
Review: How to do things with theory

Reviewed Work(s): *Stories, Theories and Things* by Christine Brooke-Rose

Review by: Roland-françois Lack

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How to do things with theory

Christine Brooke-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991). xii + 305 pp.

The first virtue of Brooke-Rose's latest volume is in its title, which makes no effort to conceal beneath a catch-all generality the fact that it brings together very different texts with diverse origins. Unlike the title of her earlier, similarly assembled volume, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (1981), or that of her now-canonical work on *A Grammar of Metaphor* (1958), *Stories, Theories and Things* disarmingly promises to deal only with particular instances of phenomena. If 'things' looks like a catch-all term, the effect is more to suggest that absolutely any stray thing might find its way into the book, giving the impression that this is more of a 'Depository of Disparate Discourses' than a 'General Theory' of something.

The earliest of the texts deposited here is from 1963, the most recent were written especially for this book. All are readings of other writers, be they novelists, poets, or critical theorists. Even the readings of her own work construct Christine Brooke-Rose as an 'other' author, or rather as other authors: Brooke-Rose the novelist and Brooke-Rose the theoretical critic. But this is not recognizably 'author criticism'. Only five of the 19 chapters attend at length to one specific author (Hawthorne, Crane, Hardy, Pound, Auden), and even these are readings more of how the authors have been read than of the authors themselves. More typically, Brooke-Rose devotes two or three pages to a succinct account of a critical position and an equally succinct critique of it. These are subsumed within lengthier treatments of general questions: in 'A womb of one's own?' she reads postmodernism through Cixous and Kristeva—or rather through representations of them in other critics—in order to dissociate 'flux and chaos' from the specificity of female writing. Similarly, the book's concluding piece, a deconstruction through gender of Terry Eagleton's 'Ideology of the Aesthetic', is a critique of the idea of a feminist aesthetics and not an avowal of Eagleton's importance; her deference towards him is clearly tongue-in-cheek. In both these cases the wider question is raised because it is pertinent to her own practice as writer, and the diversity of theorists cited and discussed (from Plato through Nietzsche, Freud, Austin, Derrida, Lyotard, Genette, Hutcheon and Barbara Johnson to Brooke-Rose herself) is a sign of creative eclecticism, not of chaos.

Stories, Theories and Things is ordered into four parts. The heading of the first, 'Theories as stories', announces the theoretical premise that informs the whole book. That a theory is structured like a story is not at all a new theory, of course, nor is it original to point out that being structured in this way undermines a theory's claim to scientificity. Being an originator is not the object: 'I'm a good critic. But I have never considered myself a theorist, not, at any rate, in the sense of "having" a theory or theories I would defend against all comers, or revise and accommodate, as a fulltime job and work of a lifetime' (26). Brooke-Rose is a theorist none the less, even a scientific one, working in the field and testing theories against relevant practices, her own and those of other novelists. Her account of the theory-as-story theory and her withering application of it to the theories of scientists like Greimas and Lévi-Strauss are evidence of a higher discipline than mere 'good criticism'. When this emphatically critical theorist takes the semiotician as her object or 'thing' (as he has made Woman his object), criticism becomes the most incisive of instruments: 'I cannot help wondering whether semiotics is not a peculiarly reactionary discipline, and semioticians unconsciously nostalgic for nice, deep, ancient, phallogratic, elementary structures of significance' (249).

Critical theory is not, of course, Brooke-Rose's fulltime job. The inclusion of her practice as a novelist among the premises of her critical readings neatly matches the theoretical premise I have mentioned; a subsection headed 'Stories as theories' emphasizes the point. This preliminary inscription is designed 'to give a certain personal, author's perspective on the critical, that is supposedly more "objective" chapters that mostly make up this book' (3). This intervention of the personal gives *Stories, Theories and Things* its characteristic voice, that of a subject who reads and writes books, attends conferences and teaches, who knows what she's talking about. It can ground an assertion in experience, and can also ironize about experience as a criterion of value. The inscription of the novel-writing subject also has a deeper effect: under the heading 'A metastory, with metacharacters' (6), Brooke-Rose narrates her novelistic career as a mock (therefore more 'real') fiction. Her novels are the metacharacters, the narrative subject ('the author') alternates between she and he, and the 'real' Brooke-Rose intervenes meta-narratively to ironize and debunk. This performance fixes Brooke-Rose, the manipulator of stories, of 'other people's scenarios' (26), firmly in the mind as the book's structuring force, supplementing its discursive logic with the suggestion that it is actually a collection of meta-critical short stories. This even renders the discursive logic superfluous. We are easily persuaded

that theories are structured like stories when the theory that says so is itself so consciously story-like.

I do not mean that Brooke-Rose is a poet in her criticism. She herself suggests that 'the essays of certain novelists (William Gass, for instance) can read like fictions' (19), but it is apparent from the 'plot' of *Stories, Theories and Things* that this is a reader-effect, determined by the initial and overt determination of the essayist *as* novelist. This book of criticism declares itself from the outset as the work of a novelist; in a novel like *Thru* (1975) we learn that the novelist is also a theoretical critic. The creative and critical functions are held apart in both texts, in each case in the service of a rhetoric. They are not conflated, in the manner of Harold Bloom. Brooke-Rose is a good creative writer who produces good theoretical criticism and not, like Bloom, a bad poet and bad novelist who successfully accommodates these failings as a critic. Bloom is the object of a particularly effective critique here, no less effective for its generous deference to more 'expert' readers: 'My own necessary but absurd "reduction" of Bloom is unfair, which is why I quote the comments of others who have examined him in more generous detail than I could here, yet nevertheless end up in this negative way'. This is typical of Brooke-Rose's critical economy: she uses other readings where necessary and, rightly I think, the reader trusts her conclusions. Her self-depreciation never diminishes her authority, even when she attempts to foreground failings: 'There have been a few delightful moments, during my desultory and decidedly non-expert readings in semiotics, when the subject made me laugh out loud instead of terrorizing, or, same thing perhaps, boring me stupid'. In this incipit to a chapter on Woman as Semiotic Object, she is decidedly unfair to herself. Her readings can seem desultory, certainly, if that means she expends only as much energy on a subject as is necessary before moving on to another, but these readings always evince expertise. She is an expert summarizer of an argument and, where necessary, an expert deconstructor, or debunker, of it.

At several points in Brooke-Rose's criticism, deconstruction makes unexpected and forceful connections with a Poundian heritage, characteristically impatient, sarcastic or bemused in the face of the mis-constructions of others. Her most entertaining chapter is a devastating assault on Pound's French translators, who are made to look ridiculous with a sweet reasonableness that can have the reader laughing out loud. On occasion she shares with Pound a heavy-handedness with language that can irritate as readily as it convinces, though her sometimes painful puns and coinages — 'undecidable (or is it undecidable)'; 'phictions and filosophy' — always make a point. They fix the arguments in the mind and give

them pedagogical force. This too is Poundian, and Brooke-Rose is valuable for the lessons she teaches in that master's wake (if not in his voice): *Stories, Theories and Things* is a ZBC of Reading, a handbook on how to accommodate semiotic theory and its variants to one's own critical faculties.

ROLAND-FRANÇOIS LACK
Institute of Romance Studies, London