

Remake – An Autobiografictional Account of a Ventriloquising Self

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Abstract:

Constantly rejecting, resisting, and questioning the truthfulness of the biographical, author Christine Brooke-Rose writes her life story in a fictionalised narrative. This remade version of Brooke-Rose's life blends the biographical with the fictional in an autobiografictional narrative on her quest for an identity. The painful shift from one country to another brings about a split in the author's identity which assumes a volatile dimension. In this quest for an identity, the author ventriloquises past versions of her (chronological) selves so as to create a fictionalised life narrative. The (grammatical) third-person narrative perspective marks the deep fracture in the author's linguistic, cultural, and geographical identity, thus turning the autobiografictional narrative into a fragmented story. The construction and deconstruction of identity is the core dimension of *Remake*, underlining Christine Brooke-Rose's belief that identity is but a story. The autobiografictional narrative *Remake* is a retrospective gesture of reminiscing nevertheless echoing a predictable (autobiographical) melancholy tone.

Key words: autobiografiction, identity, ventriloquising-ventriloquised self

A persistent and consequent experimental writer, Christine Brooke-Rose meets her publisher's request to write an autobiography with an initial negative answer. A writer who believes in unsummarizable narratives, *Remake* (1996), on the other hand, is an allobiography (Genette, 1993:70) characterized by the clear dissociation between the instance of the author and that of the character – the character has a totally different name than the author's (Tess is the protagonist of Christine Brooke-Rose's allobiography *Remake*). The allobiographical type of narrative Genette identifies (1993:70-71) can be found in both narrative regimes: homodiegetic (the narrator and the character overlap) and heterodiegetic (narrator and character do not identify with each other). In the same paradigm emphasizing the fictionality of the autobiographical narrative, Max Saunders rather speaks of "autobiografiction" (Saunders, 2010:209) rather than factual autobiography. This new denomination of the fiction-autobiography blend is the outcome of a fictionalized version of

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autobiographical account of one's life. The author's first novel, *Remake*, clearly falls in the category of autobiographical narratives because the life story is fictionalized to the degree that the character has a distinct nominal identity and does not bring the real author's into the fictional discourse. In *Remake*, the character impersonating the author's life experiences is Tess – a different name from the author's (i.e. Christine Frances Evelyn). In the distance the author puts between herself (as subject of the autobiographical novel) and the character (Tess) one can see a relationship similar to the one between a ventriloquist and his puppet. But in *Remake*, the ventriloquist is the author who voices her previous, time-framed egos as *ventriloquised selves*. These *ventriloquised selves* surface and take fictional being in the autobiographical *Remake* of the author's life only if and when summoned by the author. The distance between the author's *ventriloquising self* and her past *ventriloquised selves* does not close in. The author's autobiographical attempt to chart her own meandering, fractal identity proves a melancholy gesture that spells non-soothed suffering. The autobiographical attempt to revive the past is in fact a *ventriloquising* of younger *selves*.

The narrator of the autobiographical novel *Remake* questions the accuracy of scripted memories, of the remembered, fictionally re-lived life experiences. Because all these are under the siege of blurring and inaccuracy due to the present-time ('temps du récit') accumulated experience and the ulterior perspective on events already lived. Naturally, after a literary career that did not go by unnoticed especially by critics, an autobiography could shed some light or bring a different perspective on the author's work up to that moment. But when it comes to autobiographies, what can one expect from a writer who has devoted almost her entire career to literary experiments? An author who went to such length that she may have driven away readers due to her favouring writerly narratives can hardly be expected to produce an autobiography. According to critic Jean-Louis Hippolyte's statement, an autobiography is expected to be similar to the entries of an encyclopaedia – as the former is expected to render all or at least most of a person's life-span itinerary: "autobiography and encyclopedia are analogous insofar as they endeavour to map out, exhaustively, all of life's events and experiences." (Hippolyte, 2006:76). In most cases, autobiographies come in the form of first person narratives in which the narrator and the author share not only the experiences and events in the narrative, but the narrative perspective enables an overlapping to a more or less high degree between these two instances (Genette, 1993:72). Similarly, Terry Eagleton asserts that autobiographies mainly suppose a juxtaposition of

three instances: the one writing, the one doing/performing, and the one telling the story; this is expressed referring to the uttering subject in terms of personal pronouns: “When I tell a story about myself, as in autobiography, the ‘I’ who does the telling seems in one sense identical with the ‘I’ whom I describe” (Eagleton, 1996:92). Thus we may expect to encounter a narrative in which the narrator is intradiegetic and the perspective would be homodiegetic (Genette, 1983:248) so that readers could rest assured that what they read is the actual story of someone’s life.

Remake, the autobiographical novel written by Christine Brooke-Rose, is actually a fictional narrative as the narrator of this novel has hardly anything in common with the author whose personal, private life story readers may expect to find. Therefore, Brooke-Rose resorts to a third-person narrative perspective from which the narrator tells a story. Why did she choose such a narrative style and point of view? There are two answers to this question: firstly the author (perhaps any author or any person) could feel vulnerable and exposed in front of many potential readers (each with their own lives, perceptions, concepts, points of view, experiences) so that opening up and sharing private moments does not seem a probable awaited experience. Secondly, such a personal perspective and sharing of intimate thoughts and happenings of a lifetime do not seem consistent with the highly experimental narratives written by the author until that moment. Moreover, Paul Ricoeur states that this is not actually something peculiar, but it could only bring about a certain degree of hindrance: “[t]he difficulty will be instead understanding how the third person is designated in discourse as someone who designates himself as a first person.” (Ricoeur, 1994:35). This means that the main challenge for a reader of such a third-person autobiography (who ventriloquises previous selves of the author) would fail to successfully identify the two instances of such a text with one individual: the issuer and the performer. What such a text might elicit would be a total correspondence and expected complete overlapping of these two instances (author and character or narrator), whereas the third-person, heterodiegetic autobiography confronts us with two distinct instances: the voice of the narrator and a distinct character that may not really appear to be sharing much so as to appear in such a narrative. The Brooke-Rosean mock-impersonal autobiography discards personal and possessive pronouns – meant to render the fictional autobiography even more distant from its author. A narrative’s intended dispossession, its own germinating instance is achieved through a grammatical constraint that might trick the reader into believing the fictional

dimension more than noticing the autobiographical elements underlying it. Fictionalizing a private lifetime story – fit for an “autobiografictional” (Saunders, 2010:7) narrative – offers, in my point of view, two advantages: on the one hand the author feels more at ease when sharing actual events and thoughts with unknown readers, while on the other hand the fictional nature allows a rearranging, censoring of episodes unfit to be recounted. Thus these two reasons create the necessary comfort for the confessions to be told in the autobiographical novel. Therefore the narrator can not be but an extradiegetic one, telling a story she is not part of, while the heterodiegetic relationship supposes her *not* being part of the story (Genette, 1983:248). These two conditions fulfilled, the novel can take the form of an allobiography but recounting events attributed to a fictional character and not to a first-person narrator partly identifying with the author. But writing an autobiographical account of a life is neither a simple nor a benign process; it involves a double hypostatization of the author both in the present of the writing (*the ventriloquising self*) and in her past versions (*the ventriloquised selves*). The shift in temporal planes is seen by Paul de Man (1979:57) as an alternating play between prospective and retrospective movements. The autobiographical account is generally thought to be a retrospective view and recollection of relevant moments, aspects, persons in the author’s life, but it also involves the prospective element in the author’s addressing future readers (in future time-frames). Thus there is a double relationship and a *dual mirroring* in the autobiography: firstly, the author who faces herself in her own previous time-bound avatars; secondly, the author who faces her readers in a *pan-temporal mirroring* relationship the autobiography supposes. This dual mirroring relationship reveals the author’s resorting to the postmodern strategy of decentralization which splits and distributes attention to several centres (in *Remake* they are *ventriloquised* avatars of the septuagenarian author) claiming as much importance in the narrative.

In writing *Remake*, Christine Brooke-Rose does not rely on “oneness of person of the narrator and the hero” (Genette, 1983:198) likely to be found in many autobiographies; what rather seems to best fit the narrative formula of the fictionalised account of her lifetime is the split between these two instances. Thus the narrator, the character, and the author probably share the authenticity of events and stories from the novel, but they most certainly do not share narrative overlapping in the sense of identification. The distance between the narrative instances makes room for a more relaxed telling, for confidently and boldly revealing private aspects (because they are attributed to another being – be it the

fictional Tess), for censoring unwanted or sore episodes, nevertheless they all contribute to the creativeness of the story which is no longer viewed as a true-to-life account, but as a work of fiction. Consequently, the narrative gains more in authenticity from these two sources: the genuineness of the material sprouting the diegesis (if there is one proper in an autobiographical novel), the author's creativity in producing a new character for her own story. While in heterodiegetic fictional narratives the narrator has autonomy of voice from those of characters, in autobiography these voices are supposed to be very similar or the written result of the act of dictating. This aspect is evident from the very first lines of Brooke-Rose's autobiographical novel in question. Here we find an old lady as a protagonist and besides her there is also the distinct voice of a narrator actually telling the story of the old lady's life: "[a]n old lady of seventy-two, has professed literature, for twenty years as a teacher in a Paris university but for forty years as a writer, retired to Provence." (Brooke-Rose, 1996:1). The informational content of the novel, constituting the main body of the fictional *Remake* of the author's life, is constituted mostly of reshuffled and censored memories. These are re-arranged, re-made into a more acceptable, manageable version of a still unfolding life. Perhaps it is not an exotic concept for many to wish for a different trajectory of their own lives, or even crave for a totally different life altogether. Such a natural desire for a different version of one's life could have generated Christine Brooke-Rose's desire to re-make her life as a fictional account. The *Remake* she eventually created could be viewed as a controllable copy of fixed, immovable past events, or it could account for an equally human thanatophobic wish to live on (even if in purely fictional version) beyond the natural physical extinction. Critic Michela Canepari-Labib highlights the fictional dimension of the Brooke-Rosean autobiographical novel asserting that: "the material used consists of recollections of events that actually occurred, the author's rehandling of that raw material produces something – and someone – quite different from the person who actually had those experiences, namely a fiction" (Canepari-Labib, 2002: 262).

But when the narrator states that the entire edifice of the novel "It's only a fiction after all." (Brooke-Rose, 1996:35), the postmodernist narrative process of subversion is evidently revealed from within as authorial intervention. Therefore, the semantic reader (Eco, 2006:222) who might be expecting stories as shared confessions and memories would grow even more discouraged and disarmed as they may fear the supposed autobiographical element from the novel is virtually inexistent. When actually asserting that the

autobiographical *Remake* is fiction (Brooke-Rose, 1996:35) and not a factual story, the narrator brings to focus the underlying major theme of the novel: the relationship between history and story. This history-story relationship is interwoven by the author into all the statements of protagonist Tess (in her interactions with other characters), emphasizing “the problematic distinction between history (personal and not) and fiction” (Canepari-Labib, 2002:262). But by bringing together fiction and autobiography, Max Saunders speaks of “autobiografiction” (Saunders, 2010:7) underlining the fictionalised version of a true story, as well as the factual component of the (simultaneously autobiographical and fictional) narrative. In creating this term Max Saunders desires to highlight and “to explore the profusion of modern literature’s experiments with lifewriting” (Saunders, 2010:8). In this equation, Christine Brooke-Rose’s autobiografictional novel reveals both its fictionality and truthfulness. Despite the fact that some chapters of the novel (7. File: *LIV’POOL*, 8. File: *WARWORK*, or 9. File: *LOVENWAR*) deal with the protagonist’s active participation in the Second World War as a captain in the WAAF, “Women’s Auxiliary Air Force” (Brooke-Rose, 1996:99), the historical grounding of the plot never seems reason enough to cast out the hovering, ever-present element of fictionality bringing everything under the siege of imagination. Yet another achievement of the author directly deriving from this aspect is a demonstration to what degree the human memory is error-prone (Canepari-Labib, 2002:253). Hence, any wanted or awaited correspondence of fictional events to real facts is undermined by a supposed inaccuracy of the remembering process from a leaking, partially-accurate memory of an author. Michela Canepari-Labib (2002:263) states that it is impossible to make a difference between real and pseudo-memories which stories manage to produce. Thus *Remake* reads:

The old lady can barely admit, let alone reconstruct, the retarded mental and physical age of Tess at sixteen, the ignorance, the innocence, the non-connecting of things, the permanent being elsewhere, not the elsewhere of religion or art or grand designs, but a haze, a fog. (Brooke-Rose, 1996: 81)

The narrator constantly refers to the old lady as a main reference – she is the *ventriloquising* agent, a temporally-bound self somehow attempting to pin down the time when the story was told (‘temps d’histoire’). The septuagenarian author is the self who controls and voices

her younger *ventriloquised selves*. In this case we could invoke the unclear status and nature of identity as it is present in postmodernist fiction, such as the Brooke-Rose novel *Remake*. Even if the selves to which the narrator reaches far back in the corners of her memory seem clearly contoured, still their multitude adds up to a non-distinct identity under the control of the narrator. This is what Jean-Louis Hippolyte calls a “general poetics of vagueness” (2006:14) in which the ego muddles as an undistinguished element against a background of multiple, various other voices and narrative actors. The medium emphasizing and ensuring a proliferation of fuzziness and general confusion is: “[t]he paradoxical coincidence of order and disorder, the seemingly infinite exploration of narrative options, the principle of undifferentiated identity – all participate in this general poetics of vagueness.” (Hippolyte, 2006:14). Nevertheless, Brooke-Rose’s narrator does not seem to fully control all the chronological versions/*ventriloquised selves* of the old lady’s as they seem to appear in her autobiografictional history. However, the narrator seems to control very skilfully the events and the amount of information these younger selves of the old lady do tell. In Genette’s terms (1983:198-99) this would be the narratological device the critic calls “paralipsis” – meaning that the narrator manages to limit herself to the amount of information certain version of the protagonist have at the evoked moment. This is a key feature the narrator has to pay constant attention to, as the information the character acquires in time is evidently quantitatively more and the ulterior perspective would make room for editing some aspects in the light of experience and wisdom. Nevertheless, a haunting question arises: Why fictionalize to such an extent the autobiography of a writer that is proud of a teaching and even more of a decades-spanning literary career? The answer comes from character Tess:

Facts are meaningless, unless reconstructed by experience. Reconned. [...] Or remakes of old records, putting in the cracks of verisimilitude. Isn’t life a story? No. A story is arranged. Life is a file. A lot of files, mostly erased, the diskette to be copied erasing the diskette receiving the copy. (Brooke-Rose, 1996:65)

The obviously stated intent was to recreate and to infuse the narrative with an aura of verisimilitude by adding elements to make the text and its micro-stories appear true-to-life. Michael Riffaterre (1993:xiii) actually places verisimilitude in the same paradigm with fictional truth and language to which it is strongly connected. According to Michael

Riffaterre, “referentiality assumes an actual or potential relationship between language and reality ... so long as it respects the rules of representation that exist in any language and with which all speakers of that language are familiar.” (1993:xiii). In this context, the truth attempted to be presented in fiction is strongly and intimately related to “a system of representations that seem to reflect a reality external to the text” (Riffaterre, 1993:xiii). Both this statement, as well as the conscious and self-reflexive narrative technique employed by Christine Brooke-Rose, echo Umberto Eco’s viewpoint that literature is a form of metaphysical verification of one’s existence in the usual, (fictionally!) verifiable parameters and boundaries: “the world of literature inspires the certainty that there are some unquestionable assumptions, and that literature therefore offers us a model, however fictitious, of truth.” (Eco, 2006:7). Hence, the transformative relation between history and story in *Remake* is envisaged once more. But as memory is the engine of an autobiographical account, its fallibility is underlined by the author. The last chapter of the Brooke-Rosean novel reveals the fact that memory is not to be trusted:

The old lady meditates. Memory is not after all a computer, not, a fortiori, a diskette or even a card-index, cards crushed between coloured tabs in long boxes and manually filled in, manually consulted, crushed again, out of sight. (Brooke-Rose, 1996:170)

Despite memory’s fallibility and apparent disorder (in ‘preserving’ events), the author manages to voice several ventriloquised versions of herself in many time frames. “The old lady,” the oldest of the author’s ventriloquised avatars, seems to be the closest source and interlocutor of the narrator. The focus of the autobiographical novel is Tess – the fictionalised, ventriloquised alter ego of the author, and not a character named either Christine, Frances, or Evelyn (all being the author’s real names). The narrator states: “everything in the old lady’s life is remake now, as is the world viewed in cartoon-strip” (Brooke-Rose, 1996:1). The cartoon-strip perspective on one’s own life is unusual when a reminiscing context is invoked. I strongly believe nostalgia is the most frequent state overpowering those who reminisce. While a cartoon-strip might be an unexpected perspective, it signals the absurd, the accidental, or the hilarious situations one has been through. Most certainly the history of the world is unlikely to be presented in such a form, unless in a contemporary art gallery. As indirectly but certainly stated, the main vehicle for

this pastime evocation is memory. In history becoming story, memory plays a vital role. The author allots attention to the workings of human memory in her attempt to frame it as a dynamic process. In the last chapter, the old lady attempts a definition, as accurate as possible, of human memory and its working:

Memory can quantum along from notion to notion. The meetings of particles are events and vice versa. [...] But memory is not an accelerator of particles either. Nor is memory a digging, a fishing, a lucky dip or a pinball machine, or a sundial showing only the light hours. Memory is more like intercepting and decrypting, thousands of messages missed, or captured but not decrypted, and even the captured and decrypted now burnt or not released. Memory intercepts the messages of a mysterious invented enemy unseen, giant king or flaming dragon, the interceptor a speck in time facing the immensity of confrontable selves. (Brooke-Rose, 1996:172)

While memory seems to be the dominant vehicle that orchestrates all the other elements it operates on, the other as important elements are the previous versions of the evoking / ventriloquising self. In this light, all the previous, evoked/ventriloquised selves are confrontation partners. Christine Brooke-Rose indirectly states that autobiographies are actual confrontations with younger, distinct selves – personal or those of others. Similarly, *Remake* becomes a confrontation with an invented self (Tess) while the reminiscing agent – memory – is a wanderer among notions, events and other selves.

Besides being the generator of her own story in a distance imposed by the effacing of personal and possessive pronouns and adjectives, the self who tells her own story is equally a reader of that very discourse (Smith and Watson, 2001:27). Life is seen in the metaphoric light of a conflict, at all stages, in all circumstances with others and, nonetheless, with oneself. As only natural, the remembered and evoked situations are presented in the novel in a somewhat random order; this could be what Hippolyte calls “[p]lotting against linear time” (2006:14). But more than plotting against linear time – as we perceive it, the non-chronological order of events being told is only natural, because, as the novel reads (Brooke-Rose, 1996:172), memory does not operate in chronologies when surfacing events, persons or situations. Michel Foucault states that the fragmentariness, the deconstruction of everything in small, barely intelligible parts that are always reshuffled is a contemporary

tendency: “[t]oday, we rather go for ruptures. [...] rather imperceptible moments of change, displacements, sidings, cracks, turn-about, gaps that increase, decrease, paths that get far, cave and suddenly get back.” (Foucault, 1997:137). Practice proves that nothing can be done in a continuous flux that knows not the division of stages. Even the superimposing temporal structure is divided so as to be more easily understood and managed by humans. Virtually any structure can be made of several pieces, shuffled, rearranged, decomposed and recomposed at will. Life and the events it confronts us with confirm this hypothesis that forwards as logical the truthfulness, reliability and the (onto)logic(al) dimension of segmentariness. Christine Brooke-Rose’s chronologically disrupted reminiscing underlines the postmodernist dimension of her fiction. Just as randomness seems to govern life, *Remake* tries to capture this aspect. Jean-Louis Hippolyte states that autobiographical narratives display a “concern with the construction of identity, with the literary investigating of the self, with probing its questionable homogeneity” (Hippolyte, 2006:16-17). In the author’s quest for an identity, *Remake* hosts Brooke-Rose’s *ventriloquised selves* in an old-age gesture to answer the question ‘Who am I?’. Michel Foucault states that creating an identity can put pressure on the individual, and it also can command to break things up – both are seen “similarly abusive” (Foucault, 1997:137). Thus the pressure the author imposes on herself in the attempt to find her clear identity pushes her to question the abilities and accuracy of her memory, given the fragmentariness and incompleteness of the fallible memory. But what the autobiographical novel, and *Remake* in particular, actually attempts to do is to rearrange and face evoked situations in acceptance, because, as Paul de Man stated, “autobiographical discourse is a discourse of selfrestoration” (De Man, 1979:925). What fictional restoration is directed at is the posthumous heritage of the author in the face of death. In this light, all events, contexts, people, relatives, and situations referred to are supposed to capture in a freeze-narrative all these. Eternity seems the only antidote to the fear of extinction overcoming all humans facing physical death.

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