine Brooke-Rose*, eds. Ellen J. Friedman and Richard Martin (Normal, IL.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995) pp. 29–37, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Those writers of the period who were particularly interested in constraint were also interested in the paradoxical increase in the arbitrary nature of what is generated by these procedures. This mix of randomness and precision is characteristic of both the OuLiPo group and Brooke-Rose, who were contemporaries in France; so it is that the minutes of the December 1973 meeting of the OuLiPo show that Harry Mathews proposed extending an invitation to her (<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b100101563/f4.item.r=zoom> [Accessed 30 August 2016]). She wrote about how her lipograms had in fact preceded those more famous ones of the OuLiPo member Georges Perec ('A year after the publication of *Between* (1968), Perec brought out *La disparation* [...] obviously, we had similar concerns', 'Conversation', in *Utterly Other Discourse*, p. 32).

<sup>4</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, 'A Writer's Constraints', in *Invisible Author* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002) pp. 36-52, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> 'Origin: early 17<sup>th</sup> century: from late Latin *indeterminatus*, from *in-* "not" + Latin *determinatus* "limited, determined"' (OED).

By now, I do know what I am doing: I deal in discourses, in the discourses of the world, political, technological, scientific, psychoanalytical, philosophical, ideological, social, emotional, and all the rest, so that knowledge to me is not an extraneous element I can put in or withhold at will, it *is* discourse, it *is* language [...] I deal in discourses, as received and perceived by this or that consciousness [...] Discourse comes from Latin *discurrere*, to run here and there. It has today become whole sets of rigid uses, and I am trying to make it run here and there again.<sup>6</sup>

Brooke-Rose resists a distinction between form and content that would understand knowledge as a thing that she can either 'put in' or 'withhold' from her writing. Writing is knowledge: it is already the thing we think it's about, and the intermingling of discursive fields is one of language's natural functions. All knowledge should be available for the sort of imbrication figured by the darting, criss-crossing motion of *discurrere*. As Karen R. Lawrence has argued, Brooke-Rose's prose itself is often characterized by a digressive and errant quality, as she writes about *Between*, 'the journey figures a freedom from conventional syntax [which] engages in transgressive travel in an unpredictable trajectory, a metonymic slide from here to there that produces a sense of random movement rather than purposeful direction'.<sup>7</sup> And so this is my Brooke-Rose: not the master of constraint and restraint, where the pun is the perfectly atomised and discrete symbol of her omniscient-seeming, polyglot use of language, as it spools off in carefully mapped directions, all of which pretend towards unpredictability, but each of which she has, in fact, pre-empted.<sup>8</sup>

This essay will instead read Brooke-Rose as a writer of *discurrere*, on the side of all sorts of errancy, ambiguity and indeterminacy, wandering through and across the different scientific, philosophical and literary categories of knowledge. And so here I offer a reading of *Such* that is interested in the ways she is interested in indeterminacy via some particular aspects of quantum theory, in particular its radical reimagining of the nature of observation and its relation to knowledge. Having introduced quantum theory into my discussion, I would like borrow a formulation from Daniel Albright, whose book *Quantum Poetics* 'does not concern itself with

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<sup>6</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Ill wit and good humour: women's comedy and the canon', *Comparative Criticism* 10, ed. by E.S. Shaffer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) pp. 121-38, p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> Karen R. Lawrence, 'Floating on a Pinpoint': Travel and Place in Brooke-Rose's *Between*, in *Utterly Other Discourse*, (Dalkey Archive Press, Normal, Ill.: 1995) pp. 76-97, p. 77

<sup>8</sup> In Brooke-Rose's fiction puns are used to highlight their paradoxical function as both representative of the arbitrary nature of linguistic significance (this word means two disparate things, and that fact means nothing) and their role as exemplars of a paranoid reading of a text (this word means two disparate things, and that fact must be made to mean something). Are they markers of accident, or markers of secret or arcane knowledge, invoking a world of false etymologies and a Freudian denial of chance? In this sense puns have an odd relationship to meaning, both making too much and too little of it, creating a fanfare about its existence only to retrospectively annul it.

science, only with the appropriation of scientific metaphors by poets'.<sup>9</sup> The mapping of physics onto literature is always transgressive, as he suggests, and involves 'distortions and contortions of verbal structures' (p. 2). There are certainly those that would take issue with Brooke-Rose's appropriation of this particular scientific discourse, in the spirit of Christopher Norris, who writes, 'For [quantum theory] has been among the most fertile sources for people in the (erstwhile) humanistic disciplines who wish to give "scientific" credence to their claim that realism is a thoroughly outmoded doctrine'.<sup>10</sup> Brooke-Rose's imaginative engagement with the language and philosophy of twentieth-century physics certainly draws parallels between seismic shifts in the two disciplines, with a particular emphasis on the recasting of knowledge and interpretation in both fields.

In 1962, she had a 'crisis', during which she fell ill for two years, an illness that returned her 'to her essential self'. During this time she read Samuel Beckett's novel 1953 *Watt*, which was 'a turning-point for me'. What she liked about the novel was its 'mathematical precision... [its] play with all possible permutations [...] the mock-"scientific" but also in some way truly scientific attitude'. All of this seemed to her 'the only possible way of dealing with both inner and outer reality in this age of the uncertainty principle in physics, an age of undermined causality' and 'the strange colloidal chemistry of psychic and physical energy' ('colloidal' means particles of one substance dispersed amongst those that make up another, and held there in suspension). In response to this sea-change, she 'devoured scientific books, which bred their own curious poetry', phrases which 'of precise significance to the scientist, fired my imagination as poetic metaphors for what happens between people, and people are and always will be the stuff of the novel'.<sup>11</sup> *Such* was the culmination of this breakthrough, as well as her 'turning-point' (she also calls *Such* her 'least "mimetic"' novel (*Stories*, p. 14)).

Just after the publication of *Such*, in a radio interview, she talked about her interest in science:

The modern scientific concept [is] that any object is affected by the instrument observing it. You can't actually see an electron jumping from one orbit to another, if indeed it jumps [...] And I think this is very important in the observation of reality; the moment you start observing it, it shifts. And I think this is a problem modern novelists

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Albright, *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot and the Science of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Norris, *Quantum Theory and the Flight From Realism: Philosophical Responses to Quantum Mechanics* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> 'Christine Brooke-Rose', in *World Authors: 1950—70*, ed. by John Wakeman (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 1975) pp. 223-25, p. 224.

have to face, that you can't just make a photograph of the reality immediately around you because it has already shifted by the very process of photographing it, and looking at it.<sup>12</sup>

Quantum theory, she suggests, presents us with an alternative way of thinking about empiricist measurability in more general epistemological terms – not as something we do, neutrally, to a passive world, but (another) way in which our presence registers itself, potentially positively or negatively. As a way of making things happen, and undermining the observer's sense of themselves as indifferent and non-interventionary, it is markedly in tandem with the poststructuralist model of active reading put forward by Roland Barthes *et al*, a milieu in which Brooke-Rose was immersed. She saw her work as participating in this new relationship between the reader and writer, in what she understood as a generous act of 'sharing': 'So what Barthes calls the writerly text as opposed to the readerly text – the readerly text is the consumer product [...] the writerly text is the text which the reader is writing with the writer – I want to share my writing with the reader. Of course, that means the reader has to wake up and see what I'm doing. All the writers of the postmodern movement are doing this; I'm not the only one' ('Conversation', p. 35).

Indeterminacy is itself an ambiguous term when applied to the literary text. If a text is indeterminate we might assume it has contradictory meanings or multiple, equally weighted, possible interpretations, which the text itself does nothing to resolve. Formally, *Such* is less indeterminate than it is about indeterminacy; it does not so much present ambiguous or contradictory interpretive lines as offer a reflection on what the act of interpretation does, and what sorts of things it might make happen; it does not withhold knowledge from the reader so much as make the reader question the ways in which knowledge is itself implicated in the world around us. More than a decade after *Such*, Brooke-Rose had a debate about the nature of textual ambiguity with Shlomith Rimmon, played out in the opening volumes of *Poetics Today*. Ambiguity, for Rimmon, argues Brooke-Rose, is a by-product of 'the impossibility of choosing' between 'two mutually exclusive fabulas', whereas Brooke-Rose suggests that ambiguity is in fact a function of the surface of a literary text.<sup>13</sup> Brooke-Rose elsewhere distinguishes between the language of Beckett, which is in 'one voice, but wholly dialogical, indeterminable', and

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<sup>12</sup> BBC Radio, *New Comment*, 2 December 1965. Transcript BBC Sound Archives.

<sup>13</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, Review, 'Shlomith Rimmon, *Concepts of Ambiguity: the Example of James*', in *Poetics Today*, vol. 1, 1-2 (Autumn 1979) pp. 397-401, p. 397.

'Hardy's poetic indeterminacy, the feeling of a meaningless chasm behind the very precision'.<sup>14</sup> 'Poetic' indeterminacy, then, is a con, 'the author manipulating the very indeterminacy before our eyes' (p. 122), distinct from a Beckettian approach, where 'all is undecidable'.<sup>15</sup>

Indeterminacy is something more than a refusal to decide between possibilities, but something more nebulous, a state that blocks choice altogether. Hillis Miller makes this point when he writes in response to Rimmon and Brooke-Rose, that 'the multiple ambiguous readings of James's fictions are not merely alternative possibilities. They are intertwined with one another in a system of unreadability, each possibility generating the others in an unstilled oscillation'.<sup>16</sup> A system of unreadability, where multiple possibilities are provoked and quelled in turn, inevitably makes greater (and perhaps unrealistic) demands on a reader, who must not be in a hurry to determine anything. Yet, as Samuel Weber has written, 'despite the tendency of the semiotic process to be open-ended and relatively indeterminate, determination takes place all the time, has always taken place, and will always take place'; this determination, he writes, is 'such a violent arrestation'.<sup>17</sup> In problematising the act of determination, *Such* indicts all texts as ideally indeterminate, including itself. The danger which I hope to evade in reading Brooke-Rose's indeterminacy is the enactment of a violent arrest of my own, as 'a particular interpretation can only involve an exercise of force, in order to arrest the inherent tendency of signs to refer to other signs, *ad infinitum*' (p. 20).

This question is more pressing than usual in *Such*, a novel in which determining knowledge is explicitly shown to be problematic, and inherently metaphorically violent. The desire to know and to understand the world here articulates itself as dangerous to meaning itself, which survives best as undifferentiated potential. Observation and interpretation act as deadening static takes on the flux that is reality, and the novel articulates the possibility of and the desire for more mobile and tolerant modes of perception. This might be constituted by merely existing alongside people and things without trying to decide about them, a way of feeling one's ignorance as sufficient and unproblematic. This type of not-knowing would be ok with error and discontinuity and opacity, immersed in what William Empson calls 'fruitful sorts of muddle' in *Seven Types* (p. 154), the sort of ambiguity which 'sustains intricacy, delicacy' (p. 160). Published in 1966, the novel is narrated by a man who is variously known as Someone,

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<sup>14</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Ill Wit and Sick Tragedy', in *Stories, Theories and Things* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991) pp. 103-122, p. 121.

<sup>15</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Fiction, Figment, Feign', in *Stories, Theories and Things* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991) pp. 157-166 p. 165.

<sup>16</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'The Figure in the Carpet', in *Poetics Today*, vol. 1.3 (Spring 1980), 107-118. p. 112

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Weber, *Institution and Interpretation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 21.

Lawrence and Larry.<sup>18</sup> Larry, who ‘collect[s] silences’ (*Such*, p. 203), is put through various epistemological estrangements to ask this central question, about whether or not it is better to know what’s going on around us: the reader is asked to navigate his variously conscious and unconscious dreaming, or hallucinations, whilst undergoing an operation. Larry’s awareness of what is ‘really’ happening is overlaid with his parallel experience, with the world of planetary movement infecting and being infected by what he undergoes on the surgeon’s table. Gradually the ontological hierarchy reverses, so that instead of ‘the floor sinks like a blanket of interstellar cloud’ (*Such*, p. 204), where the interstellar cloud is merely invoked metaphorically, instead the astral plane begins to accrue more felt reality than the hospital room. Whilst ‘dead’, Larry meets, or imagines he meets, a woman with whom he falls in love and their five ‘children’, who spring forth from the woman’s (‘Someone’s’) body, and who consist of surrealistically yoked-together appendages and distorted or malfunctioning objects. At different points in the narrative Larry imagines first that he, and then the other beings that interact with him, are planets, as here, where he is about to undergo his heart massage: ‘the five moons unless planets perhaps hang about anxiously [...] the orbits surround me like meridians in slight ellipses. One of them says lie down, I shall dissect you now’ (*Such*, p. 203). Brooke-Rose’s method here is characteristic of the novel as a whole: the ‘moons’ or ‘planets’ become ‘orbits’, which seem to have ontological heft, as they assume subject positions necessary to ventriloquise the medical staff. Orbits are the elliptical trajectories made by planetary bodies, but human bodies orbit each other too, and as a figure it captures something of the civilly distant yet precise circumlocution of a surgeon’s choreographed moves around a patient lying on a gurney. The indeterminacy of reference here seems to stem less from Larry’s hallucinatory perception and more from the Escher-like figurative and metaphoric structures at work: what is serving as illustration of what? It seems as though if we could work that out then we could work out which ‘level’ is realer, the interior, the sublunary, or the heavenly.

#### **A CERTAIN TOLERANCE OF AMBIGUITY: THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE AND THE LITERARY TEXT**

The double blow to human understanding of the physical universe that occurred in the twentieth-century was delivered by the theories of relativity and quantum mechanics. The former does ‘violence [...] to our concept of physical causation’, as Paul Davies puts it, by

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<sup>18</sup> In the full-length studies on Brooke-Rose, the novel is usually dealt with along with one or both of *Out* and *Between*.

proposing that there is an origin to both space and time.<sup>19</sup> The latter is arguably even harder to bend to an everyday understanding of physical processes. Werner Heisenberg, whose uncertainty principle is so central to the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, established that uncertainty inheres in nature and that discrete entities are subject to arbitrary fluctuation. Measurement cannot take place with any certainty in two locations simultaneously, and because ‘observation itself changes the probability function’ (*Physics and Philosophy*, p. 22), measurement whether by instrument or by human observation constitutes part of the reality of the atomic event. The world of particle physics after quantum theory is threatening on new levels both ontological and epistemological; indeterminacy is introduced, as Heisenberg writes, at the level of our basic ability to describe objects, or even to understand them as objects, if objects are in fact clusters of events. Niels Bohr’s reply to the famous 1935 Einstein, Podolsky and Rosen paper (which sought to disprove some of the tenets of the theory) spoke of ‘the necessity of a final renunciation of the classical ideal of causality and a radical revision of our attitude toward the problem of physical reality’.<sup>20</sup> Indeterminacy is not the same as not knowing, since the latter might reasonably expect there to be something which it does not yet know, but might do in the future (as Davies puts it, in an Einsteinian world-view, ‘observations do not *create* reality, they uncover it’ (p. xii)); now they might have a hand in creating it too.

For Brooke-Rose, what the Copenhagen interpretation articulates is a new and special kind of not-knowing, an insinuating and contagious uncertainty that seems to inscribe the object with a portion of itself. She read, and quoted, Heisenberg’s writing, as well as that of Neils Bohr, and it is this notion that she fixes on most intently and consistently in her discussions of quantum theory, particle physics, and the twentieth-century’s multiple scientific paradigm shifts more broadly: that scientific observation actively participates in, and affects the qualities of, the thing observed. As she wrote in 1965, it ‘has become a truism that, in submicroscopic terms, the object observed is affected by the instrument observing it – part of the famous principle of uncertainty which has indirectly affected all our philosophy and all our attitudes’.<sup>21</sup> In an essay in *Granta* in 1980, discussing contemporary fiction, Brooke-Rose writes again of her ‘everyday paraphrase of Einstein’s revolutionary insight that in the physical world there is no

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Davies, ‘Introduction’, in Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 1989) pp. vi-xviii, p. ix.

<sup>20</sup> Niels Bohr, ‘Can Quantum Mechanical Description of Physical Reality be Considered Complete?’, *Physical Review*, vol. 48, 15<sup>th</sup> October 1935, pp. 696-702, p. 697. For a useful recounting of the EPR episode, see *Niels Bohr, 1913—2013: Poincaré Seminar 2013*, eds. Olivier Darrigol, Bertrand Duplantier, Jean-Michel Raimond, Vincent Rivasseau (Switzerland: Springer International, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Dynamic Gradients’, *London Magazine*, 4.2 (March 1965) pp. 89-96, p. 93.



simultaneity without an observer to create it'.<sup>22</sup> In the modern constructivist theory of knowledge, as she understands it, 'not only coincidences are seen as arising out of the experiencer's own activity, but also the events that are coinciding, the notions of space and time, of motion and causality, and even those experiential compounds that we call objects – they all come about through the experiencer who relates, who institutes differences, similarities and identities, and thus creates for himself a stable world of sorts' (*Granta*), citing Piaget's *La Construction du réel chez l'enfant* (1967), and, in physics, Heisenberg's *Physics and Philosophy* (1958). Later, in 1982's *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, she was able to conclude that 'man is now wholly decentralised', because the advances on modern physics throw the notion of an 'ordered, systemisable universe' into doubt.<sup>23</sup> She posits a world in which we are still experiencing the aftershocks of a series of scientific advances: 'After Einstein's equivalence of matter and energy, after de Broglie's dual nature of particle and light wave, after Planck's demonstration that energy is emitted in discontinuous quanta, and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle' (*Rhetoric*, p. 7). Again, she highlights how 'observable phenomena are affected by the instrument observing them' meaning that 'a certain tolerance of ambiguity was introduced into science, and man is now faced with a philosophy of indeterminacy' (*Rhetoric*, p. 7). This means that for those in non-scientific cultural realms, but who, like Brooke-Rose, take seriously the cultural and philosophical import from the insights of science (as, she would argue, we all do, even if we are only dimly aware of the crosscurrents), there is a need to give up the post-Enlightenment hierarchy whereby epistemological clarity and precision are automatically placed above ignorance, muddle and indeterminacy. We need to learn to be satisfied with the faint modulations of possibility over the bullish pleasures of certainty. The uncertainty principle, as Peter Middleton has written about post-war American poets' attraction to physics, 'became the half-understood idea that a residual imprecision was unavoidable in all atomic measurements because the act of observing the atomic world necessarily altered its behaviour', which therefore 'appeared to provide a naturalized epistemology justifying the perspectival and affective character of poetic judgements'.<sup>24</sup>

Things, and texts, no longer sovereign and unchanging, register and respond to our knowing presence. Interpretation becomes a threatening and perhaps a destructive act, while

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<sup>22</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, 'The End of the English Novel', *Granta* (1<sup>st</sup> October 1980) <<https://granta.com/where-do-we-go-from-here/>> [Date accessed: 1<sup>st</sup> October 2016].

<sup>23</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 7. Future references will be to *Rhetoric*.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Middleton, *Physics Envy: American Poetry and Science in the Cold War and After* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 74.

observation loses its air of disinterest; it is not neutral or passive, but actively engages and, in doing so, fixes – and alters what it attempts to fix. Since this shift is in the observer's relation to the world, it is specifically a problem for the artist. Nevertheless, Weber argues, interpretation is difficult to avoid: 'And yet, in this spectral world, choices must still be made and identities established, no matter how provisional, probabilistic, and aleatory these may be. It is the inevitability of such decision making, in a situation marked by irreducible ambiguity, that gives rise to a thinking nourished not only by ambivalence, but also by anxiety' (*Institution and Interpretation*, p. xii). In the wake of quantum theory, interpretation, both of literary texts and of our material reality, is an active, creative, and thus potentially dominating act; as a correlation, the ambiguity it seeks to resolve becomes valorised. Peter Middleton writes that 'Listening to the physicists, a poet might well conclude that they were inviting other researchers to acknowledge their own uncertainties. *Not knowing* need not be a sign of error or failure' (*Physics Envy*, pp. 84-85). Brooke-Rose's acknowledgement of the ways in which ambiguity marks reality and its interpretation is also an explicit attempt to do what she thinks that novelists have hitherto failed to do, and pay an adequate attention to the slippage between the two. This new way of thinking impedes any sort of straightforward verisimilitude or attempts at any old-style conventional realism (or her characterisation of it): 'you can't just make a photograph of the reality immediately around you'.<sup>25</sup> If reality cannot be fixed without changing it, then all of the artist's efforts to do so are imbued with a knowledge of inevitable failure. The nebulosity of experience, and the unavoidable loss of that experience by any attempt to render it, are charged with pathos and an elegiac note; it has always slipped away as we attempt to record; but now – worse – it slips away because we attempt to record.

### ***SUCH*, OR FANTASIES OF IMPRECISION**

This note of loss is expressed fully in *Such*, a novel whose tone is part semi-mystified wonder and part ironically detached scientific precision. The appropriation of astrophysical metaphors in the novel allows Brooke-Rose to elaborate its dominant theme, a theme that she returned to in all her work; that of the precarity and violability of the human subject, and its continual vulnerability to dissolution. *Such* elaborates this as a series of positive permeabilities and crossings-over, among them the 'fusion of outer space with psychic space' ('Illicitations', p. 102) and asks us to consider clarity, definition and the spatial constraint needed for bodily

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<sup>25</sup> And yet, realism in the broadest sense is inescapable; as she pointed out in various essays and interviews, language has a core representative function, and no-one can write in a perfectly 'anti-realist' way: 'I am not antirealist, if by realism one means representation, and I do not think a writer can be antirepresentation: language is representational' ('A Writer's Constraints', p. 41).

coherence all as potentially diminishing. It is a novel that asks us to consider Larry's experience of being waves and undulations, a state amenable to the easy merging of one's atoms with another's, or the entangling of meridians: a version of intimacy more radically freeing than any we are used to. Astrophysics, which sees things at scales other than the human one – both planetary and submicroscopic – liberates Larry's perspective, and Brooke-Rose articulates both the dangers of lofty isolation evoked by the ponderous movements of astronomical bodies and probes into the potential play in the notions of attraction and repulsion at work between bodies of different scales. Human interaction is reinterpreted through the lens of the movement of the spheres, with the moments of Larry's operation expanding to comprise the entire novel, as well as an indeterminate and perhaps infinite amount of time (or not: 'I haven't got all day you know. – Oh, I thought you had a spacetime continuum. I apologise'.<sup>26</sup> *Such* repeatedly dramatizes everyday human interactions, emotions and relationships by literalising language that would more normally function as metaphoric, or as Lawrence notes, 'terms that we normally use to describe the defenses and vulnerabilities of human communication, such as emotional "opacity" or "resistance" are restored to their physical origins, sometimes passing from dead to live metaphor in a single instance'.<sup>27</sup> Collisions of will become actual collisions on a submicroscopic scale: his 'atmosphere' constantly changing depending on the 'recombination of ions' (*Omnibus*, pp. 241-42), or the 'combinations or splitting of its atoms' (p. 276), till it's 'less dense, with fewer collisions' (p. 242), and people are continually filling rooms with the submicroscopic ingredients of their various emotional states, like Stance's wife who 'bombards the spare room with particles of a vague discontent' (p. 282), or Elizabeth who likewise 'bombards [the room] with particles of her self-absorption' (p. 379).

Larry's perception has been lastingly expanded by his experience. Like a synaesthesia of dimension and geometry, he perceives 'the rectilinear room fills with smoke wisps, filaments of gas, voices that swim for dear life and noise'; but then his description is invaded by the beautiful but aggressively totalising sense of 'the vibrant hum of waves merging, doubling, trebling each other and overlapping, expanding, bursting the walls, the street, the entire sky in ultra-violet light' (p. 363). In the second half of the novel this excess both of perception and what is perceived – overlapping, expanding, bursting – alienates him from the rest of the world, with their stunted inability to see or understand; Larry is Lazarus, back from the dead, come back to tell us all. His perception is lastingly tainted by the central claims of the novel: just like the

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<sup>26</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus. Four Novels: Out, Such, Between, Thru* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), p. 210. Future references will be to *Omnibus*.

<sup>27</sup> Karen R. Lawrence, *Techniques for Living* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), p. 41.

discontinuous nature of quanta, noted by Brooke-Rose above, intelligibility becomes a product of discrete moments rather than sequentiality, and perception itself becomes an active agent in the world. Larry is haunted by his own superior ability to know, and a facet of that knowledge is the realisation that we are all unable to perform the arrest that is determination without changing the thing perceived: 'But even if you could see an atom coming into existence the problem would remain [...] the same principle of indeterminacy applies, compared, I mean, with the determinacy in regard to large numbers of atoms. The moment you try and find out its condition the very process of investigation must disturb it. So with ideas and people' (p. 363). People and our knowledge of them are incommensurate; as soon as we 'investigate' them, they change.

Larry's interior life has been amputated from the physical reality that surrounds him. This incongruence is cultivated by his other world being a realm drawn and experienced beyond a level of practical comprehensibility. The reader is asked to reimagine what it might mean to exist at all; all of the most fundamental precepts of our perceiving life are questioned. *Such* asks, via Someone: 'Yes but for practical purposes you have to, Larry, live in the chemistry of people. Otherwise how can you live?' (p. 387). Lawrence reads the novel as a psychoanalytical journey of self-discovery, whereby Larry's death effects his transformation into someone who can understand (like a demon) all things in heaven and earth. Astrophysics thus teaches Larry to 'encounter the various psychic layers of his own development' (p. 45), with his five planetary children who come to sing the blues as expressive of 'the drives and desires that Larry has tried to repress' (p. 45). Thus, as his actual-death experience shows him, he will 'recognize the "cylinders" that drive him' (p. 46). As Sarah Birch suggests, the novel's use of psychoanalysis contains its own critique, as she argues that: 'the discourse of astrophysics is used to subvert classical psychoanalysis', with the aim of this being to 'contest the assumptions which depth psychology has popularised'.<sup>28</sup> Judy Little argues that *Such* is 'subtly didactic (better relationships are needed). Larry's world comes together as his language does'; she then compares this 'unifying movement' to Brooke-Rose's more disintegratory fictions *Out* and *Between*.<sup>29</sup> But if Larry learns anything at all, as Lawrence points out, it is that he must learn specifically 'to relinquish the fantasy of [...] precision' (p. 47) and instead to 'content himself with the free energy in language, its errant combinations and uncontrolled detours' (p. 47). Larry's world only 'unifies' inasmuch as he comes to recognise the discordance and

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<sup>28</sup> Sarah Birch, *Christine Brooke-Rose and Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 63.

<sup>29</sup> Judy Little, *The Experimental Self: Dialogic Subjectivity in Woolf, Pym and Brooke-Rose* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), p. 137.

discrepancies of his interior life, how it is possible to flip wildly from being one kind of person to another. In fact, the second half of the novel seems full of regret and diminishing returns, rather than the fully realised and successful arrival of Larry at his destination after any sort of journey of discovery, psychoanalytical or otherwise.

Central to this movement of attenuation is Brooke-Rose's use of energy, typically imagined as both emotional and thermodynamic: 'She wastes herself, out of a feeling that I waste her, but energy works that way' (*Omnibus*, p. 293); and 'if you don't take care, Someone, your atoms will become totally random and unable to impart uniform motion to others. Now concentrate, please, look, listen, organise your energy, listen at least to the absolute immobility of your own heat-death, if it must occur' (p. 234). Total randomness here is a sign of impending entropy; cohesiveness might be inadvisable but its opposite is equally destructive, as Larry understands it: 'I couldn't possibly have chosen anything if any choice occurs inside the latitudes and spirals that fill the room' (p. 306). There is perhaps a golden point in the oscillation between formlessness and pattern where the subject is in control – organising their energy, recuperating their atoms – as the alternative would mean a world akin to that imagined by Something, when she says to Someone: 'You try to live without causality, pretending that each moment has its own separateness, that anyone might come or go in that moment like an electron'; and yet the illusion of personhood is equally dangerous, in that it potentially reinscribes a belief in the metaphysical that would see people as more than the sum of their parts: 'You like people, don't you? You have no interest in things. But people consist of things' (p. 239).

Sexual harmony is expressed through the dissolution of immaterial geometries, 'I put my meridians round hers and we merge into one almost perfect sphere' (p. 214), just as the affective power of emotion is imagined as material, 'I feel sick so please don't bombard me with your particles of anxiety' (p. 228); 'The world drains me of atoms' (p. 225). This move from a metaphor about emotional evacuation ('the world drains me') to the idea that we might be shedding atoms as we live and suffer emotional enervation as a result of this material change, is the novel's most characteristic move. This swerve from the figurative to the concrete suggests that we reverse the meaning-making mechanism that goes so easily from the real to the metaphoric: 'my love is like a rose' delivers us significance where we want it, at the end, whereas *Such* repeatedly denies us the comforts of such meaning by taking the metaphysical and returning it squarely to the physical world. According to Brian McHale, Larry hesitates between two worlds, that of fantasy and that of the real, the ontological and the

epistemological, but also that of metaphor and that of the concrete or actualised.<sup>30</sup> That is, Brooke-Rose is interested in scientific metaphor precisely because it reverses the usual figurative dynamic. In *Such* feelings become materially itemised, but this enumeration, as we know, must involve loss. Thus, Brooke-Rose's use of quantum theory delivers a critique of all systems that prioritise the ability to itemise and account over that which might resist or evade such reductive taxonomies. Larry's material imagining of his own emotions, 'I pour the molecules of my tenderness' (p. 287) begs the question, what would a tenderness look like that was not available for this sort of physical manipulation and sorting? Brooke-Rose's answer might be, in the wake of quantum theory, one that existed before we observed it.

*Such*'s elegiac note is thus a manifestation of Larry's new capacities for understanding and knowledge, capacities for precision that bring with them an inevitable diminution of other types of understanding or experience, and a parallel diminution in the lived value of those objects of knowledge. 'And as their initial material cools the atoms condense, forming small particles of dust which through constant collisions aggregate into larger and larger bodies, until perhaps they burst with accumulated identities that pass from one another like elements, emitting particles of pain. You can never know with absolute certainty that consecutive observations of what looks like the same particle do in fact represent the same' (p. 386). The indeterminacy that resides with the particles and their accumulated identities is met by an equal indeterminacy of knowledge: in the very attempt to gain epistemological precision, knowledge of an individual particle is rendered meaningless, as it might not be the one we thought it was; each particle rebounds with new strangeness after we notice it. Larry is a sort of Maxwell's demon, a tragic fantasy figure, compelled to understand the world at levels beyond the rest of us, forever compiling his inventory of reality, sorting the world into its different categories of thermodynamic energy, counting his own depletions.

What are things like before we attend to them? They exist in latency, in potential, epistemologically estranged: 'Larry, everyone deserves the attention of definiteness. –Even if they prefer the uncertainty principle? –They only pretend to prefer it. While they have to [...] –In the meantime we do the best we can, some of us preferring to pretend causality exists, and others, other preferring to prefer its absence' (p. 387). The 'attention of definiteness', i.e. the attention that brings forth definition, puts a halt to the changeable flux, the events and energy

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<sup>30</sup> Brian McHale, "I draw the line as a rule between one solar system and another": The Postmodernism(s) of Christine Brooke-Rose', in *Utterly Other Discourse: the Texts of Christine Brooke-Rose*, eds. Ellen J. Friedman and Richard Martin (Normal, IL.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995) pp. 192-213.

knots that the particles comprise before they are measured. Here it is figured as something to be wished for – attention and recognition are things people ‘deserve’, but the lesson of the novel is that attention is the thing we have to recognise as paradoxically destructive to knowledge; it would be better to pretend not to want it and to (even falsely) embrace uncertainty. Scientific knowledge, then, far from getting us ever closer to an absolute quantifiable truth, has the potential to reinscribe itself into older discourses, ones which are more practised at the valorisation of indeterminacy:

I think I believe every particle of ourselves, whether combined with those of others in normal electrovalence to make up this or that slice of us, or whether bombarded by those of others until this or that human element mutates into some other, every particle of ourselves returns. So that it has, in that sense, identity. But you can never quite identify it at any given moment. –Though you pretend to recognise it. –You recognise it, if you like, by an act of faith. Every scientist makes an act of faith at that point, as does every doctor, parent, priest, he expresses the chance as a probability over a large number of atoms, a near certainty but a probability nevertheless. (pp. 387-88)

So the loss that this essay has identified with hermeneutic certainty here becomes transmuted into something more akin to grace; which, as two models of responses to indeterminacy, offer complementary competencies. To live with the knowledge of the failure of knowledge might, in the end, be quite good for us; to accept a reduction of definition recast as the grace to exist in potentiality. Just as Brooke-Rose’s voids are not really voids at all, but are suffused with force and dynamism, serving as a repository of taut potentiality, *Such*’s silences are responsive, with Larry’s repeated protest that ‘I collect silences’ always undercut by this or that silence’s specific way of making itself heard.

It is in these paradoxically pregnant absences that Brooke-Rose manages to register her ‘real’ in the face of the quantum slippages that abound, whereby uncertainty allows for latency, a refusal to ‘make false sense by means of a false realism’ in Frank Kermode’s words (*Genesis of Secrecy*, p. 15). Latency is generative of *discurrere*: ‘Mathematics works that way. You start with nothing, treat it as something, and in no time at all you have infinity or thereabouts. Storytellers do the same I believe’ (p. 267), a point made in a different way by Richard Martin, who after summarising the novel’s plot, points out its own suffusion with a sense of subdued or frustrated possibility: ‘Far from having no plot, *Such* is almost overloaded with potential plots

which tend to be only partially developed'.<sup>31</sup> But it is also about epistemic precision: 'I have no interest in things as such, I like people', says wrongheaded Stanley, where the 'as such' now works like a Sartrean thing-in-itself distinction. What might things *qua* things, things *per se*, things *as such* be? Lawrence suggests that the title functions as an *et cetera*, confirming 'as such' the 'ordinary, the habitual, the known' (pp. 40-41), but 'as such' also evokes an ontological widening out of possibility, something is not quite like that, *as such* (but it is, a bit). Yet part of what the book is about is the fact that there is no 'as such' (I don't like things as such, I like people); there is no linguistic or perceptual contraceptive hygiene between the world of things and the world of people; we are particles and waves, crashing into a thousand combinations and recombinations, dissolving and merging with Lucretian violence and beauty.<sup>32</sup>

### CONCLUSION: AN ETHICS OF INDETERMINACY

The novel's finely tuned epistemological arguments amount to a critique of any system of knowledge that impinges upon the indeterminate, the uncertain, and the latent. Brooke-Rose repeatedly and insistently spoke about the central insight of post-Heisenberg physics, as she understood it, as having a seismic effect on 'all our philosophy and all our attitudes' ('Dynamic Gradients', p. 93). That this turns out to be a novel about human understanding and perception of the other is not 'just' related to this by use of an arbitrarily selected metaphor, as if any old 'jargon' would do ('jargon, of whatever kind, has great poetry' ('Conversation', pp. 83-4)) – it is about how we are all radically entangled with each other, particles, events, and collections of particles. The ethical import is not an injunction to 'pay more attention' to people or things, but something like 'pay more attention to our forms of attention'; watch out for a type of vigilance that brings with it an intrusive need for clarity, and that might become violent or overbearing or destructive to that which it seeks to document. In other words, beware your epistemic desire. That this is eminently amenable to poststructuralist and indeed deconstructionist models of reading is worth extrapolating: the undecidability that is often said to be the conclusion of the latter recast as a wider life-lesson.

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Martin, "Just Words on a Page": the Novels of Christine Brooke-Rose', in *Utterly Other Discourse: the Texts of Christine Brooke-Rose*, eds. Ellen J. Friedman and Richard Martin (Normal, IL.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995) pp. 38-51, p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose mentions Lucretius at least once: 'There will occur the blanket bodily transfer to the livingroom for a night of utterly other discourses that will spark out of a minicircus of light upon a page of say Lucretius' (Brooke-Rose, *Amalgamemnon*, 143). This quote and/or its variants elsewhere in the novel, serves as the epigraph for Ellen G. Friedman's and Miriam Fuch's seminal collection of essays *Breaking the Sequence*, and is also, obviously, the source for the title of Friedman and Richard Martin's edited collection of essays on Brooke-Rose, *Utterly Other Discourse*.



Larry's paralysis in the face of an opaque surface seems more terminal, then, than the reader's:

Don't you remember anything, a moment, a non-temporal moment perhaps, of total knowledge, or total intuition, some final decision for or against made in the light of the person you had become midway through life in the dark wood?

–For or against what?

–For or against, well, the clarity of total consciousness.

–No, I remember nothing but opaqueness. (*Omnibus*, p. 303)

Memory, that throughout has been represented as so shiftily ambivalent, now betrays Larry – 'I remember nothing' – but in so stating he is indeed making a choice for or against, one that falls 'against' 'the clarity of total consciousness'. The pleasures and profits of opacity, in the end, offer an ideal for the novel that is articulated against the dangers of 'total knowledge' or 'clarity'. Opacity might mean loss, as we must relinquish both the memories that comprise us and our chances of gaining epistemic purchase, but at least we don't get our hands dirty, ethically speaking, and besides, the continual experience of loss is the inevitable and natural condition of all those, like us, who exist in time (or, as Larry might say, heat-death is inevitable to all those subject to the thermodynamic principle of entropy).

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