Introduction

Roberta Garrett and Liam Harrison

'Rachel Cusk Won't Stay Still'

In autumn 2022, *The Atlantic* published a profile of Rachel Cusk entitled 'Rachel Cusk Won't Stay Still'. The title referred to Cusk's decision to permanently relocate to Paris, the city in which she had been spending much of her time following the UK's controversial decision to exit the European Union in 2016. Frequent relocation has been a feature of Cusk's life. Born in Saskatoon Canada in 1967, she spent her early childhood in Los Angeles before moving to East Anglia in the UK to be educated at a private Catholic girls' school. She attended New College Oxford in the late 1980s and moved to London in the early 1990s. After having children, she moved to Bristol, Brighton and the Norfolk coast, before her recent move to Paris. In an interview with Merve Emre, that concludes this collection, Cusk reflects upon her move to France and how it relates to questions of identity, character and time in the French and Anglophone novel:

> Character is a very difficult thing to believe in or to assert the existence of in anything other than a very static set of circumstances, where character can confirm itself all the time. But now I think slightly differently, certainly, about the question of time. I wonder why I have never used my ability to slow down time and why, actually, in the Anglophone novel, it's really a rare thing for anyone to do – to make time go very, very, very slowly in a book. I've moved to France, I'm reading French novels in French all day, every day, and the thing that I'm most struck by: they go much more slowly. Time pauses.

Cusk's approach to writing demonstrates the conflict between a restless spirit and an attention to temporal stasis – the ways in which time pauses and passes. Transition and renewal have been constant themes throughout her work, and she is an innovative, prolific and versatile writer. To date, she has produced twelve novels, three distinguished works of non-fiction, a collection of essays, short

stories and numerous reviews and journalistic pieces. She has also written for theatre, creating a new version of Euripides's *Medea* in 2015. And yet, as Liam Harrison's chapter in this collection concludes, Cusk has frequently 'disparaged the forms of fiction available to her as a writer, while nonetheless continuing to write fiction'. Cusk has recently stated, 'I always think and feel that I'm coming to the end of writing as a useful occupation, which is maybe a suicidal impulse given to female creators' (Treisman 2023). The history of Cusk's literary output is one of experimentation and a desire to push against established models and forms, whether these are artistic and cultural or socio-political. There is a well-recognized historical tendency for critics and readers to over-identify the biography of the female writer with the characters and situations addressed in her novels. This has often worked to the detriment of their art, by means of diminishing and undermining its formal and imaginative achievements. As noted throughout this collection, the tendency to narrow the scope of women writers by interpreting their work in this manner has been particularly evident in critical and media responses to Cusk's fiction and non-fiction, and, in turn, has become something her work has actively sought to anticipate and complicate. As an astute observer and chronicler of modern life and consciousness, and as a woman writer whose life and work spans a period of intense and sustained debate on sexual difference and gender identity, the interplay between Cusk's life and the themes and concerns of her work are increasingly difficult to separate, especially when considering her experiments with form and narrative structure, and this difficulty is explored throughout this book from a variety of perspectives and critical approaches.

Cusk's early novels, *Saving Agnes* (1993), the debut that won her the Whitbread First Novel Award at the age of twenty-six, and *The Country Life* (1997), adopt a self-ironizing tone that still resonates with the work of young female authors over two decades later. Both are comic, protagonist-focused *Bildungsromans* that depict the trials and tribulations of young, educated, white middle-class women (Agnes Day, like Cusk, is an Oxford graduate). These novels are written in the 1990s, during a period in which career and lifestyle aspirations and expectations for certain women had shifted in comparison to the previous generation. In his essay on representations of femininity in Cusk's early work, Nicolas Boileau states that, 'her early novels depict young, successful female characters that, for some reason have failed to live up to society's expectations and end up as marginal, but conventional women' (2013: 2). In her chapter in this collection, Sonja Pyykkö, interrogates Cusk's ongoing preoccupation with femininity and failure stating that 'it is ultimately not failure per se, nor even a fear of failure, that

Saving Agnes seeks to represent, but something even more elusive: a distorted self-perception that causes Agnes to compare herself to an idealized version of herself'. The opening chapter of *Saving Agnes* captures this disjuncture between the required performance of female empowerment, what Ros Gill and Shani Orgad have more recently referred to as 'confidence culture' (2021), and the inner lives of young women in a patriarchal culture that makes few real concessions to their needs:

> Agnes usually managed to sustain the appearance of a thrusting young professional running on a tight schedule; but then someone switched on the lights, pulled off the mask, revealed the pretender for exactly who she was. (Cusk 2013: 190)

Pyykkö contextualizes Cusk's youthful protagonist's distorted view as symptomatic of the gradual impact of falling living standards – even for the middle class – due to neoliberal policies, alongside the conflict between female career aspiration, traditional expectations of femininity and the persistence of structural sexism. As Pyykkö details, these latter conflicts were also the basis of much female-orientated culture in the 1990s, through popularized figures such as Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones. In 1998, Cusk continued to explore the vicissitudes of attempting to acquire an acceptable version of female identity in her third novel, *The Country Life*. The tonal register of *The Country Life* is also comedic, drawing on Stella Gibbon's classic pastoral satire *Cold Comfort Farm*, and the older plot of the outsider amongst eccentric wealthy family. The themes of alienation and estrangement continue in what might be considered the second phase of Cusk's writing career. This ranges from her first foray into non-fiction, *A Life's Work: Becoming a Mother* (2001), through the novels of the noughties: *The Lucky Ones* (2003), *In the Fold* (2005), *Arlington Park* (2006) and *The Bradshaw Variations* (2009). It also includes her second and third autobiographical works, *The Last Supper* (2009) and *Aftermath* (2012), as discussed in depth below, the latter received such negative reviews that it produced a period of 'creative death' that led to a third phase in Cusk's writing, of creative renewal.

The tonal register of Cusk's noughties' novels and non-fiction is darker and more contemplative than her early novels. Thematically, much of this work explores the tension between the desire to live fully as an intellectual, an artist and – for many of her characters – merely as an autonomous, sentient adult, while being subject to dominant cultural expectations and judgements on maternal behaviour and family life. In *A Life's Work*, Cusk's states of her pregnancy, 'it is the population of my privacy, as if the door to my room were

wide open and strangers were in there rifling about, that I find hard to endure. It is as if I have been arrested or called to account, summoned by the tax inspector, isolated and searched, I am not living freely but in some curious tithe' (Cusk 2001: 40) and 'motherhood, for me, was a sort of compound fenced off from the rest of the world. I was forever plotting to escape from it' (8). The five female characters in *Arlington Park* have little in common except their exasperation that marriage and motherhood has led to a greatly restricted social role. Juliet, the most openly rebellious of the wives and mothers reflects that:

> for a while she prized the idea of a house and a husband and children, as though they were a new refinement of human experience. Then she got them, and the feeling of led started to build up in her veins, a little more each day. The time she realised that if she didn't buy food herself there would be none in the house; the time Benedict returned to work a week after Barnaby's birth and she realised she would be looking after him alone; the countless time a domestic task had fallen to her . . . it was all surprising to her, outrageous almost. (Cusk 2005: 39)

Roberta Garrett's chapter contextualizes Cusk's response to the public culture of motherhood in terms of the increased socio-cultural intrusion into these areas that began in the late years of Conservative rule in the 1990s and continued through the period of New Labour government in the 2000s. Cusk's first memoir, *A Life's Work*: *On Becoming A Mother*, blends a thoughtful account of her own physical and psychological experiences of pregnancy and motherhood with reflections on the absence of critical work addressing these themes in classical literature, satirical comments on the socially-validated maternal role and some hard-hitting feminist observations on the continuation of domestic inequalities 'after a child is born the lives of its mother and father diverge, so that where before they were living in a state of equality, now they exist in a feudal relationship to one another' (2001: 11). In their analysis of the public culture of motherhood, Rachel Rosen and Katherine Twamley discuss the tendency for this to either conflate women and children (in a 'protected' but marginalized bubble) as 'motherandchild' or, if a mother desires any degree of independence or individual autonomy beyond her proscribed role, to view them as adversaries – 'motherversuschild' (2008: 1). Cusk's complex memoir narrates her attempts to negotiate a path through these polarized identities as a female writer attempting to retain an evolving but authentic sense of selfhood while also responding to her child's needs.

It is testimony to the power of the oppressive public narrative of motherhood during this period that *A Life's Work* was greeted with censorious responses from

female lifestyle columnists who were determined to interpret Cusk's narrative through a 'motherversuschild' lens and ignore its exploration of ambivalence. As Garrett also details in her chapter, there had been few high-profile memoirs on motherhood in the UK and US since second wave feminism, before Cusk's controversial memoir. In contrast, the last two decades has witnessed an explosion in female authored Western life-writing on this subject. This has ranged from the more academic and sociological to playful autofictional work, such as Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018) or Annie Ernaux's interrogation of parenthood in *I Remain in Darkness* (1999). It has become almost commonplace to address this subject through the blending of the personal and political that was pioneered during second wave feminism by Adrienne Rich and revisited by Cusk in the early noughties. Given the consistent attention to gendered double standards, oppressive gender roles and misogyny in her work, it is odd that Cusk has been so rarely thought of as a feminist writer. This is, in part, a historical accident. Cusk's early work fell between the critical identification of feminist writing as a form primarily associated with the self-reflexivity and metafictional qualities of much innovative women's writing of the 1980s and early 1990s and the emergence of fourth-wave confessional, autofictional feminist work in the early twenty-first century. One of the intentions of this collection is to highlight the role that Cusk's work has played in carving out space in the cultural mainstream for women writers to voice taboo ideas and emotions. As mentioned, Cusk has endured reviews that were hostile even by the harsh standards routinely applied to women writers. It seems likely that if Cusk had been more strongly identified as a feminist writer – and therefore as part of a known tribe rather than a lone warrior – this understanding of her autobiographical work would have afforded some protection from the impulse to ridicule her writing that is evident in some critical responses (epitomized by Camilla Long's savage review of *Aftermath*, in which she accuses Cusk of 'mad flowery metaphors and highfalutin creative writing experiments' (Long 2013)).

Cusk's thematic focus on privileged characters has also been held against her in a manner that has not been evident in comparison to her male contemporaries. Yet Cusk is rarely oblivious to privilege, including her own. As Pyykkö argues, in Cusk's debut, Agnes is 'saved' by becoming aware of a wider and much less rarefied world beyond her own. Garrett's analysis of Cusk novels of the early noughties, specifically *The Lucky Ones* and *Arlington Park* also highlights the 'condition of England' element of these predominantly realist texts. The reader is aware that the stifling but materially comfortable lives of the middle-class housewives who constitute the principal characters of these works, exist

contemporaneously alongside the lives of the poor and dispossessed. Indeed, Cusk's allusion to Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* through *Arlington Park*'s use of multiple narrators spanning one significant day, signals Cusk's awareness of the cruelty and insularity of certain sections of English middle-class culture. Cusk's evocation of Woolf is also salient in terms of her feminist credentials, as Peter Childs explores in his afterword. Woolf was famously dismissed by certain second wave critics – most notably Elaine Showalter – due to her interest in androgyny and her tendency to write about personal issues with a level of detachment and aloof intellectualism that was interpreted as an inability to confront her own 'painful femaleness'. Cusk is also a writer whose restrained use of emotion and experiments with narrative voice has precluded recognition of the way in which her work consistently challenges gender injustice, along with other socially validated sources of prejudice and inequality. Daniel Lea's chapter takes this view in his analysis of Cusk's critique of the restrictive values and roles of bourgeois family life in the last of her family-focused noughties' novels, *The Bradshaw Variations*. Lea argues that the novel offers a reconstituted notion of authenticity which resembles that proposed by Charles Taylor, in which romantic isolation and existential individualism is rejected in favour of a dialogic view of self and its relationship to social structures. This acknowledges the limitations of routine while also allowing for 'the possibility of moments of transcendence'. Childs examines these questions of female authenticity by bringing them back to Woolf, claiming that Cusk's 'quest for a female reality' is a 'question inherited from Woolf'. As Cusk writes in an essay on the subject of defining 'women's writing': 'In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf asserts two things: first, that the world – and hence its representations in art – is demonstrably male; and second, that a woman cannot create art out of a male reality' (*Coventry* 2019: 167).

It's All Aftermath

The third phase of Cusk's writing career was initiated by the 2012 non-fiction work *Aftermath*, a memoir about her divorce from her second husband, Adrian Clarke. 'Nothing belongs to me any more. I have become an exile from my own history,' Cusk writes, 'I no longer have a life. It's an afterlife; it's all aftermath' (2019: 91). As with her fictional work, *Aftermath* is intensely concerned with gender expectations, who holds narrative power, and how relationships and lives blend into each other, alongside the moral difficulties which arise when

conflicting narratives take place. Early in *Aftermath*, Cusk sets up the stakes of her project, describing the battleground of her divorce:

> My husband believed that I had treated him monstrously. This belief of his couldn't be shaken: his whole world depended on it. It was his story, and lately I have come to hate stories. If someone were to ask me what disaster this was that had befallen my life, I might ask if they wanted the story or the truth. I might say, by way of explanation, that an important vow of obedience was broken. I might explain that when I write a novel wrong, eventually it breaks down and stops and won't be written any more, and I have to go back and look for the flaws in its design. The problem usually lies in the relationship between the story and the truth. The story has to obey the truth, to represent it, like clothes represent the body. (2019: 2–3)

Aftermath raises many pressing questions – about artistic representation, the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, and the ethical stakes of form – as Cusk asks us to reflect upon what shape each narrative takes and who gets to do the telling, especially in relation to gender roles. These questions are interrogated throughout Cusk's writing, as the chapters in this collection explore, and her work frequently returns to the conflict between 'the story and the truth' that *Aftermath* poses.

Aftermath received a vitriolic critical response for the candid and partial way that it portrayed the breakdown of Cusk's marriage. Indeed, just as *Aftermath* raised many artistic questions that have informed Cusk's later work, this criticism she faced has also had a significant effect on Cusk's writing style. Echoing the criticism that, several years earlier, was directed at *A Life's Work*, *Aftermath* was dismissed as 'whiny, pretentious and self-indulgent'. In *The Sunday Times*, Camilla Long condemned Cusk, this time as 'a brittle little dominatrix and peerless narcissist who exploits her husband and her marriage with relish' (2012). Joanna Biggs summarized the complaints, while adding some of her own: '*Aftermath*, has brought Cusk charges of self-absorption, narcissism, condescension, commercialism, cruelty towards her children, too much revelation, not enough revelation, naivety, grandiloquence, ice in her heart and a lack of a sense of humour' (2012). The critical focus on Cusk's work has therefore predominantly been evaluative and highly personal. This collection recomplicates these evaluative responses to Cusk, by examining her writing in various historical, cultural, and artistic contexts, analysing how she has confounded critics and readers alike, and considering how this relates to the diffuse renderings of subjectivity, gender and identity in her work. Moreover, we can see how Cusk has

subverted the impulse to read her work biographically, by disrupting the biographical foundations and narrative expectations of the novel.

From the criticisms listed above, we can see how Cusk was portrayed after writing *Aftermath*; self-indulgent, narcissistic, condescending, exploitational, pretentious, and, perhaps more than anything, cruel. Indeed, Emre has suggested that Cusk is perhaps 'the cruel[l]est novelist at work today' (2018), based on the relationships she cuttingly depicts in her novels, rather than a judgement on Cusk's own personality. What the criticism of Cusk's character tends to ignore or dismiss, however, is how Cusk self-consciously highlights these negative qualities within her writing, accentuating her own fallibility in non-fiction works like *Aftermath* for dramatic effect, with a degree of self-reflexivity that is both pronounced and difficult to gauge. As readers we end up asking ourselves when encountering Cusk's cruelty: how deliberate, self-aware and self-critical is it? As Melissa Schuh states in her chapter, Cusk's understanding of self is 'contingent, unfinished and multi-faceted' thereby eluding conventional moral judgements. However, responses that conflate the analysis of cruelty in her work – whether emanating from 'Cusk as character' in her autobiographies or manifested through the behaviour of her fictional characters – with Cusk herself, suggest a gender-biased critical tendency that is inadequate in dealing with the complex revisioning of selfhood in her work.

Cusk's work has received more attention from the media than from literary critics, and there is a striking dearth of academic criticism which this collection aims to redress, while also noting some of the potential causes. As detailed throughout these chapters, Cusk has been especially reviled for her memoirs, *A Life's Work* and *Aftermath*, which expose the ambivalence of maternal subjectivity and the visceral pain of divorce, leading to the personal and gendered criticism of her – as a mother, (ex-) wife and writer. Indeed, Patricia Lockwood has noted how it is a commonplace confession to dislike Cusk, and she expresses surprise that no one has ever begun a review of her work with: 'I, too, dislike her' (2018). Writing about *A Life's Work* and *Aftermath* several years after publication, Lockwood also reflects on the affective experience of reading these memoirs, arguing that 'these books are notorious not for their actual content but for the degree to which they seemed to leave readers feeling thwarted. We know what we want from memoirs, and she did not give it to us – too much of her mind and not enough of herself' (2018). Cusk's response after *Aftermath*, as several chapters examine, is to evacuate the self almost completely, drawing variously on minimalism, silence and questions of authenticity to render a diffuse and complicated portrayal of selfhood. This collection also examines why Cusk's

work has prompted such critical hostility. On the one hand, Cusk's characters are often privileged middle class white people, who fail to interrogate their social status, as Pyykkö explores in Cusk's portrayals of failure in *Saving Agnes*. On the other hand, the discomfort Cusk causes may be generated by her perceptive interrogation into the societal and cultural narratives that we live by.

Cusk described her own state of mind after writing *Aftermath* and the backlash directed at her as a kind of 'creative death'. 'That was the end,' Cusk claimed, 'I was heading into total silence – an interesting place to find yourself when you are quite developed as an artist' (Kellaway 2014). 'I was depleted to the point of not being able to create anything', Cusk explains, linking this exhaustion to her own sense of selfhood: 'There seems to be some problem about my identity. But no one can find it, because it's not there' (Thurman 2017). Here was an established author at a creative impasse. On the one hand, the prospect of writing novels felt 'fake and embarrassing', and Cusk proposed that 'once you have suffered sufficiently, the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together seems utterly ridiculous' (Kellaway 2014). On the other hand, Cusk confessed that 'my mode of autobiography had come to an end. I could not do it without being misunderstood and making people angry' (ibid.). Cusk declared that the form of writing which had epitomized her previous non-fiction, *A Life's Work*, *Aftermath* and *The Last Supper* was exhausted (Cusk was sued for defamation over *The Last Supper*, and the first print run had to be pulped). While she also rejected the notion of writing another social novel, such as *Arlington Park* or *The Bradshaw Variations*, which had defined the second phase of Cusk's fiction writing career. This creative impasse resulted in the novel *Outline* (2014), later followed by *Transit* (2016) and *Kudos* (2018), eventually forming the Outline trilogy.

Life and Writing

The *Outline* trilogy breaks down boundaries between fiction and life writing, as the narrator and protagonist, Faye, appears to be a lightly fictionalized version of Cusk. And yet, Cusk's work does not neatly fall into the burgeoning, albeit tenuously defined category of autofiction, just as her writing career has often eschewed fixed genres. As Lorrie Moore notes, despite the comparisons, 'her work is not the autofiction of Karl Ove Knausgaard and Sheila Heti, whose own voices and personalities cram their pages; nor is it the meditative flâneurie of W. G. Sebald or Teju Cole; it is something more peculiar and thrilling and Cusk's

own' (2018).[1] And yet, while Cusk's work does not comfortably sit amidst this growing corpus of writing or nascent genre, Schuh's chapter draws on the conceptual litheness of autofiction to analyse Cusk's autobiographical experiments in the *Outline* trilogy. Schuh suggests that autofiction, as a 'combination of fictional modes of representation and autobiographical impulses, offers possibilities' of revealing a kind of representation through absence. By considering the trilogy's preoccupations with the 'boundaries between life and imagination, fact and fiction, [. . .] questioning established autobiographical tropes of "truth", unity, coherence and closure', Schuh unpacks how Cusk 'advances an understanding of self and life that is characterized by ongoing reflection and affirmation of complexity and contradiction'. Put more simply, Schuh argues that while '"Faye" is not quite interchangeable with "Rachel Cusk" [. . .] Cusk is still inseparable from Faye'. This blurring between biographical and fictive selves can also be read as a pointed response to the previously noted conflation between women writers and their creations, complicating this relationship through formal innovation. As Clare Hanson states in her foreword, there is a 'tight interplay between substance and form' in Cusk's work and it is animated by 'the mutual imbrication of life and writing'. Or as Kevin Brazil has suggested, situating Cusk in a new period of literature, 'Cusk's work, as in many interactions between life-writing and fiction after postmodernism, is haunted by the distance between life and literary form while pursuing their ever closer fusion' (2019: 96).

Cusk's work frequently returns to the significance of narrative and stories, in terms of how identities, society and culture are constructed, and how narratives attempt (and often fail) to connect individual experience with social structures. This tension is stretched to its limits in the *Outline* trilogy, which strives for what Cusk calls a 'purity of narrative' (Kellaway 2014), through a series of one-sided conversations. In all three novels, Faye is mostly silent and instead acts as conduit for the stories and confessions of other people. In place of narrative development, the trilogy relays a series of encounters between Faye and an assortment of

[1] Cusk has frequently commented on and distanced her work from the term autofiction: 'I don't think that I write "autofiction," though I admire the people who do, and essentially wish that I did. I think it's an evolution beyond what I'm doing. I'm perhaps stuck in the past, trying to work out the past. I don't think I'm in any way as free as the writer of autofiction. I don't think that anything I do is revolutionary in that way. I have a moral agenda, a willingness to commit myself to morality, that feels extracted at great cost from the "novel," as we define it currently. The autofiction writer can access that instantly through the legitimacy of the self. So maybe I'm working away on something basically bankrupt. But I enjoy the work and sometimes feel sustained by it – very much so in the case of "The Stuntman"' (Treisman 2023).

friends, acquaintances and strangers, such as fellow plane passengers, her hairdresser, her builders, her creative writing students, rich philanthropists, businessmen, writers, organizers at literary festivals, and so on. In each encounter, Faye (whose name is only announced once in each novel, adding to her sense of anonymity and withdrawal) appears to be largely detached from the stories and anecdotes relayed to her, intervening only enough to keep the other people talking. These characters rarely appear more than once, preventing a linear narrative or character development from taking shape. This sense of stalled progression adds to Cusk's 'extension of what modernist experimentation began', as Ella Ophir argues, through Cusk's 'means of disabling the twinned vectors of character and plot development before they can start' (2022: 4). The more the trilogy progresses, as Ruth Franklin notes, the more 'the monologues circle and spiral around one another, their layering and patterning creating a form of profound complexity, like a seashell' (2016). While these novels are predicated on the absence of the narrator and subjective withdrawal, they are the work that, paradoxically, saw Cusk finally recognized as a major writer. This success also prompted Cusk's back catalogue to be republished with uniform covers by her UK publisher, Faber & Faber, emphasizing a shift in reputation, as she was now recognized as a 'serious' writer – marketed and stylized as modernist inheritor rather than chick-lit, raising many questions of gender and reception unpacked in the chapters by Garrett and Ricarda Menn. Indeed, considering Cusk's use of metaphor, Menn proposes that while 'the Faber covers may suggest a uniformity of writing across Cusk's writing career, the serial continuity in the content of her work is predicated upon discontinuities of selfhood'.

Violence and Silence

While the *Outline* trilogy fictionalized her own life, albeit in a formally fraught and complicated manner, Cusk's next novel, *Second Place* (2021), tackles biographical innovation by repurposing the art patron Mabel Dodge Luhan's 1932 memoir about D. H. Lawrence, *Lorenzo in Taos* (1932), to create a novel that explores gender relations, artistic freedom, identity and, more obliquely, the conditions of confinement and lockdown. Like the *Outline* trilogy, *Second Place* similarly dwells on the dissolution of a linear identity, as Cusk claimed after writing *Aftermath*, 'I have lost all interest in having a self. Being a person has always meant getting blamed for it' (Thurman 2017). In *Second Place*, Cusk continues her radical experimentation with narrative perspective, ventriloquizing

the voice of Luhan and reworking the memoir *Lorenzo in Taos* into a first-person fictional form, as well as portraying her 'hero' D. H. Lawrence (although as Cusk notes in her interview with Emre, *Second Place* is about 'chucking D. H. Lawrence, getting him out of my life. I will survive without D. H. Lawrence. I turned against him and got rid of him'). Without wishing to exaggerate Lawrence's influence on Cusk, it bears noting how she writes about Lawrence in terms that acutely capture her own creative practice: 'Lawrence does more than part company with the Victorian modes of narration – he destroys them by completely inverting the literary and actual function of "man" as a representative of "mankind"' (2019: 203).[2] Cusk similarly takes a destructive attitude towards previous forms of narration and character, as she subverts the notion that a unified sense of self is required to render subjectivity, and complicates what the novelistic and non-fictional 'I' is capable of representing – whether in the evacuation of narrative selfhood in the *Outline* trilogy, or the recasting of Luhan and Lawrence in *Second Place*. These ideas also raise questions surrounding influence and legacy, as Childs notes in his afterword, *Second Place*, 'in one simple sense accords first place to Luhan's memoir', and thereby 'interrogates the abiding question of precedence and what, or who, is displaced into a second "place", understood as location, role, or status'. Cusk's D. H. Lawrence stand-in, L, is given the last line on the matter in the novel, in the fitting form of a posthumous letter to M, writing that 'I miss your place', before pronouncing how his current location, the hotel room in which he will die, 'is a bad place' (Cusk 2021: 207).

Cusk revisits the 'discontinuities of selfhood', which Menn detects across her serialized reading of Cusk's corpus, in the short story 'The Stuntman', published in *The New Yorker* in 2023, and incorporated into Cusks' latest novel, *Parade* (2024). The story, once again, explores a diffuse sense of selfhood, and what it might mean to delegate difficult experiences to an 'alternate or double self whose role it was to absorb and confine them so that they played no part in the ongoing story of life' (Cusk 2023). This repressive or inoculating method (depending on your reading of it) is analogized in the form of a 'stuntman': 'this alternate self took the actual risks in the creation of a fictional being whose exposure to danger was supposedly fundamental to its identity' (2023). The narrator of the story is assaulted on the street in a random attack, in a narrative tactic (as well as a biographical event which actually happened in Cusk's own life) that disrupts the

[2] We can also hear echoes of Lawrence's famous letter to Edward Garnett, 'You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character' (Lawrence 1981: 183).

withdrawal of selfhood trialled by the *Outline* trilogy, as the narrator notes 'the violence and the unexpectedness of the incident in the street had caught my stuntman unawares' (2023).[3] While the *Outline* trilogy subverts many conventional expectations of presence – in terms of plot, character and narrative – 'The Stuntman' and its central act of violence epitomizes 'the inversion of representation while being ultimately representative'. The story ends on a contrapuntal note of 'violence and silence' (2023) that is explored extensively throughout the chapters that follow, as this collection examines how these twinned vectors function throughout Cusk's work, often through subtle and inverted measures.

The essays in this book frequently return to and excavate the 'creative death' that Cusk claims to have suffered after the publication of *Aftermath*, and the artistic possibilities contained therein. Menn unpacks how Cusk's generic turn from memoir to autofiction is directly influenced by the preceding series of memoirs and the impact of their reception. Moreover, Pyykkö notes how Cusk's writing contains a kind of 'post-mortem' inflection, and describes life 'rendered almost unrecognizable by some perfectly ordinary but no less destructive disaster'. As Cusk notes in her interview with Emre, 'somehow death or exhaustion or not being defined attains a weird adverse value'. Nonetheless, the essays in this collection are also alert to the limitations of metaphorical exile, especially in comparison with the very real experiences of exile in its historical and contemporary iterations. Cusk's styles of self-criticism and self-condemnation are put under the microscope. Harrison's chapter explores how Cusk's vein of self-deprecation attempts to protect her work from any future criticism, pre-empting the kind of backlash she received after *Aftermath* by 'interposing such criticism into her self-reflexive prose'. As Harrison details, Cusk's work complicates any easy parsing of her work by repurposing muted qualities of silence and withdrawal into something powerfully expressive, through her distinctively, 'discrepant style'. Pieter Vermeulen, alternatively, considers criticism of Cusk in the context of developments in British fiction since the apparent 'hysterical realism' and 'maximalism' of the early 2000s. Vermeulen's chapter pushes back against the classist and elitist charges often directed at Cusk, noting how the portrayal of the downstairs neighbours in *Transit*, 'The Trolls', offers 'an entirely more conflicted politics than the self-righteous embodiment of

[3] In an interview with *The New Yorker* discussing the story, Cusk reveals that the attack is based on personal experience: 'It's true that I was brained in the street in Paris, completely randomly, and the difficulty for me as a writer lay in the use of a personal experience that was so anomalous.'

bourgeois values' that many critics have condemned Cusk for. As with many chapters in this collection, Vermeulen's critical approach pays attention to the importance of style, unpacking the political and cultural resonances of Cusk's pared back prose in *Transit*, to explore how 'the psychology, the economics, and the aesthetics of minimalism are deeply connected; through the insistent presence of the neighbours', while also suggesting Cusk's style draws attention to rather than reaffirms 'minimalism's problematic exclusionary politics'. By detailing how 'the aspiration of minimalism is dependent on class and citizenship', Vermeulen claims that '*Transit* checks the privilege it performs', as its 'performance of minimalism is a self-critical one'. We can thereby trace a common thread throughout Cusk's writing career – challenges of irony, representations of failure, and moral conflations between art and author – that speak to the hermeneutic difficulty and pleasure of encountering Cusk's work.

Cusk has spoken about the challenges she sets her readers, noting of the *Outline* trilogy: 'for these books to work, the reader needs to play at least some role in the "writing" of them, since there's no conventional narrator. It's an active rather than passive reading experience' (Zafiris 2017). The active reading experience speaks to how these novels (un)dramatically unfold, how the various narratives accumulate, which is perhaps more significant than what they literally describe. Rachel Kushner has recently countered one criticism frequently applied to Cusk's work, by stating 'I don't read for relatability' (2023). Situating Cusk amidst 'strangely, unapologetic novelists from the upper echelons', Kushner claims that Cusk and her peers 'tend to be especially good at writing about class, [. . .] their own class, because they have nothing to prove, or to obscure' (2023). We see this in the self-criticism of *Aftermath*, as Cusk mistreats her au pair with demonstrable disdain for her own actions, as Harrison examines in his chapter. Garrett's reading of *The Lucky Ones* also examines Cusk's skill in exposing the more serious consequences of social privilege combined with ethical indifference by interweaving the story of a young, poor, incarcerated pregnant woman with that of the lawyer that fails to properly represent her.

Cusk's writing contains elements of the 'new audacity' that Jennifer Cooke traces across contemporary feminist life-writing, as a series of intersectional feminist literature that draws on innovative forms of expression to challenge ongoing structures of oppression. The new audacity, in Cooke's terms, 'experiment[s] by testing the boundaries of autobiographical conventions', exhibits 'boldness in style and content', and explores 'difficult and disturbing experiences', resonating with the formal innovations of Cusk's hybrid writing (2020: 2). Writing about the French author Annie Ernaux in 2023 – whose work

also captures the kind of 'new audacity' described by Cooke – Cusk uses language that perhaps more accurately describes her own work. On the one hand, Cusk considers writing 'as a sphere where the self, the soul, is entitled to find refuge' (2023). On the other hand, Cusk claims that Ernaux's 'art bears no relation to a privileging of personal experience; on the contrary, it is almost a self-violation' (2023). In this sense, Cusk's work explores 'the relationship between fate and freedom', as Emre notes in the interview with Cusk that concludes this collection, as well as the relationship between 'silence and violence' which is explored in 'The Stuntman'. Harrison touches on the creative possibilities of silence as it functions as an expressive mechanism for Cusk's style throughout her essays and fiction, a style which may lead to new forms of artistic liberation. Silence also speaks to Cusk's interest in the visual arts, which she has frequently written about, as Harrison notes: 'visual art appeals to Cusk because of its silence [. . .] and it provides a correlative for her own style, which is deeply entangled with the limitations of language'. Cusk, in her interview with Emre, similarly concludes, 'If there is a desire for freedom, it is freedom from language.'

While there is often a line drawn between different phases of Cusk's writing career, as sketched above, especially her pre- and post-*Outline* writing, Lea's chapter pushes back against this dichotomy, tracing similar concerns with authenticity, domesticity and 'the representation of selfhood' in *The Bradshaw Variations* and the *Outline* trilogy. Lea examines the social and cultural pitfalls that Cusk's novels explore, analysing how she 'portrays her characters *in situ*, embedded, and often trapped within domestic relationships that govern the outline of their identity'. The protagonists in these narratives 'largely reconcile themselves to the narrative identities from which they have striven to break free', Lea contends, and proposes that they 'discover some solace in the familiarity of their compromises'. Pyykkö also notes common concerns that span Cusk's writing career, tracing a thematic concern with failure across Cusk's debut novel, *Saving Agnes*, and *Second Place*. 'True art means seeking to capture the unreal' (Cusk 2021: 180), M writes, while confessing she only possesses the 'more common ability to read the surface of life' (54). Pyykkö traces a similar fixation on surfaces with Agnes Day, albeit in the trials and tribulations of the *Bildungsroman*, as opposed to the stasis of M's Norfolk marshes. Considering both Agnes and M, Pyykkö contends that for Cusk's 'novels to succeed as works of art, their protagonists must fail'. Distinguishing Cusk's work into neat phases, then, may be as complicated as the depictions of selfhood and biographical innovations of the Outline trilogy and *Second Place*, as her work continues to subvert and confound readerly and critical expectations, and refuses to stay still.

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