Notes on Christine Brooke-Rose, *Life, End Of*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

The Relation between Theory and Machinic Imagination

This is Brooke-Rose's last book. Reviewers routinely remark on the differences between it and her earlier, more experimental novels. What matters, I think, is what it reveals about the psychology of the narrators in the other books: their forms of attention and their preferred subjects. Those traits are hers aside from her concerns with linguistics or the postmodern novel (as in "Thru"), and also aside from the chosen subjects and narratives of those earlier books.

Brooke-Rose's narrator (at first implicitly, later more carelessly and openly, the author herself) is full of the concerns that can be found in other books written during the authors' last years. She complains, as Gaddis, Howard Brodkey, and many others have, about the specifics of her medical condition, her burning feet, her fluctuating blood pressure, her strategies for keeping her balance. Not all of this is specific to this book: she has often had an intense preoccupation with the observable and describable quirks of the body and its appearances. The confusing double reflection that sometimes appears in a car's rear-view mirror, which recurs throughout the novel "Thru," is an example: it's a minute, exacting physical description of a particular part of the body (eyes and eyebrows).

This sort of attention seems empirically exacting, and I think she wants it taken that way; but it is better described as compulsively machinic: it's closer to an autistic presentation than a realist novelist's delight in detail. She thinks of the body as a sort of machine, susceptible to exacting perspectival and formal description: our bodies are humorous, quirky things, comprised of detachable parts and pieces, each of which needs to be put into precise prose. There is little, in Brooke-Rose, of the body's gestalt, of the body's motion or its elegance: it's a construction of pieces, an ultimately unpleasant, tenuously constructed machine.

The narrator (author) like to report on conversations and encounters from a certain distance, as if the author and narrator wasn't fully present. When she's fully present -- when the texture and objects of conversation return -- it's often a matter of facts and figures. She is interested in verifiable information, reports, summaries, things that she can use to solve questions she has, or things that fill in details she hadn't known. Other than that she's skeptical of friends and their motives and uses, and in general she keeps away from people in different ways, sometimes by simply cutting them off.

I'm trying, in the compass of a few paragraphs, to sketch a picture of Brooke-Rose the author, as well as her narrators: like her other novels, "Life, End of" is dry because it is skeptical of human contact; scientific because it fears everything inexact, including emotions; and cold or unpersuaded when it comes to the body. She thrives on theories, texts, references, links, lists, catalogs, inquiries, problems and solutions, puzzles. She loves dissecting, listing, analyzing, diagramming, parsing. (This is especially clear in "Thru," which revels in, and supposedly critiques, some French poststructuralist theory.) That personality drives her work, and gives it
both its power and its obstinate love of fragmentation.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis's review on Goodreads has the following lines, riffing on Brooke-Rose's repeated use of "T.F.," meaning True Friend, and "O.P.," which might mean Other People, or Opinionated People:

"Opinion People with their talking over and on top of. Who's crotchety here? You probably know all the crotchety old men with all their crotchety old books, their last books. I know that Gaddis guy did one. Collapsing and decaying. It comes. Just let me tell you, 'Life, End of' has its rights but more it has its obligation upon you, True Friend, Reader. Sympathy, empathy? Gelassenheit, better."

Gelassenheit, usually translated "releasement," is one of the late Heidegger's invented words. It means, roughly, the capacity to let people and things exist in their mode of being. Personally, I don't find much of Heidegger's nearly mystical, abstract acceptance in 'Life, End of': I find anger and dissatisfaction, tempered by physical and mental inability. There is, often, a lack of both sympathy and empathy, but it's because the narrator's at the end of her tether, not because she finds a way to accept what is.