

Introduction to Dossier on Rachel Cusk

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Nicolas Pierre BOILEAU

Introduction

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Nicolas Pierre BOILEAU

Introduction

- 1 The articles published here are mostly derived from a one-day conference held at the University of Rennes 2 in 2011. Maria Tang and I were initially worried that very few people would be interested in our project, since recognition of new writers in the world of academia is often a slow process, and contemporary works of fiction can easily go unnoticed. However, it turned out that Rachel Cusk is as yet more widely read than studied in universities, at least in France. Amongst the proposals we received, many dealt with Cusk's most popular piece of fiction to date, *Arlington Park* (2005). Although this was the first of her novels to be translated into French, Cusk had already made a name for herself back across the Channel with five published novels and an autobiographical memoir. Following the publication of her fifth novel in 2003, *In the Fold*, she was named as one of Granta's 20 Best Young British Novelists, a tribute to the strength of her writing which probes with incisive, chiselled precision both the pain and the comedy of her middle-Englanders' humdrum existences. The publication of *A Life's Work* in 2001, an autobiographical account of the feelings of ambivalence motherhood can engender, saw her embroiled in a controversy with which her name remains connected and which she says has stuck to her like a label. Although she has received numerous literary prizes, her work has until now been largely ignored by university scholars, with the exception of a few published articles.
- 2 In the past two years, I have continued to explore Cusk's writing, teaching *Arlington Park* and writing two more articles on her novels.¹ The reception of Cusk's work in France is largely positive – her latest memoir, *Aftermath*, in which she once again draws on her own life (here her divorce) to write about the condition of womanhood, has recently been translated into French.² It is fascinating to start prolonged work on such literary work in the making. Cusk's novelistic experimentation and explorations are set to become more prominent in contemporary studies, because she is building up an *oeuvre* whose range and exploration of issues – such as feminine subjectivity, the experience of the body, class, and the effect of dogmatic discourses on the individual – run counter to many accepted or preconceived theories. She offers her own specific voice, showing how subjective experience is constructed through the ambivalent response of the individual to the discourses with which each has to come to terms, whether they be scientific, academic, sociological, psychological, or political.
- 3 The following articles aim to situate Cusk within the broader context of contemporary British fiction. Her work is attuned to contemporary debates (she often writes for *The Guardian*) as well as the British literary heritage in which, as an Oxford graduate and teacher of creative writing at Kingston University, she is well versed. Yet this does not lead her towards postmodern aesthetics and parodic forms. Cusk is hereinafter cited as a (neo)modernist writer, a label which needs elaborating. Modernism is a difficult term to define, because it was coined by critics and not by artists.³ If it started as a very specific moment in history – from the very early 20th century up to the second World War – rather than with a specific aesthetics, its definition is constantly expanding, both historically and geographically. The formal innovations and experimentations that all modernist writers launched into so as to account for the crisis of experience brought along with modernity have now become a defining feature of what can be called “neo-modernism,” when this is applied to contemporary writers such as Cusk.⁴ Towards the end of the century, a similar crisis occurred with the advent of modern technologies and the war against terror that followed 9/11, changes which contributed to the atomisation of the subjective experience of daily life. Cusk's characters all seem to be seeking their niches, their homes, a space that could “save” them, in the words of her first novel, *Saving Agnes*. Modernist tropes – dissection of thoughts, multiplication of viewpoints, poetic prose, interest in the insignificant in which the significant looms large – are adapted to the contemporary world, making necessary alterations in the process. In that sense, her work should be considered in connection with the work of another British novelist who is currently

gaining prominence, Jon McGregor.⁵ The representation of the English city and its necessary other (the countryside) finds a neo-modernist expression in Cusk's interest in the suburb of Arlington Park which shows Cusk's novelistic experimentations. Modernist techniques sought to do precisely this, a century ago.

4 Another feature of Cusk's writing which is highlighted in the following articles is her experimentation with genres, as was again shown in her recent publication of yet another memoir that looks quite unlike canonical autobiographies. To readers who are unaware of Cusk's other writings, *Arlington Park* will probably offer itself unquestionably as a novel. Yet, the articles that look at other, previous novels by Cusk, such as *The Lucky Ones*, *In the Fold*, and *The Bradshaw Variations* (her second novel, *The Temporary* could be included in the list, but it is not discussed in the following collection) invite us to interrogate that assumption: her use of the Short Story Cycle, which can be defined as loosely connected short stories, her auto/biographical writings, even her use of Gothic themes (*The Country Life*), bring to the fore a generic instability that places Cusk in the line of modernist aesthetics. *Arlington Park* is indeed built on independent units knitted together by a tenuous, Dallowayan plot: the female characters are neighbours who occasionally go shopping together, but what holds them together here (and what holds the book together as a result) is the fact that they are all invited to a party at the end of the day. On several occasions, the narrative is interrupted by descriptions of the rain on Arlington Park, recalling Woolf's description of the sea in *The Waves*. This gives rhythm and dynamism to the structure, but it also reveals the rather loose connection between all the sections. After reading the Short Story Cycle *The Lucky Ones*, one might be tempted to say that *Arlington Park* too is also a Short Story Cycle, were it not for the more obvious plot that unites the different parts. This would need addressing more specifically, perhaps by first looking at all of Cusk's fiction, in order to interrogate a pattern, or lack thereof, in her construction of plots and books.

5 The following collection is divided into two sections. The first section is dedicated to *Arlington Park*, which is Cusk's most-read piece of fiction to date. This section opens with Armelle Parey's paper on space. It goes without saying, given the title of Cusk's novel, that this should be one of our first critical concerns. A. Parey remarks that it is the only novel "whose title directly points to the place where the novel is set" (1).

6 Cusk's *The Country Life* (1998) also pointed to the experience of space, but the title was more generic than specific, a cliché rather than a realist setting. This is what A. Parey argues when she emphasises the lineage between Cusk's novel and Victorian literature – many Victorian novels are entitled after the name of a place. Although the name is invented, it is a perfectly plausible name and it anchors the narrative in a contemporary, realist world. Place is here seen as a means for Cusk to explore the feminine condition in the contemporary world. Space remains, so A. Parey argues, an instrument of power in gender relations; it is not a given, but it interacts with subjective experience. Although all the women of *Arlington Park* have fully furnished homes that everyone is supposed to look up to in envy, A. Parey reads these homes as constructing emptiness, of space and of being. Subjectivity, space and feminism is also at the heart of this section's second essay, by Maria Tang, "Embodied Subjectivities in *Arlington Park*: A Beauvoirean Perspective." M. Tang's argument is based on Cusk's own feminist text, published in the *Guardian*, "Shakespeare's Daughters." In her Beauvoirean reading of the novel, M. Tang argues that the women of *Arlington Park* are "mired in immanence and facticity, cut off from the transcendence that would confer subjectivity on them." Cusk seeks to uncover the ambiguities of this subjective experience, in which women, rather than complaining about their plight, become fully aware of the fact that they have made a choice that marginalises them. This results, according to M. Tang, in a splitting of the subject, making the characters desperate for communication, for interacting with others. The shared space of domesticity which "produc[es] an alienating split in their subjectivity" enables Cusk to show how these women's condition is a risk that they have taken, and that it is "not only physical but also ontological." The third article looks at Cusk's Woolfian filiation, by arguing that *Arlington Park* is based on "Dallowayisms" that make it, as it were, a cover version of *Mrs Dalloway*, eighty years after. Monica Latham, a Woolfian scholar, sees Cusk's neo-

modernist technique as a “variation” on Woolf’s novel, although Cusk’s definition of “reality” has evolved from Woolf’s apprehension of what she called “life.” Latham’s argument is that Cusk is a unique author on the literary scene because of the malleability of her prose and her borrowings from Woolf. The last article of this section analyses the presence of “ghosts” in Cusk’s fiction: suggestions of secrets and the haunting of the unsaid is represented through intertextual references to tales, gothic fiction and detective novels whose potential anxiety is diffused by brusque returns to reality. In a Derridean reading, Claire Wrobel shows how spectres and ghosts pop up in the narrative every time feminine identity is questioned and demonstrates how the novel is grounded in imaginary figures. Wrobel questions the categories of time and space to show how Cusk accounts for the instability of women’s identity.

7 The second section comprises four articles, which look at Cusk’s other fictional work, *The Lucky Ones*, and her non-fictional works, *A Life’s Work* and *The Last Supper*. The last article deals with more than one work and provides us with an overall reading of Cusk’s fiction and non-fiction as well as a good, provisional conclusion to the work initiated in the collection. In the first article, “Linked Stories, Connected Lives: *The Lucky Ones* as Short Story Cycle,” E. D’hoker argues that *The Lucky Ones* should not be considered as a collection of short stories, or as a ‘novel’, as it is advertised, but as a Short Story Cycle. This experiment in form, which is Cusk’s first departure from the more classical forms of her earlier fiction, enables her to represent the “questions of commonality and companionship; of connection and community.” By discussing the *genre* of this “so-called novel”⁶*The Lucky Ones*, E. D’hoker invites us to reconsider the very categories which we employ to describe the rest of Cusk’s fiction, as the last part of her article discusses the inscription of this work within current, critical debates about literature and sociology. This is also the starting point of my own article, “A Novelist in Changing Rooms,” in which I argue that the generic instability of Cusk’s memoir, or auto/biography, or auto/biographical essay, confuses those who are seeking a factual truth which they refuse: the ambivalence of feelings that a woman can experience when giving birth. Without launching into the sociological debate that this could foster, I focus on the literary aspect of the work to see how Cusk represents the various layers of discourse to which each individual being is subjected, especially as a woman and here, a mother. The unveiling of these discourses enables Cusk to point to a reality that is unreachable and which accounts for the multifarious texts she works from. Isabelle Rannou’s article “‘Like Journeying Through a Painting’: Travel Writing and the Exploration of Textual Boundaries in Cusk’s *The Last Supper*” addresses the question of generic boundaries by showing how painting influences writing and how writing affects the representation of art in this “journey through a painting” in Italy. The last article, written by C. Hanson and entitled “The Plain Garment of Motherhood,” branches out across Cusk’s career through all her modes of writing. C. Hanson shows how the representation of maternal subjectivity in Cusk’s fiction and non-fiction is a response to Anglo-American post-feminist culture. She sheds light on the way in which Cusk discriminates between the subjective and the collective in order to reveal the fractures and fissures in maternal subjectivity.

8 I would like to conclude by thanking Sylvie Mathé, editor-in-chief of *E-rea*, for accepting this project and supporting it throughout the process of selecting and collecting papers, as well as all the members of the scientific committee who agreed to write reports on, and help us publish, the following articles which will hopefully open the way to further research on Rachel Cusk.

Notes

1 N. P. Boileau, “Not feminine enough? Rachel Cusk’s highly-feminised world and unfeminine characters in *Saving Agnes* and *The Country Life*” in *Anglistik*, vol. 24, n°1, 2013, “Focus on Feminization of Writing,” Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz (ed.); N. P. Boileau, “Fear and Laughing in Sussex: on Rachel Cusk’s *The Country Life*,” paper delivered at the Rural Experience conference held in Loughborough University, March 2013, organized by Julian Wolfreys. Paper in revision.

2 R. Cusk, *Contrecoup, sur le mariage et la séparation*, trad. Céline Leroy, Paris, Éditions de l’Olivier, 2013 / R. Cusk, *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation*, London, Faber and Faber, 2012.

3 Peter Childs, *Modernism, the New Critical Idiom*, Routledge, 2007 (2nd edition).

4 “To write about the modernist novel, as opposed to the Victorian novel, say, or the Edwardian novel, is to write not only about the possibilities of the genre, but about its perceived impossibility. The possibilities were evident enough... And yet there was also a feeling, more prevalent among writers than among critics, that the novel as traditionally conceived was no longer up to the job: that its imaginary worlds did not, in fact, correspond to the way one's fellows spent their entire lives.” D. Trotter, “The Modernist Novel,” in M. Levenson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 70-99.

5 B. Schoene, “Suburban Worlds: Rachel Cusk and Jon McGregor.” *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009): 154-79.

6 V. Woolf is reputed for having struggled with the label she should give her books, a tendency which is often quoted through her own phrase “my so-called novel” when she was writing *Between the Acts*, see V. Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume 6: 1936-1941*, Nigel Nicholson et Joanne Trautmann (éd.), Londres, Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1994, March 20th, 1941.

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After publishing articles on the genre of *Auto/biography*, he is now exploring the relation between psychoanalysis and literature by looking at Modernist texts across the 20th century and into the 21st.

His main interests are the definition of identity and the failure of language to grasp the real nature of experience in authors such as V. Woolf, E.M. Forster, Janet Frame and Rachel Cusk.

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