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Christine Brooke-Rose's Routes of Belonging: *Remake*

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In this age of globalisation, Christine Brooke-Rose may represent an interesting case of cultural diaspora internal to Europe, an experience she describes with considerable insight in her autobiographical novel *Remake* (1996). Prompted by her publisher, Brooke-Rose gathers fragments of an existence rooted in separate cultures, spanning crucial moments in European history. Her novel recaptures the feelings of her childhood in memory, mapping a sense of displacement and the ensuing wonder at the various experiences befalling the war-time child and adolescent and, later, her intellectual mediation between different cultural traditions. Aided by an in-depth knowledge of both narratology and Lacanian theories of displacement of the subject, the author turns her life experience into a highly experimental autobiographical narrative which I propose to illustrate. While her fiction successfully exploits her position as someone who is ambiguously positioned between cultures, it also exemplifies that sense of *depaysement* described by other intellectuals who have converted this very sense of being on the border between national cultures into a positive life-project.

In a 1978 essay by Juri M. Lotman and B. A. Uspensky entitled "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture," the two Russian semioticians described the processes structuring the formation of culture as both dynamic and stabilising. Just like organic life, social life is also characterised by a need for self-preservation and stability, which cannot be divorced from the changeable quality of its surroundings, and the inherent drive for self-regeneration. Culture, "a continually expanding nonhereditary memory," is therefore inseparable from the changing conditions of the environment and is also constantly subjected to both self-renewal and stabilising processes (226). In the long term, these mechanisms can be seen as essential and alternating structural principles shaping the dynamism of culture, thus providing an inner tension in culture's development and construction. Fi-

nally, Lotman and Uspensky summarise their contribution with an almost epigrammatic quotation from Heraclitus, which they see as illuminating the basic features of culture: "Essential to the psyche is the self-generating logos" (227).

This classical quotation can fruitfully guide us into the work of Christine Brooke-Rose, a British author with variegated national affinities and multiple cultural attachments, whose fiction I have recently begun to study closely in the general context of cultural memory and its fictional rendering. Though her experimental fiction provides us with an ideal angle from which to look at memory and questions of identity in the context of a new Europe in the making, Brooke-Rose has attracted very little attention, remaining largely outside the pivotal influence of the media and the glittering literary establishment. Admittedly, the highly experimental quality of her fiction and her position on the border between national cultures with strong literary traditions, have long determined the circumstances of her literary path and the slow acceptance or recognition of her work. These circumstances have been acknowledged by critics and by the author herself. In an incisive study of Christine Brooke-Rose's fiction, Sarah Birch aptly points out the "infringement of national identity" characteristic of her work, alongside the readers' reluctance to "abandon the national paradigm" and bridge the creative gap opened by the author's "protean" imagination (Birch 162). In turn, Brooke-Rose has addressed the difficult quality of her writing and challenged critics to examine those aspects of her narrative technique that have previously been ignored (*Invisible Author* 1-2).

Despite slow acceptance of her work into the literary canon, Brooke-Rose's fiction maps a very personal and creative path in search of a cultural project providing a positive contribution to the current debate on cross-cultural identity, biographical narrative and their relation to historical fiction. In this age of globalisation, she may be taken to represent an interesting case of cultural diaspora internal to Europe, an experience she describes with considerable insight in her autobiographical novel *Remake* (1996). Other intellectuals, whom I shall refer to in the final part of my essay, have transformed their subject position on the border between cultures into an affirmative life project. Few, however, have articulated their predicament or theoretical approach in the shape of a novel.[1]

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[1] An example of someone who has described his crosscultural experience in an autobiographical narrative is Elias Canetti, who has movingly portrayed his childhood and his transition through multiple languages in *Die gerettete Zunge* (1977).

Prompted by her publisher to write an autobiography, Brooke-Rose sets out to gather fragments of an existence rooted in separate places and cultures and spanning crucial moments in European history. The novel is "a piece-meal attempt to master a file, a life" (*Remake* 13), where life is not a synonym for a cohesive "story," but only a loose series of files, "mostly erased" and then copied anew onto the palimpsest of memory (65). Tellingly, the title of almost every chapter in the novel echoes the word "file," while a rigorous and inquisitive third-person narrator delves into the author's past, assembling fragments of her pre-war childhood in Switzerland and Belgium prior to her move to England in the middle of her schooling. Further fragments chart her work in the British Intelligence Service's decoding centre during the war period – an activity the whole family was recruited into because of their language skills. An Oxford education followed, thanks to a British government grant offered to former war service staff on the condition of successful university admission, marriage, post-graduate study and a career in literary journalism in post-war Britain. Finally, the novel chronicles Brooke-Rose's move to France in 1968. Following her divorce from Polish poet and exile, Jerzy Peterkiewicz, her life takes one more new turn when she is offered a position as a lecturer in American literature at the new Université de Paris VIII at Vincennes.

Brought up bilingual in French and English with an excellent command of German and later acquisition of other languages, Christine Brooke-Rose had to integrate different selves rooted in separate cultural milieus at a time when the current debate on cross-cultural identity was still absent from the scholarly and cultural agenda of Europe. Many other literary exiles share this destiny of course. Perhaps most characteristic of Brooke-Rose herself is the fact that her "semi-voluntary exile" to France (*Invisible Author* 126) coincided with a return to her first spoken language, the language spoken in her childhood in Switzerland and Belgium, though, paradoxically, she never returned to writing in French. Ironically, France, with its idiosyncratic and unquestionable cult of national administration, belatedly taught her that "deep and permanent feeling of exclusion" experienced by many exiles and refugees, with even greater anguish, as she poignantly reveals in her latest volume of critical essays in a chapter titled "Interlude: Exsul" (125). Here, more than in the novel itself, she explicitly lists the advantages and disadvantages of her intellectual and geographical displacement, admitting her "rude culture shock on discovering that my childhood language was also

that of such a quarrelsome, self-centred, and self-righteous people" (125).

She is equally outspoken about "the more devilishly subtle but just as unacceptable" English ways of alienating when she addresses the issue of literary exile: from the pinnacle of old age, Brooke-Rose draws attention to her long absence from England and frankly observes that it may well have rendered her more susceptible to feelings of exclusion (128)[2].

Yet, looking back on her intellectual and life experience from the vantage point of an exiled old age in southern France, she admits to having become more tolerant of "French failings" and to have stopped making comparisons. She finally acknowledges her condition as a "treasured status," echoing perhaps "the perpetual nonbelonging" of her childhood. She claims that this place of nonbelonging can also become home: a form of inner exile and of "protected serenity and isolation" housing her "identity," namely "the lady who lives in that house" (129).

Her novel recaptures the feelings of her childhood in memory, mapping a sense of displacement and ensuing wonder at the various experiences befalling a child and war-time adolescent, and, later, her intellectual mediation between different cultural traditions. The novel is also a fascinating journey into the historical past, triggered by a French television documentary that the third-person narrator – the author's alter ego recast as an "old lady" – watches as the narrative unfolds. The programme features major historical events chronicled through the media coverage of their time, which in turn prompts the old lady to reflect that television documentaries follow the same techniques as fiction in selectively reconstructing the past out of myriad points of view and confrontable selves. Ultimately, a sense of connection emerges from the haphazard and seemingly incoherent life process, though a scrupulous and rigorous third-person narrator vigilantly holds any passionate observation or easy interpretation of the past in check.

The freshness and originality of Brooke-Rose's autobiographical novel lies precisely at the intersection between remembrance of personal events and the chronicle of historical facts unfolding visually on televi-

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[2] As I revise this article for publication, I read in a recent issue of *The London Review of Books* Frank Kermode's review of Brooke-Rose's latest novel *Life, End of* (2006). Kermode openly amends the lack of recognition lamented by Brooke-Rose and says: "It's hard to avoid the conclusion that the originality and skills of Brooke-Rose deserve a greater measure of admiration and respect than we have so far chosen to accord them" (17).

sion at the onset of the novel. These events are skilfully rendered in the present tense to recapture a sense of the immediacy and wonder of both childhood perception and the surprising events registered in adult consciousness, which may appear falsified or distorted in retrospect. Such distortions are made ironically clear when "the old lady" singles out a programme called *Histoire Parallèle* on the French cultural channel, "showing the newsreels of the same week fifty years ago, German, English, French, later American, Russian, Japanese. [. . .] With two historians hind-citing omissions and lies, the old lady hind-siting [sic] irrelevance, knocked into long lost images" (*Remake* 5).

A creative tension arises from the illusion of total accuracy in the representation of facts and fiction, and the familial look, described in relation to family photographs by both Marianne Hirsch and Roland Barthes, is also traced in Brooke-Rose's novel with the aid of a different medium. Like Hirsch and Barthes, she also seeks to define "a boundary between inside and outside" (Hirsch 83), placing the events befalling her family into a larger framework of historical time and deconstructing the apparent unity of dramatised stories, both personal and collective. Her in-depth knowledge of both narratology and Lacanian theories of displacement of the subject and interrelation between self and other serves her precisely to achieve a necessary degree of distance between the act of narration and the facts of narration. In particular, two elements in the novel allow us to examine Brooke-Rose's narrative strategy in detail: her use of verb tenses coupled with specific time and place deictics (words such as *yesterday* or *here*, *then*, *ago*, etc.) and a lack of personal pronouns, and her attribution of a multiplicity of voices to the central consciousness registering the novel's events.[3] The latter approach is a clever rendering of the notion that the self functions like a prism reflecting the mutually constitutive gaze of the many others who influence the subject. Those many voices intercept and confront the central consciousness in the novel in an attempt to render visible the process shaping its identity.[4] A closer look at the text will illustrate Brooke-Rose's narrative technique in translating theory into autobiographical fiction.

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[3] Cf. Brooke-Rose's comments on her own use of narrative technique including lipograms, i.e. self-imposed "constraints" or rhetorical artifices entailing the omission of certain letters or, by extension, pronouns and narrative tenses, such as the past tense (*Invisible Author* 2-3, 57-60).

[4] The term "central consciousness" marks the position of the perceiving character whose reactions to the events chronicled in the novel contribute to the organic unity of

Throughout the author's narration, the reader encounters the naïve gaze of a child, referred to as "the little girl" before the name Tess surfaces at a much later point in the novel. Tellingly, Tess is "a play on *text*" and has no relation to the protagonist of Hardy's novel, as Brooke-Rose clarifies in her latest work (*Invisible Author* 60). The etymology of *text* denotes weaving (Lat. *Textus*, i.e., weave, web), and Tess is, therefore, a little girl moulded by many different scraps of languages as well as many persons identified under the clustering name of John or one of its derivatives. Accordingly, the names Jeanne, Joanne, Jean-Luc or Vanna or, simply, John1, John13 or John56, etc. – or John the psycho (*Remake* 74), John the litcritter (11), the pedantic John (16) – represent her closest relations or friends and, ultimately, all those whose influences have been incorporated into the making of Tess. In short, they are her "mentors" or "tormentors," as the novel wittily acknowledges (12). Because this little girl is almost trilingual and will acquire more languages at a later age, John incorporates all those "scatterings and smatterings" of language, just as the satellite dish on the roof of the old lady's house in Provence, "pivoting like an ear-eye," captures the multilingual babble of TV news, "a monotonous variety of natiocentric views" (6). Ultimately John is "a whole language, or more, a worldword memory" (12), and, by the end of the novel, "language is like Tess, absorbing alien elements and yet somehow always elsewhere" (149). Indeed, "John is Tess" (172).

The only exception to Brooke-Rose's self-imposed, rigorous and detached narrative mode is her switching from a third to a first-person narrative voice when recounting the experience of losing her mother. The change is motivated by the insertion of a fragment of Brook-Rose's diary chronicling the anguish of this separation brought about by death. A greater emotional intensity permeates this chapter bearing the title "File: Pro-Nouns," and the reader is now allowed unmediated insight into feelings of personal loss and mourning.

The novel swiftly shifts from glimpses of family life and school to memories of the war, experienced as pure information "from the enemy viewpoint, the British being the enemy," when Tess is summoned to Bletchley Park, "in the peaceful Buckinghamshire countryside," to decode German messages (*Remake* 108). Her experience is memorable in several ways, as Tess, now eighteen, learns the tricks of propaganda and acquires her "first training of the mind, a first university" (107). Sur-

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the narrative, despite the fact that the character's many perceptions almost dissolve the self into an "anti-biographical" narrative.

rounded by a team of polyglot scholars and mathematical brains with eccentric hobbies, she becomes fiercely aware of the tremendous power knowledge gives and, most importantly, learns "to imagine the other," as writers do, or as "all human beings should, in fact, but don't always" (108).

Back at school in Brussels, a picture of the little girl and her sister, Joanne, "dressed from top to toe in dark green kilts and jumpers and socks and tartan ties," evokes the feeling of non-belonging. Both girls "are treated as foreign bodies"(50) just as, a few years later, their new English school environment produces a similar response:

> Joanne and Tess are in fact treated as French, since nobody seems to know where Belgium is. A great curiosity in such an English school at the time. Teased, questioned, giggled at. Just like the kilts in Brussels. (69)

In their new English environment, the school syllabus is also a new one, with history now chiefly:

> Whigs and Tories, Fox, Pitt, The Great Reform Bill, Canning, Peele, Clive of India, the Black Hole of Calcutta, the Indian Mutiny, the Crimean War, the Sick Man of Europe, the Corn Laws, Irish Home Rule, Disraeli, Gladstone, the Boer War. Belgium has disappeared. (69-70)

Similar observations are interspersed throughout the narrative, swiftly mingling present and past, and filtered by the natural simplicity of the little girl and the old lady's calm wisdom. She observes that schools "teach a national version of history, but learning the history of Belgium in the thirties means learning the history of Europe, for Flanders belonged to many powers" (9). From the vantage point of her old age, she concludes:

> Today the old map of Europe learnt at school is resurging with vertiginously calamitous zones from under the leaden palimpsest, not to mention the old map of Africa, ah, le Congo belge so proudly thrust into the children's imagination with jerky films at the Musée Colonial of black-breasted women pounding meal and savagely garbed black men stamping out war dances in happy honour of the white chiefs. (10)

Persistently, the question of the real meaning of identity – "a seamless tissue of half-lies" (51) – resurfaces in the rigorous overview of almost a century, while the crucial dilemma is posed as, "[h]ow far back in history

can a nation go to settle frontiers of identity?" given that, "[c]ollective memory seems to be fabricated at school, on models ordered from above" (18).

Thus, the unsettling experience of her educational dislocation in the early years of her school training highlights the fragile notion of cultural identity as an artificial construct which is permanently in the making and is also stitched together out of discontinuous narratives. Far from advocating a process of assimilation entailing a fixing of origins and history, the novel's protagonist simply revises her school experiences, laying bare the contradictions embedded in unified national and oppositional cultures. Admittedly, this is an intellectual stance that may not add anything new to the notion of diaspora and cross-cultural identity as it has been articulated in much contemporary discourse and postcolonial theory. Yet, Brooke-Rose's novel is unique in translating these issues into an autobiographical narrative which combines a highly ingenious narrative strategy with the naïve perception of a child grappling with a mutable social environment within Europe. The novel does indeed live out of a delicate balance between these two features, and a further example of this characteristic mode is contained in a passage which portrays the little girl's first impressions of the geographical map of Europe. When her sister observes jubilantly that "France is bigger than England":

> The little girl looks and sees a sort of solid square for France and, for England, a crotchety old lady backside to the continent with stretched legs driving a motorcar into the Atlantic, Ireland as the wheel. (11)

Further remarks of a governess pointing out self-assuredly that "everything pink on the [world] map belongs to England," prompt the little girl's pertinent reaction in asking "Why?" (11). At the same time, an external voice intercepts this childish memory and questions it further: "What was the answer? Says John13 (John the littcritter)" (11). Soon after, however, an adult voice admits that she cannot remember what the answer to that innocent question was.

It is precisely this interplay between objectivity and the rendering of immediacy and direct perception that lends Brooke-Rose's fiction its characteristic style. In the process of remembrance enacted in her autobiographical novel, she renders the elusive quality of identity and the shifting possibilities of language against multiple cultural and historical layers of reality. Thus, she unmasks the hegemonic claim to truth produced by any given system of thought, be it informed by ideology, lin-

guistic codes or nationalist practices. Her chosen style also involves a sophisticated use of narrative tools which her in-depth knowledge of structuralist and post-structuralist theory and of the French *nouveau roman* allows her. It is to Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute's rejection of realist conventions that Brooke-Rose's style is partly indebted. The new devices afforded by their fiction, such as an impersonal present without narrator producing temporal ambiguity and discontinuity, have been incorporated into her narrative mode, effectively blurring the impersonal sentence used for relating external events with a present tense allowing for a detailed rendering of the impact of reality onto the central consciousness.[5] Thus, the author is ideally positioned on the border between different cultural traditions and can best appropriate different narrative conventions in order to offer "a personal synthesis of whatever different cultures offer her" (Canepari-Labib 22).

In her perceptive assessment of Christine Brooke-Rose's work, Lorna Sage claimed that Brooke-Rose longed in her fiction for what Roland Barthes had named "textual atopia," i.e. placelessness. She considered that Brooke-Rose felt so well-disposed towards a conception of the novel as "a site of verbal play" and "split selves" simply because "it promised a kind of liberation from origins, from 'place,' in the form of gender, class, nation" (Sage 203). Brooke-Rose does indeed celebrate a displaced subjectivity that registers a prismatic world caught between a proliferation of different discourses. Therefore, she may also be said to exemplify what Bakhtin had named heteroglossia when discussing the dialogic nature of the novel which originated "on the boundary line between cultures and languages" (Bakhtin 50).

Brooke-Rose had already accustomed us to a similar juxtaposition of different linguistic codes in a previous novel, *Between*, published in 1968. Tellingly, the protagonist here is a simultaneous interpreter whose life largely unfolds on airplanes, conference venues and in the interstitial space of hotels, customs and border zones. Indeed, the novel captures the multilingual "lunatic, empty-speech making of different congresses" producing a variety of languages and specialised jargons, all joyfully jostled together, with the same detached objectivity with which the huge interior of an airplane is shown circling around the world. Inside it, the

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[5] For a detailed discussion of these narratological issues see Brooke-Rose "Narrating without a Narrator." A longer version of this paper was subsequently included in Brooke-Rose *Invisible Author* in a chapter entitled "The Author is Dead. Long live the Author." See also Canepari-Labib (ch. 1).

interpreter's body is held suspended between its wings and, like her body, her language and her consciousness also travel. Echoing the language of customs and border controls, the narrator's voice reflects:

> Have you anything to declare such as love desire ambition or a glimpse that in this air-conditioning and other circumstantial emptiness freedom has its sudden attractions as the body floats in willing suspension of responsibility to anyone? (422)

As already observed by Little in her analysis of the novel (139-40), the same voice generates further variations of the same phrase a little later, juxtaposing the impersonal language of border control to the ethical issue of commitment: "Have you anything to declare such as love desire ambition nothing at all just personal effects . . . as the body floats in willing suspension of loyalty to anyone" (*Between* 461). The interpreter is in fact a woman of uncertain age and "uncertain loyalties" which are ever shifting in her life. Born of a French mother and a German father, her childhood and youth years were spent in Catholic France and in Nazi Germany, while her freer adulthood is spent suspended in mid-air. Therefore, the novel enacts both the fast-changing reality of the interpreter's multilingual world and the ideological, ethical and social implications underlying questions of boundaries and cross-cultural encounters. Ultimately, we are invited to question many common assumptions about culture in a way which unobtrusively lays bare the processes of human encounter, their potential development and the cost they involve. Accordingly, the customs phrase undergoes one more variation, turning into: "Please declare if you have any love loyalty lust intellect belief of any kind or even simple enthusiasm for which you must pay duty to the Customs and Excise" (444).

Remake shows similar instances of cultural dislocation highlighting issues of loyalty and belonging. We learn, for example, that Tess and her mother visit the Lake District at the outbreak of World War Two and are reported as potential spies by the family who lodges them and hears them speak a foreign idiom. Similarly, the novel points out French TV speakers' inappropriate habit of colonising all foreign names into French phonetics: "People are frightened of names. Of otherness" reflects the old lady as her process of re-memoration is set in motion by a TV programme (4).

As the autobiographical novel draws to a close, with scenes of French intellectuals crowding the author's new surroundings in the

post-68 climate, more contradictions are caught in the mesh of the central consciousness. Therefore, the ideological stance of a "deep Derridean" colleague, "[l]ooking like Queen Nefertiti, in Cardin clothes and a luxury flat, unimaginable as intellectual sent to pick rice in mid Cultural Revolution," is classified as "confused" (166). Yet, the canonical mentors "are all safely in print, Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray, Foucault, Lacan, Bakhtin, Deleuze, Baudrillard and all the other maîtres-à-penser" (167). Symbols will be replaced, statues will crumble, new borders will resurface on the world map, and Christine Brooke-Rose, "a kind of high-tech wise woman, like a figure from a twenty-first-century fairy tale," as Lorna Sage charmingly describes her in *Moments of Truth* (193), remains in place to register the fragile and shifting quality of memories which challenge our perception and understanding of time, ideology and culture.

Her novel can be read as both an act of infringement of national identity and as a celebration of the potentially liberating energies that Otherness can offer. Since, as George Steiner well observed, "each human language maps the world differently" and "construes a set of possible worlds and geographies of remembrance" (xiv), the polyglot mind can fruitfully interrelate lines of division normally drawn by geographical boundaries and self-centred cultures otherwise resistant to change. Hence we are brought back to Lotman and Uspensky's quotation of Heraclitus in their interpretation of culture as a semiotic mechanism: "Essential to the psyche is the self-generating logos." Christine Brooke-Rose, with her characteristic taste for puns and humorous language games interspersed in her fiction, refreshingly alerts our consciousness to the contradictions hidden in fixed viewpoints.

While her fiction successfully exploits her position as an intellectual outsider, i.e., as someone who is ambiguously positioned between cultures, it also exemplifies that sense of *depaysement* which Tzvetan Todorov has illustrated in *L'homme dépaysé* (1996). Here, the Bulgarian intellectual who elected France as his homeland and the United States as his third pole of attraction, questions the conditions which may qualify national allegiances as positive or negative, depending on the ideological circumstances in which they are spoken. Recalling his return to Bulgaria after eighteen years of absence, he explains that suddenly he found himself unable to address an audience of Bulgarian intellectuals in the terms that he had originally planned while still in Paris. Then, he had intended to argue against the defence of one's own group of belonging and the

ensuing cult of national values, which he saw as stemming from mere collective selfishness, when he realised that his fellow-citizens would not have been able to understand his talk in the terms he had wished. The circumstances of former Bulgaria under Soviet influence meant in fact that a nationalist position was the only possible form of opposition to Soviet imperialism at that time.

Todorov resorts to this episode in his life to address the question of multiple attachments and split selves and he finally concludes that the co-existence of a double voice can be productive if it becomes accommodated within a context which has been freely chosen. Alternatively, those split voices enter into competition with one another and may become a threat if they are not integrated into an acceptable project. Todorov admits to having been able to integrate his Bulgarian voice into his French life because "my present identity is Paris, not Sofia" (my trans. 10). Yet, he has not been able to anchor his French voice in his former homeland and culture.

What he ultimately emphasises is the need for a balance to be maintained in the acquisition of a new cultural code without the loss of the old one, for which he employs the term *transculturation.* He favours a situation that he names *depaysement* and defines as the necessary disorienting experience capable of bringing about a loss of ethnocentric and self-centred illusions in individual and collective consciousness. In order to achieve this state of *depaysement,* one must learn to become detached from oneself and one's old habits, and to see them anew from the outside. Todorov's proposition seems to me helpful in differentiating between the term *diaspora,* entailing a different political status for the exiled subject, and the condition described by both Brooke-Rose and Todorov in the different contexts of their fiction and critical writing.

It should also be noted that while the term *diaspora* has produced a wealth of discursive fields which continue to be interpreted anew in the context of postcolonial literature, the notion *depaysement* seems to capture the inner tension and dynamism involved in experiences of multiple attachments and belonging in a more effective, subtle and positive way.

Perhaps, Christine Brooke-Rose's characteristic position as an intellectual can best be described in the terms set out by Abdul R. JanMohamed when he attributes to Edward Said the features of a "specular border intellectual." Commenting on Said's authorial subject position, JanMohamed distinguishes the "syncretic intellectual" from the "specular border intellectual" (97), claiming for the former the ability to feel at

home in more than one culture and to combine disparate elements into a new syncretic form. Of the specular border intellectual he gives instead the following definition:

> By contrast, the specular border intellectual, while perhaps equally familiar with two cultures, finds himself or herself unable or unwilling to be "at home" in these societies. Caught between several cultures or groups, none of which are deemed sufficiently enabling or productive, the specular intellectual subjects the cultures to analytic scrutiny rather than combining them; he or she utilizes his or her interstitial cultural space as a vantage point from which to define, implicitly or explicitly, other, utopian possibilities of group formation. (97)

As JanMohamed reminds us, Edward Said had already characterised the awareness of intellectuals positioned on cultural borders as "contrapuntal." Said also saw in their predicament a productive spiritual displacement in terms which evoke the same notion of *depaysement* highlighted by Todorov.

Like Christine Brooke-Rose, these intellectuals share the ability to position themselves as participant-observers of the cultures they experience and travel through, moving through identities which, in the process, may or may not become bound into a composite new vision or negotiable project, depending on the nature of their individual, social and psychological experience.

Brooke-Rose, however, gave fictional shape to the condition of polyglot displacement characterising our postmodern times as early as 1968, when *Between* first appeared. In her experimental autobiographical novel *Remake*, she continues to be engaged with those same issues but uses all the critical tools at her disposal in order to portray the constitution of her own subjectivity as an ongoing process. Having experienced her own being as displaced in between languages, she may have been best suited to comprehend structuralist and poststructuralist theories intimately and almost instinctively. As she remarks in her critical writing, theory has released an immense power in her. Yet, she also draws attention to the inadequacy of separating theory from content, a trend which she knows to have existed in academic institutions "on the Continent" where the teaching of literature entailed a totalising attention to theory divorced from textual analysis: "Indeed, theory sometimes seems erected against having to read," she wittily observes in *Invisible Author* (15), proving once more her attempt to bridge the gap separating differ-

ent learning traditions which are also the product of distinct national cultures.

Rosi Braidotti, a feminist philosopher who has made of her displaced polyglot identity a powerful theoretical tool, addresses the issue of her cultural nomadism in a volume entitled *Nomadic Subjects* (1994), commenting: "The truth of the subject is always in between self and society. The truth of the matter is that, from the moment you were born, you have lost your 'origin'" (14).

Brooke-Rose has indeed demystified origins, picturing her "bifography" – as she humorously names it – in just this condition, inviting her readers to share the same stance and discard fixed view-points. Like Todorov and other specular or syncretic intellectuals, Brooke-Rose has fruitfully converted this very sense of being on the border between national cultures into a positive life-project, which she attempts to retrace in her autobiographical novel, knowing only too well that, "all portrayal is betrayal," and that "memory can invent memories" (*Remake* 172).

Finally, the interrelation between fiction and biography outlined by Brooke-Rose in a cross-cultural context also bears on questions of historiography in a very significant way, as the Basel conference on "Cultures in Contact" has highlighted again recently. Therefore, one may be reminded of the way in which the historian Eric Hobsbawm describes his position as an intellectual in relation to his multicultural family and place of birth, Alexandria of Egypt, in his autobiography. Referring to the Greek poet Cavafy, who was also born in Alexandria, Hobsbawm advocates the necessity to stand "at a slight angle to the universe," making the following statement with which I would like to conclude:

> History needs mobility and the ability to survey and explore a large territory, that is to say the ability to move beyond one's roots. That is why we cannot be plants, unable to leave their native soil and habitat, because no single habitat or environmental niche can exhaust our subject. Our ideal cannot be the oak or redwood, however majestic, but the migrant bird, at home in arctic and tropic, overflowing half the globe. (415)

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