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# “YOU ARE HERE”: Reading and Representation in Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Thru*

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. . . learning how to become a parasite upon a text nobody reads passed on from generation to generation.

Christine Brooke-Rose, 1975

**Abstract** Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Thru* is a strikingly provocative postmodernist text. Instead of examining how *Thru* deconstructs fiction through the literary and linguistic theory that it includes, this essay looks at how theory—specifically Roman Jakobson’s diagram of communication—is altered within the context of fiction. The analysis considers the mechanisms through which criticism differentiates itself from reading and how *Thru* manages to expose such distinctions. I foreground the text’s disrupted graphic surface in order to suggest that this may be the basis for the pragmatic reader to gain the advantage over the critic in achieving a productive view of this complex text.

## ***Thru* and Criticism**

More than any other of her novels, *Thru* (1975) is responsible for the perception of Christine Brooke-Rose as a difficult writer. Written in summer

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vacations from teaching structuralist narratology at the Université de Paris à Vincennes, *Thru* may be seen as an attempt to try to resolve the tensions between being a writer of fiction and becoming deeply involved with narratology as a teacher. The result is that *Thru* both applies and plays with post-structuralist theory (and several other varieties) and has been described as “a novel about the theory of the novel, a fiction about fictionality, a non-narrative about narrativity, a text about intertextuality” (Brooke-Rose 1996a: 104). Analyses of *Thru* tend to highlight either how the novel uses critical theory to deconstruct literature (Little 1996: 128, 143; Berressem 1995) or, inversely, how fiction acts upon literary theory (Caserio 1988: 294; Reyes 1998: 239). What will particularly concern me here is how readers and critics deal with a text in which literature and literary theory cross-fertilize so vigorously.

I shall introduce the difficulties *Thru* presents for critics by looking briefly at an example of worthwhile criticism. Rimmon-Kenan 1982 was the first large-scale academic essay on this important text. A revised version, with helpful alterations and expansions, appears as a chapter in Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 75–92. I admire Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s continued attention to this text, which places Brooke-Rose in the worthy company of William Faulkner, Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, and Toni Morrison. I also find myself in sympathy with the basic intention, as I understand it, of Rimmon-Kenan’s book. Unfortunately, however, the inclusion of the modified essay in the book project aggravates what I find to be a central flaw in the original article: the denial of anything other than self-reflexivity to *Thru*.

Rimmon-Kenan (1996: 1) announces the intent of *A Glance beyond Doubt* as an “attempt to reinstate representation and rehumanize subjectivity,” and certainly I do not dispute the necessity of literary criticism taking such a productive approach. There is, however, a problem with the course Rimmon-Kenan plots to show attitudes toward these issues in fiction. She follows the development of “the Anglo-American novel of our century,” especially those novels “that represent a theoretical avant-garde,” and her analyses discover a “movement . . . generally analogous to the transition from modernism to postmodernism to a counter tendency within postmodernism” (ibid.: 3–4). The point at which this model suggests that representation and subjectivity fizzle out, in the sequence *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Thru*, *Company*, and *Beloved*, is *Thru*. Although Rimmon-Kenan warns that “such transitions are never clear cut” (ibid.), we read on the next page that “*Thru* is clearly postmodernist” and, later (ibid.: 75), that “*Thru* explicitly and playfully opts for a postmodernist position.”

It would be futile to dispute this terminology: if *Thru* cannot be described as a postmodernist text, nothing can. Brian McHale (1995: 200) is right to

assign to *Thru* "the full postmodernist repertoire of destabilising strategies" and to describe it as "a text of radical ontological hesitation: a paradigmatic postmodern novel." But to settle for this when faced by this text is facile and reductive. Whether *Thru* is the epitome of postmodernism or of deconstructive fiction, the novel itself still needs to be read.

The historicizing sweep of Rimmon-Kenan's (1996: 85, 90) argument forces *Thru* to become the extreme point of a postmodernity that is intent on "dismantling representation" and that "dissociates voices from any originating self." However, when Rimmon-Kenan (ibid.: 4) argues that in her chosen texts "the problem of representation is dramatized mainly through a manipulation of narrative levels" and that the "problem of subjectivity takes the form of undecidability concerning the narrator's identity and structural position vis-à-vis the events narrated," her argument is at odds with her own attempt to historicize a development, since the problems and the forms of their examination are the same in all those texts. Moreover, at least for me, the problem of representation is present in every text, and that of subjectivity is raised by all narration.

Postmodernism is not a special case. Neither of these problems ever goes away, for they are implicit in (1) language, which has to refer (the referential function of Jakobson's diagram, below), and (2) a reader, who needs to attribute the discourse (see Foucault 1988 [1969]). Representation is necessary to fiction, and subjectivity is always an issue for a human recipient. I prefer a view of postmodernism closer to that of Patricia Waugh (1984: 5) in *Metafiction*, which construes the devices of literary postmodernity as a "tendency or function inherent in *all* novels."<sup>1</sup> The differences Rimmon-Kenan notices among her texts are not, then, a development as such but depend on the rigor and complexity with which these texts address the same issues.

The intention in the following is not to attack the thesis of *A Glance beyond Doubt*. If anything, dispelling the historicity of Rimmon-Kenan's argument suggests that her central themes are indeed universal in narrative. Instead, I intend to prove two points: (1) that even in a narrative that may be seen as "constructing itself and then destroying itself as it goes along" (Hayman and Cohen 1976: 4), there are elements that attempt to deliver representation in new ways (rather than just problematizing the old ways) and (2) that the novel's self-conscious problematization of readerly hypothesizing demands a reader that directly contradicts Rimmon-Kenan's (1996: 76, 89) idea that *Thru*, by using "metalanguage as its object-language," somehow manages the "transformation of the reader into an element of the text."

1. Ultimately, however, while valuing the lessons offered by *Thru*, Waugh (1984: 147-48) suggests that this novel is a limit text of postmodernism.

### The Jakobson Diagram Lesson

I shall begin my discussion of *Thru* by reproducing part of a significant passage that illustrates the key problems surrounding the analysis of this text.<sup>2</sup> By setting itself in academic environments in which both literary theory and creative writing are taught, the novel establishes—at least partly—a mimetic domain for their hybridization. The Jakobson diagram lesson (Brooke-Rose 1975: 50–51)<sup>3</sup> is my designation for a passage in which a class and tutor discuss “the economy of the narrative” (ibid.: 49) and which includes the eponymous diagram. Although the dialogue is neither marked as speech nor attributed to particular characters throughout the novel, we can discern a pedagogic voice against student voices here, and the voice that introduces the diagram itself is plainly that of the teacher (see Figure 1).

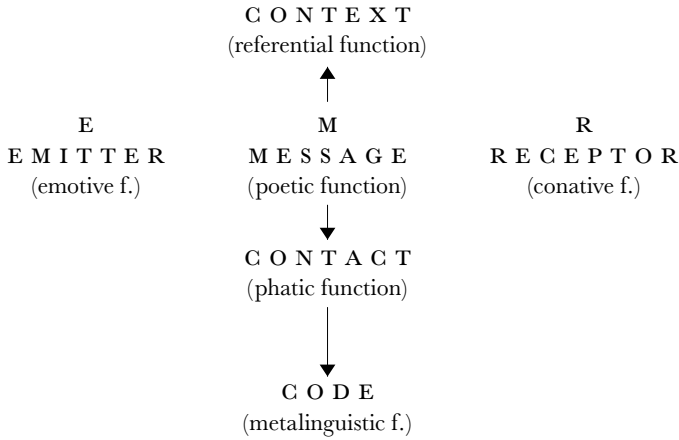
It is not difficult to understand that this passage represents a seminar on literary theory, but the devil is in the detail of how it is represented. Perhaps the most noticeable thing about the passage is that the diagram itself functions at a representational level. In other words, the diagram replaces a representational description of the interaction of the tutor with the board (or overhead projector). Instead, we, the readers, see a textual representation of what the class sees, that is, the diagram itself. The way the diagram is presented to the reader is an example of what Brooke-Rose (1998) has called “naive mimesis.” This representation directly contrasts with Rimmon-Kenan’s (1996: 89) view of *Thru* as “non-representational.” It is true that the content of this piece of representation, a literary theoretical intertext, immediately complicates (or offers an alternative to) our understanding of it as simple graphic mimesis, but this is exactly the crux of *Thru*’s poeticization of poetics. By representing a class that believes itself to operate at a level above language, *Thru* creates a situation in which the diagram is part of the referential *and* the poetic functions, not part of a metalinguistic critical discourse, although it invokes such a discourse.

This creates difficulties for the reader in hierarchizing the narrative, and these difficulties are compounded because the scene problematizes any attempt to attribute narration. It is not clear which member of the central couple of the text, Armel and Larissa, is the teacher of this class (leaving aside the possibility of each being narrated by the other) or whether they (either one) are teachers of a class in a narrative written by a creative writing class. For example, one character in the text surmises that “it is clear

2. Though we find it hard to place sections of *Thru*’s narrative in any hierarchical order, there are clearly recognizable “scenes.”

3. The text is more readily available now in an omnibus edition (Brooke-Rose 1986). The Jakobson diagram lesson occurs on pages 628–29. Other references within this essay to *Thru* may be converted for use with the omnibus edition by adding 578.

A very good point. But we mustn't confuse the levels of discourse. My function here is not to narrate but to teach, or shall we say I am not a function of your narrative, and we are using a metalanguage, so:



YOU ARE HERE

(Unless you have gotten imprisoned in M)

There should be placards saying: Danger. You are now entering the Metalinguistic Zone. All access forbidden except for Prepared Consumers with special permits from the Authorities.

M-phatically.

Figure 1

that Larissa is producing a text. But which text? It looks mightily as if she were producing this one and not, as previously appeared, Armel, or Armel disguised as narrator or the narrator I disguised as Armel. That's not very clear" (Brooke-Rose 1975: 66). In other words, like the reader, characters in the text find that "any discussion about whether to return to Armel (or to Larissa) as subject of discourse drifts into the undecidable" [*sic*] (ibid.: 108). And the same problem applies to the possibility of the creative writing class as joint narrators. At some points they threaten to kill off Larissa and/or Armel but at others seem to be taught by one (or the other) of them, and later they argue that: "this is the text we are creating it verbally we are the text we do not exist we are a pack of lies dreamt up by the unreliable narrator in love with the zeroist author in love with himself but absent in the nature of things, an etherised unauthorised other" (ibid.: 251).

Because all these examples come from within the text, and in two cases are clearly dialogue, such pronouncements are metaphorically (if not literally) in quotation marks, open to question. Potential reversals of narration are offered throughout *Thru* and are foregrounded by the question “Who Speaks?,” borrowed from Roland Barthes (1975 [1970]: 41), occurring repeatedly, and in several different languages, throughout the text (fifteen times according to Grant 1995: 122). We simply cannot tell whether Armel or Larissa or both are central characters as such or central characters within an internal narrative (or, somehow, simultaneously both).<sup>4</sup>

Thus there is no clear-cut central consciousness or narrator figure for the reader to focus upon and create a center from which to hierarchize the narrative (“we’re building our house on quicksands” [Brooke-Rose 1975: 37]). Unlike the narrating translator character of Brooke-Rose’s *Between*, in whose mind the various languages interact, or the damaged astrophysicist of *Such*, or even the dialogic narration of Jip and Zab typing into the same computer file in *Xorandor*, there seems to be no way for the reader to attribute the text he or she is reading to an identifiable source within that text. This supports Rimmon-Kenan’s (1996: 90) contention that “*Thru* links narrators with indeterminacy and dissociates voices from any originating self.”

That we cannot positively attribute the text here to a particular narrator or point of view means there is no comfortable barrier of a mediator with the text. As a result, we cannot be quite sure how we are to read the diagram, by which I mean that the diagram clearly represents the subject of the fictional class, but the fictional class can also be seen as a message and thus as subject to the diagram. In as much as we enter the text while reading, the Jakobson diagram scene does have the effect of seeming to place us in the class, even if only as a disconcerted fly on the wall, but the subject matter of that class suggests we ought to look at the act of communication from the outside. These options are not evidence, however, that *Thru* traps the reader in the text, only that it makes it more difficult for the reader to orient himself or herself within it. The question of self-orientation for the reader relates significantly to how we discuss the reader-text relationship. Is *Thru* a trap or a challenge?

The positioning of the reader and the capacity we allow him or her for dealing with the difficulties that the text poses is the most significant problem to come out of this scene and the novel as a whole. My position, which will be stated briefly here, depends on a concept of a determined and adaptable reader. In *Thru*, conventional narration is stripped away and replaced with something not less but *more* representational; a technique Brooke-Rose

4. See also Rimmon-Kenan 1982: 23–28 and 1996: 77–83 for her fuller account of *Thru*’s narratorial instability.

(1998) has described as “absolutely objective narration,” that is, narration that has no self-conscious awareness of the act of narrating. Compare the way the “naïve mimesis” implicit in the direct re-presentation of the Jakobson diagram has no consciousness of its textuality, unlike a more conventional inclusion of the diagram as a figure (as in this text). The “un-narrated” situations in *Thru* depend on the reader to hold them together, and in this experience of constructing meaning from complex, contradictory signals the reader is close to our own everyday experience.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the text is not simply, or ultimately, self-reflexive but also to some degree mimetic. By *mimesis* here I mean something quite specific rather than a synonym for *realism*.

In the term’s first usage, Book 4 of *Republic*, Plato discusses the morality of “poetry” (epic poetry/drama) and finds it wanting. He defines the epic form as a combination of “pure” narrative, that coming from the narrator, which he calls “diegesis,” and imitative narrative, in which the voice of a character is represented by the author: this he calls “mimesis” and disapproves of (Plato 1993: 87–89). Plato’s second use of the term, in Book 13, via a painting metaphor, has “mimesis” standing for representation as a whole (diegetic *and* mimetic), and this is the more commonly accepted usage. Once again “mimesis” is found to be morally wanting, being only the two-dimensional representation of a representation of a divine ideal.

It strikes me that it might be useful to retain the definition of mimesis as “impure” imitation found in Book 4, not for dialogue alone, but for any literary device that acts by imitation on the representational efficacy of the text. For the larger “mimesis” of Book 13, it seems adequate to substitute “representation.” In making this distinction between representation and mimesis, I assign no advantage, moral or otherwise, to one over the other; mimesis is simply a new, and still unacceptable, version of representation, whatever particular period it appears in. This mimesis is the type of representation that *Thru* offers its readers.

The following section attempts to theorize how such techniques might be assimilated.

### Narrative Levels and Metatexts

We have already mentioned narrative levels and the process of hierarchizing the narrative (putting levels in place) in relation to *Thru*. But it needs to be understood that such maneuvers bear no relation to the actual text. As Umberto Eco (1979: 13) states: “The notion of textual level is a very embar-

5. Brooke-Rose has stated in an interview about *Thru*, perhaps optimistically: “people will say, ‘how do you expect your reader to follow this?’ But I’m surprised that readers find this difficult. They all live like this” (Hayman and Cohen 1976: 15–16).



rasing one. Such as it appears, in its linear manifestation, a text has no levels at all. . . . Therefore the notion of textual level is merely theoretical; it belongs to semiotic metalanguage.” In literature there are no levels, there is only text: “Levels do not exist: our sense of them is the result of an allusive juxtaposition of registers” (Sage 1989: 38). Our excuse for using these critical fictions is not convention, though they are seldom questioned, but necessity. We shall return to the implications of this critical necessity in the next section, but for the moment I want to interrogate the concept of the “allusive juxtaposition of registers” that texts generate.

In her critical work on *The Turn of the Screw*, Christine Brooke-Rose (1981: 188) rejects narrative grammar, for both its “false analogy” with sentence grammar and in particular its “deep structure,” because she feels that “deep” somehow implies it is “more profound in an evaluative sense.” She then goes on to state: “I shall however retain the notion of levels of structure, for they seem indispensable” (ibid.). In practice, the levels Brooke-Rose uses are surface structure, meaning presentation of events and sequence of words, and metatexts, which are divided into authorial and narratorial metatexts:

Although the surface structure is the narrator’s (fictional) responsibility, there will naturally be an author’s metatext (AM), which indirectly tells the reader things the narrator does not state directly. And in the case of a dramatized and self-conscious narrator like the governess, there will also be a narrator’s metatext (NM) on her own narrative. (Ibid.: 191)

In practice it proves difficult to distinguish between AM and NM. Later Brooke-Rose (ibid.: 208) offers an insightful answer to this problem: “Metatext is always essentially the reader’s text; it depends on the reader’s attention . . . and can therefore vary a good deal, not only in degree, but in specific judgments as to whether information implied comes direct from the author or is filtered through the narrator’s consciousness.”

There are a number of points to note here. Brooke-Rose’s metatexts are difficult to distinguish because the text leaves the distinction to the reader. In any case, as Barthes would argue, the reader is the creator of meaning in the text, and the whole text is “the reader’s,” but Brooke-Rose is defining particular metatexts that work by *implying* information (the “allusive registers”). Properly, these metatexts are a complex function of the language of a particular text that, though only *implied* textually, goes directly to the reader’s hypothesizing activity.<sup>6</sup>

6. A nonliterary but pertinent example: in reading this critical essay you are constructing metatexts about me insofar as you believe me to exist—about my intellect, education, influences, and my use of notes.

*Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, by Denis Diderot, an important intertext within *Thru*, suggests some ways in which metatexts operate. For example, Jacques's fatalism is described as "everything which happens to us on this earth, both good and bad," is "written up above" (Diderot 1986 [1796]: 21), but the idea of "written up above" is cunningly used by the authorial narrator within *Jacques the Fatalist*. Instead of specifying where Jacques and his master spend a certain night, Diderot (*ibid.*: 39) presents a long series of options to the reader, ending with: "Although all of these might appear equally feasible to you, Jacques was not of this opinion. The only possibility was the one that was written up above." There is in this phrase both the suggestion of the godlike powers of an heavenly author and a pun on "above" as a literary convention for "aforementioned," but the effect of this short passage as a whole suggests a number of possible hypotheses to the reader.

We might just read the idea of "written up above" quite literally as emphasizing how Jacques (a character within the fiction) believes in the heavenly writing, which would illustrate his fatalism and even a little piety. This reading would belong to a character-based metatext. The reader could, on the other hand, take a longer view, understanding Jacques as a fiction and focusing on the way the authorial narrator implies, relatively directly, that he is privy to the information about Jacques's lodging because the reader depends on his authorship for the story, thus emphasizing his own godlike powers. This would belong to one member of Brooke-Rose's difficult-to-distinguish pair, AM and NM, depending on how we understood the authorial figure in the text.

There is, however, also the possibility of the reader making an almost wholly metatextual reading, in which Jacques would be taken to know, or to suspect to some degree, that he is a character in a fiction. As criticism of Diderot's work suggests, "the real problem [in *Jacques the Fatalist*] is where the creator really comes out into the open, revealing himself with the total freedom he really has, a freedom over a character who, in these circumstances, can only be a fatalist" (Bremner 1983: 171). We recognize that, as a character in a fiction, Jacques is helpless in the matter of his own destiny and that as such he is ironized by the author character; but there is another, more subtle, metatext here. This metatext depends on the persistence of the characters despite the exposure of their fictional position. In Jacques's case, because of the applicability of his personal doctrine, there is the sneaking feeling that he might suspect the *unreality* of his situation: "I have noticed several times that there's something sly about Destiny" (Diderot 1986 [1796]: 81). This metatext generates a rivalry between the author figure and his chief character, which fits well with the play on roles of master and servant in *Jacques the Fatalist* but which, as metatext and particularly

as “the reader’s text,” is difficult to evidence from the text on the page.<sup>7</sup> The stability of such metatexts is remarkably fragile; an alternative hypothesis generated by the same evidence would suggest that the author character was tantalizing the reader by placing such potentially metatextual observations in the mouth of a helpless character.

Such passages can thus be interpreted in a variety of different ways simultaneously, and from the rub between them the reader accumulates metatexts. The important point is that the reader is capable of reading a complex set of possibilities that might logically be mutually exclusive but that in practice are not. We can, as readers, maintain textual and metatextual readings at the same time.

As I. A. Richards (1965: 13) states in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, while refuting the doctrine of the association of ideas, human thought cannot be reduced to a single track: “We can all detect a difference in our own minds between thinking of a dog and thinking of a cat. . . . We can also say ‘dog’ and think ‘cat.’” Similarly, the human brain, by which a reader functions, will be able, unless severely debilitated, to deal with a narrative paradox (by suspending its possible outcomes). Readerly metatexts, happening in the reader, not the text, offer a more flexible conception of reading than that available in “narrative levels.”

Rimmon-Kenan (1982: 22) describes *Thru*’s logical disjunctions as “rendering level and metalevel perpetually reversible.” But I do not agree that this reversibility has the effect of “blocking all possible resolution” (Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 85): it merely suspends the need to resolve aspects of the text. In my opinion, the reader cannot be trapped at a particular level in the text precisely *because of* their perpetual reversibility. The difference between blocking and suspending is not merely verbal; for example, the character of Armel is represented as black at some points in the text (Brooke-Rose 1975: 45–48, 59–65) and not black at others (specifically denied in *ibid.*: 151; see also Brooke-Rose 1996b: 246). This indeterminacy does not stop us understanding that he has a relationship with Larissa, though he might be her ex-husband or a new suitor or both (“a coincidence. They do happen despite the critics” [Brooke-Rose 1975: 67]). The reader is not trapped inside the text by rigid, monolithic, computerized logic: we can accept a paradox and negotiate it according to our preferred metatext. Our reader is by no means hamstrung by the reversibility or contradiction between levels, which Rimmon-Kenan effectively demonstrates in the text.

7. To this extent, Diderot’s novel is unlike *Thru*, in which many characters talk about narration and claim it for themselves, including versions of Jacques and the master that are versed in narratology.

## Metalinguage and Graphic Space

An awareness of potential metatexts encourages the reader to read less literally, less linearly, to see possible meanings outside the literary straight and narrow. Thus we have the opportunity to take the tutor's statement that introduces the Jakobson diagram into *Thru* ("My function here is not to narrate but to teach, or shall we say I am not a function of your narrative, and we are using a metalanguage") at face value or, alternatively, of reading it ironically and metatextually. Earlier in the lesson sequence we read:

There's a diametrical opposition between the function of an element—what it is used for—and its motivation—what is necessary to conceal the function. As Genette puts it, the prince de Clèves does not die because his gentilhomme behaves like a fool, though that is how it seems, his gentilhomme behaves like a fool so that the prince de Clèves can die. (Brooke-Rose 1975: 50)

With this principle it is quite possible for the reader to reverse the statement that introduces the diagram. Applying such a reversal, we end up with: "My function is to narrate, not to teach; I am a function of your narrative; we are not using metalanguage." The first clause relates to the possibility that we are receiving the scene through the teacher's narration—that he or she is a narrator, not "just" a character. The second clause, which does not exclude the first, has the narrator again deny characterhood, and by implication, it attributes the narrative ("your narrative") either to the class or to the reader. The third clause would seem to throw into question everything we have already drawn from the reversed statement. In short, it problematizes metalanguage and simultaneously offers it a challenge in which the "we" is no longer straightforwardly the class but could be any of several configurations of character, narrator, class, and reader. As soon as the text's actual statement "we are using metalanguage" appears, readers are required to consider further the implications of the inclusion of this theoretical diagram in a fictional narrative. I have already argued that the diagram performs a representational function, but at this point I want to elaborate on how the presence of the diagram might inform a metatext about criticism in the novel.

A diagram almost identical to the one on page 51 of *Thru* can be found on page 22 of *Rhetoric of the Unreal*, Brooke-Rose's major critical work on science fiction and fantasy. This book was published in 1981, and the section that includes this diagram was first published in 1980 under the title "Round and Round the Jakobson Diagram." The diagram itself is a conflation of two diagrams used in Jakobson's essay "Linguistics and Poetics" (1960).<sup>8</sup> Brooke-

8. Reprinted in Chatman and Levin 1967, which, interestingly, also contains a sequence of extracts from Brooke-Rose's first critical book, *A Grammar of Metaphor* (1958).

Rose's *Rhetoric of the Unreal* illustrates how different schools of literary theory have concentrated on, or become trapped within, different areas of the diagram. She suggests that, while traditional criticism combines study of the emitter and context (or the emotive and referential functions), New Criticism excludes everything but the poetic function. Reader theory naturally concentrates upon the receptor and the conative function, while transformational grammarians concern themselves with the metalinguistic code. Structuralism, she suggests, homes in on the poetic function with elements of the emitter and receptor being used in some later schemes. Positioning various schools in relation to the diagram may be interesting, but Brooke-Rose's intention in *Rhetoric of the Unreal* seems to be to point out that the functions are not alternatives and an approach to fiction should encompass them all (see also Brooke-Rose 1996a: 98–99). Returning to the Jakobson diagram in *Stories, Theories and Things*, Brooke-Rose (1991: 10, 17) points out those parts of it most commonly neglected. The failure of criticism to deal with the plural functions of written language, despite the strong influence of Jakobson on much modern literary theory, is not seen as a symptom of this diagram but as a difficulty caused by the instrument we use to deal with language: language itself.

In *Xorandor*, Brooke-Rose (1987: 88) puts Kurt Gödel's theorem in the mouth of one of her teenage narrators, Zab: "In any powerful logical system things can be formulated that can't be proved or disproved inside the same system" (see also Derrida 1981: 219). The assumptions underlying literary, linguistic, and philosophical theory all rely on language. The problem is, how is it possible to talk about language, speech, or writing without some means of focus, and consequently some amount of setting aside? And this problem for criticism mirrors a problem for the writer who considers that writing always sets aside or excises part of the totality of experience.

*Thru's* treatment of theoretical diagrams and other representations of texts by critics in diagrams and tables may be compared with Brooke-Rose's (1981: 156–57) arguments against critical paraphrase in *Rhetoric of the Unreal*.<sup>9</sup> This novel opposes itself to any schema that presumes to reduce the complexity of narrative: such critical maneuvers remove the narrative text even further away from the complexity of actual experience that the narrative has failed to encompass.

Jakobson is not held individually culpable, and several other theorists (A. J. Greimas, Noam Chomsky, even Vladimir Propp when he cannot get

9. The absurdity of such reductions is perfectly demonstrated in Sterne 1985 [1759–1767]: 453–54. There diagrammatic lines are offered as summaries of plot and digression, every deviation from the "cabbage-planter's line" of linear plot recorded as a loop or curve.



Figure 2

all folktales to follow a single linear pattern) are satirized to some degree in *Thru*. The point is simply that in order to somehow encompass his material—in this case, the communicative act, which includes prose text—Jakobson maneuvers out of the “linear manifestation” of prose text (Eco 1979: 13) and into the diagram.

The diagrammatic form is shown to be a textual device that operates in the same manner as text on the page. Diagrams and prose text are read in the same graphic space. In the normal reading of prose, our eyes effectively move left to right for each line on the page, and the process is similar when we read across diagrams, although they are likely to be less visually repetitive. When referring to the Jakobson diagram in *Stories, Theories and Things*, Brooke-Rose herself treats it as a compass dial: the text central, the author West, the reader East, the world North, the remaining functions at various latitudes South. This last is the direction in which our reading of the diagram eventually requires us to head, but our progress through the graphic space of the diagram is stopped in its tracks with a phrase familiar from maps of all kinds accompanied by an arrow (see Figure 2).

This demonstrates the graphic space of the page by directing us across it, backward, against the normal flow of reading, which moves recursively down the page.<sup>10</sup> If the Jakobson diagram were a map, we would begin reading it at YOU ARE HERE, but in this context, when it appears as part of a prose text, we begin at top left of the page. Logically, a tutor’s comment on the diagram “(Unless you have gotten imprisoned in M),” phrased like speech, follows it visually and temporally. The diagonal arrow, we must conclude, is either drawn by the tutor in the class or is simply a (diagrammatic) representation of a gesture on his or her part.

The caveat “(Unless you have gotten imprisoned in M)” is a joke, since to reach YOU ARE HERE we must have escaped M for message in the diagram, and similarly we must have gone beyond the arrow that returns us to reach the caveat itself. Our reading continues despite these attempts to divert us. The metatextual joke on Jakobson is that, although we have

10. As *Thru* notes, simultaneously punning with Chomskyeian terminology: “This structure is generated by recursivity rules which in English tend to be to the right, as in French, whereas Japanese favours recursivity to the left” (Brooke-Rose 1975: 99–100).

escaped M in the diagram, we remain very much in M in the narrative. Because this is a novel, we cannot escape to a metalinguistic level, we are in language; and furthermore, because linguistics is in itself language, there is a strong suggestion that we can never escape to the metalinguistic level. This is because levels, as I have pointed out, do not exist in the text. They are instead a metatext we impose on the text to structure “the allusive juxtaposition of registers.”

Jakobson’s (1960: 353) own use of his diagram tended to place only poetry in the poetic function, while the novel is associated with the referential function through the following argument: “We could . . . hardly find verbal messages that would fulfil only one function. The diversity lies not in the monopoly of some one of these several functions but in a different hierarchical order of functions.” In other words, having developed a diagram of the entire communicative act, he proceeded to narrow his focus. Jakobson’s treatment of his diagram recalls how the literary critic presents metatextual levels as belonging to the text and attempts (usually successfully) to hierarchize them.

This critical imposition is, of necessity, strongly defended: “Poetry and metalanguage . . . are in diametrical opposition to one another: in metalanguage the sequence is used to build an equation, whereas in poetry the equation is used to build a sequence” (ibid.: 39). But after *Thru* has combined literary representation and critical diagrams in the same text and the same graphic space, it becomes fairly clear that “equation” and “sequence” are both ultimately sequences, with the difference that the former associates itself with the science of mathematics rather than linguistics. For this reason I do not believe it is possible to use the “placards” to distinguish the linguistic and the metalinguistic within narrative in the way the close of the Jakobson lesson suggests. I suspect that, though *Thru* claims they have been omitted, mention of them is the closest we can come to such signs since, as the use of the Jakobson diagram here shows, it is impossible to fence in narrative with theoretical metalanguage.

The floating narrative of *Thru*, with its unreliable, ungendered narrators, who may be writing about the class or being written by the class, provides the context in which “YOU ARE HERE” is an ironic joke. This simple phrase works at three metatextual levels: (1) as a representation of tutorial comment, (2) as comment on the effectiveness of diagrams in criticism (see also Brooke-Rose 1975: 65), and (3) as a pointer to a position on the graphic surface of the page. At this point I would like to emphasize the third of these, which might initially seem like the most trivial metatext imaginable but which in *Thru* takes on a particular significance. When everything else is unstable, it is about as much as we can say that we are reading through

the graphic space at any one point. But we recognize simultaneously that this is not a point of rest. We have to move on. *Thru's* lack of conventional chapters or any kind of sequential breaks means that there are no places of rest within the text at all; we have to keep moving through *Thru*.<sup>11</sup> But the text remains for us to return to, even the "scrapped" chapters (those sections of narrative voted out by the creative writing group, such as Salvatore's sequence [ibid.: 75–78]).

This continuation of the novel as process *and* artifact is what lies behind the joke at the end of the section featuring the diagram: "M-phatically." Because *Thru* is a novel, it is M for message, emphatically. The use of this diagram is referential, poetic, and to a certain degree, metalinguistic, but the emphasized "M-" reminds us that all these are part of the message.<sup>12</sup> The second part of "M-phatically" "M-phasizes" the phatic role, the continuation of contact, the prolongation of the message with or without content. Clearly the gap before the next paragraph is part of the text and part of the message too. This is the effect of an awareness of the graphic surface, which is the medium of contact for printed texts. It forms solid ground from which, I would suggest, all metatexts are built (and it is not a metalanguage).

### Readers and Critics

In *A Glance beyond Doubt*, Rimmon-Kenan (1996: 76) suggests that "*Thru* uses the reader's (or critic's) metalanguage as its own object language, subverting the distinction between the two." I would dispute this statement. Although "the two" Rimmon-Kenan refers to here are metalanguage and object language, the sentence can also be seen to subvert the distinction between critic and reader, which is the tendency of her argument but very far from the effect of *Thru*: it is primarily the *critic's* metalanguage that is *Thru's* object language, and it is the critic who is preempted by the text and has no way to escape. Others (Fowler 1989 [1977]: 125 and Maack 1995: 139) have argued that reader and critic are necessarily the same for this text; but I believe that, even when critic and reader may be embodied in one person, they do not construct the same metatexts. A particular reader may or may not have access to the same metalanguage as the critic, but in either case the reader has less theoretical baggage and more freedom to find a

11. There are some unexpected, unnumbered gaps in the text, but most of these can be attributed to the text's construction in blocks, so that an acrostic page is a unit. The narrative generally continues without rest.

12. As a critic, Brooke-Rose (1975: 51) sensibly suggests that "no reader or critic can see all aspects at the same time" and opts for an eclectic approach that adapts to the particular text being studied.



way around the text's undecidability. The reader's role is trying to figure a way through the text in order to continue reading, not to build or maintain a critical project or overview. As Hanjo Berressem (1995: 114) states in response to *Thru*, "The critic is therefore referred back to his or her function as a reader." Metalanguage is a coded metatext, potentially a plural one, as *Thru* shows by the breadth of theory it includes, but it is not sufficiently plural to contain all the reader's possible metatexts.

*Thru's* literary-theoretical intertextuality does make it difficult to distinguish reading from critical reading when the language, and supposed metalanguage, of the critic is already appropriated by the text. Critics may attempt to fall back on what they know (literary theory), but critics do not necessarily know literary theory in its playful and parodic manifestations in *Thru*. *Thru* reverses the hierarchy implied in Rimmon-Kenan (reader as somewhat inferior to the critic) because the determined reader (critic or not) can adapt to this text that resists critical dominance and introduces, and exposes, literary theory throughout.

In *Thru*, critical metalanguage is sabotaged, poetics has become poetized, yet the reader (which is what even critics are ultimately) is capable of carrying on, of reading. This activity cannot be explained away or trapped or killed off in the way that literary theory has dealt with the Author. (Indeed, Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" [1977: 148] ends with "the birth of the reader.") The whole point of *Thru* is that narrative and language, the dialogue between text and reader, are inherently stronger and more essential than criticism, which, although it claims the status of metalanguage, is only another narrative, another set of stories, supplementary to an original text.

*Thru* sometimes figures this relationship as an impossible reader/writer romance ("the reader is the writer and the writer the reader" [Brooke-Rose 1975: 30]), but this is predicated, through the text's instability, on the emotional entanglements between the characters. When Larissa asks algebraist Professor/Count La Bocca to help her with a "three-dimensional graph" of internal (narrative) and external (reader) time in a text, their collaboration fails: "the true implication being perhaps her retrospective realization that she has worked on something infinitely beyond her and beyond you too, so that you want to break up this communion of false premises with your uncomplicated desire which has been quietly generated for some time" (ibid.: 115). The second-person "you" here may be read as referring to Stavro, Larissa's lover of the moment, but it might also be taken as a meta-textual "you" addressing the reader. The "uncomplicated desire" then shifts from character's sexual desire to reader's textual desire. Where criticism

fails to encompass the communicative act by diagram, narrative communicates its intimate, collaborative nature by metaphor.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

The use of Jakobson's diagram illustrates how *Thru* never allows us to get our bearings, to settle for one reading over another, and—the crucial point that Rimmon-Kenan denies—to exclude a mimetic reading. I agree that such passages are intertextual and metatextual (Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 88) and that *Thru* mixes the levels of discourse, but I do not think any of these function as “an alternative to representation” (ibid.: 87). The assumption that language does not represent needs to be avoided. Brooke-Rose (1991: 210), for one, has vehemently disputed this assumption—as she puts it: “realism of a kind is essential to all fictional modes.” And this can be stated in such an axiomatic way because language itself is representational.

Although in parts of *Thru* “textuality is . . . playfully ‘performed’ by highlighting various aspects of ‘the materiality of the sign’” (Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 86), such materiality is not an alternative to representation—it is representation. For example, some of the more obviously nontraditional narrative sequences in the text, particularly distortions of the conventional graphic surface, are realistically motivated. Examples would be the eyes and nose in the driving mirror textually represented on page 1 of the novel, the rectangular driving mirror (4, 32), the bridge (11), the dancing hoops (40–41), the classroom desks (4), and the much disputed arc icons (37, 156). It is more useful to look at how these add to the text's “residue of realism” (Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 89) and ask what is demanded of readers in order to assimilate these effects.

In using these devices, *Thru* simultaneously celebrates and satirizes the possibilities of the print medium, attempting to open up the conventional boundaries. It is important to recognize that *Thru*'s complexity is motivated by representation, and the novel uses the representational medium of language in new ways—some verbal, some graphic—to this end. The ways in which this representation functions are new and, I believe, comprehensible but have not yet been found acceptable for one reason or another. Plato disqualified mimesis on moral grounds; Rimmon-Kenan (1982: 31) presumably downplays *Thru*'s “perverse mimeticism” because of its non-postmodernity. Extracted from context, individual examples of graphic

13. Kafelanos 1980 is good on the textual/sexual relationship between Armel and Larissa but, unfortunately I feel, ties them to intellectual and emotional aspects of the author.

mimesis have been critically described by Waugh (1984: 98) as illustrating the “naive imitative fallacy”; but included within the ongoing text of a novel, they are far less easy to dismiss. Many critics have noted the acrostic pages in *Thru* on which text can be read vertically, horizontally, and sometimes diagonally (6, 113, 163), but no critic had (or has since) written about the hidden text available to be read vertically in some of the non-acrostic pages of *Thru* (1–21, 119–20, 157–59). In these pages we can find words, phrases, and sentences that can be read vertically composed of the leftmost (or rightmost [157–59]) letters of each line. For example, an early scene between two lovers has the following sexual vertical “side text”: “TWO white thighs DO it two White legs wo YOu dadDY bitcH YOU TIT BITCH you got IT ALL wrong” (9–13). But even this unique device is mimetic, revealing what characters think against what they say (see Brooke-Rose 1996b: 248).<sup>14</sup> The whole point of the complex graphic mimesis used in *Thru* is that it attempts to encompass as much as possible, to be as complex as possible.

That the novel’s ambiguities do not resolve themselves and that they penetrate all the narrative levels we can invent does not, I would argue, make the text necessarily nonmimetic. Our perceptions of the world are partial, our understandings different and, in short, subjective. This is the product of both a wealth of information and our freedom to interpret. *Thru*, in producing the experience of “perpetual reversibility” that must be limited by the reader, *is* producing a mimetic effect, though of a metatextual kind. This “metatextual mimesis” goes further than the readerly attempt to see meaning or meaninglessness in textual detail and involves the interpretative experience of ambiguity and unresolvability and the necessary pragmatic solutions to such difficulties.

*Thru* is inspired by the ideas that criticism is just another narrative and that the reader is more important than the critic in interpretation. With its sabotaged jargon, unresolved ambiguities, new mimetic, and innovative devices, *Thru* is not an example of “foolproof composition” (Sternberg 1987: 50); but its confusion and complexity validate reading despite everything. In the absence of “foolproof composition,” I invoke a fail-safe device for interpreting such a book: the pragmatic reader, whose object is not the line of least resistance but the best reading available. The options that *Thru* gives us as readers (and the fact that we do have options) represent the relationship of the individual to reality (even if we wish to characterize it as a plethora of

14. A case might be made for the embedded vertical text of *Thru* being some kind of meta-language. See White 1999: 198–202.

narratives) better than any text that gives, or attempts to give, a single unifying finalized hypothesis or solution through the process of reading. In this sense it is possible to invoke Meir Sternberg's (ibid.: 47) statement about the Bible with regard to *Thru*: "To make sense of the discourse is to gain a sense of being human."

Without this kind of reading, *Thru* remains in the "transient category" of the "undetermined text" according to Brooke-Rose's own definition of the term.<sup>15</sup> This is a species of text where "the reader, not being properly encoded, is or feels free to read everything, anything, and therefore also nothing, into the text" (Brooke-Rose 1981: 124). The undetermined text is the antithesis of biblical narrative, according to Sternberg's (1987: 50) analysis, which may be "difficult to read, easy to underread and overread and even misread, but virtually impossible, so to speak, to counterread." Brooke-Rose's "Is Self-Reflexivity Mere?" (1996b) is an attempt to contradict some counterreadings and underreadings and open up aspects of the novel that have lain hidden in plain sight on the graphic surface of *Thru* for a quarter of a century. However, according to Brooke-Rose (1981: 127), such states of incomprehension of a nondetermined text are not permanent:

An "apparent" non-determination of codes . . . may in some instances turn out to be a mere contemporary blindness to an unfamiliar form of this necessary balance, the encoded reader being as it were invisible, for a while, to the actual reader, until later actual readers discover him; whence a lack of comprehension, a lack of reaction, or on the contrary, sometimes, over-reaction, but for the wrong reasons.

It has not helped *Thru* that initial reviews portrayed it as unreadable (see Reyes 1995) and that later criticism has foregrounded it only as the epitome of postmodernism. But perhaps now enough time has elapsed to bring *Thru* back into the literary fold on its own terms. As Brooke-Rose (1981: 127) has argued, sometimes in nondetermined texts "the apparent non-existent balance turns out to be a structured balance, in which case the text will rejoin one of the first two categories [over-determined, under-determined], and keep critics happy for generations." Certainly, if it can be done, there will be as much rejoicing, by critics as well as by those readers interested in the possibilities of literature, as there has been wailing and gnashing of teeth over this particular text.

15. In the essay "The Readerhood of Man," republished as "The Encoded Reader" in chapter 5 of Brooke-Rose 1981.

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