

A Novelist in Changing Rooms: Motherhood and Auto/Biography

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► **To cite this version:**

Nicolas Pierre Boileau. A Novelist in Changing Rooms: Motherhood and Auto/Biography. E-rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone, Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone, 2013, 10 (2), 10.4000/erea.3243 . hal-01304191

HAL Id: hal-01304191

<https://hal-amu.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01304191>

Submitted on 20 Apr 2016

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Référence électronique

Nicolas Pierre BOILEAU, « A Novelist in Changing Rooms: Motherhood and Auto/Biography », *E-rea* [En ligne], 10.2 | 2013, mis en ligne le 18 juin 2013, consulté le 19 avril 2016. URL : <http://erea.revues.org/3243> ; DOI : 10.4000/erea.3243

Éditeur : Laboratoire d'études et de recherche sur le monde anglophone

<http://erea.revues.org>

<http://www.revues.org>

Document accessible en ligne sur :

<http://erea.revues.org/3243>

Document généré automatiquement le 19 avril 2016.

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- 1 In the very first scene of *A Life's Work*, Cusk describes the bodies of the women around her changing in and out of their swimming costumes. As she sets about recounting her experience of motherhood, Cusk represents a reality that is often hidden: the body does not appear as a whole (Miller 1993), but as disjointed parts, evoking a sense of disconnectedness. The effect of the scene is that the female body – for this is the body that is being shown – becomes a meaningless jumble of grotesque parts. Cusk also seems to estrange herself from the community of mothers who take their children to the swimming pool, as if her experience of it was that of an outsider, as if it was not one she could share. This scene is emblematic of the way Cusk's writing seeks to probe into a reality that is usually unseen and un-charted. Cusk's account of this reality, which is presented as non-fictional, can be regarded, paradoxically enough, as an essay on writing rather than auto/biography. According to Cusk herself, it is her non-fiction that made her name, especially her memoir about becoming a mother, *A Life's Work*, whose title Kate Kellaway finds "self-important." This is a good example of the kind of criticism *A Life's Work* triggered off. Yet Cusk is far from satisfied with the type of notoriety it has brought upon her: "It's caused me *so* much grief. I think it's sort of labeled me—and I'm not someone who thinks very much, possibly not enough, about my 'readers' because I don't sell enough copies for that to be an issue" (Barber 2009). The scandal which this piece of non-fiction caused hasn't prevented Cusk from opting for the genre of the memoir¹ again, with a travelogue, *The Last Supper* (2009), and another memoir which put her on the firing-line once more, *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (2012). Cusk's records of her experience caused ambiguous reactions: on the one hand many have claimed to find it "offensive" (LW 2)² (prompting Cusk to repeat time and again that she "was only being honest") (Cusk 2008), and suggesting that she had misrepresented the experience of motherhood/ maternity. On the other hand, this is Cusk's best-selling work (LW 5), and it has been re-edited several times, as if the narrative was true to a certain extent ("true" is a word Cusk repeats together with "sincere" throughout the second introduction).
- 2 Cusk says she was surprised by the whiff of scandal *A Life's Work* caused: "I have merely written down what I thought of the experience of having a child in a way that I hope other people can identify with" (LW 10). Yet such reaction to memoirs is hardly atypical, because of the particular relation between fact, truth and fiction that the autobiographical project implies (Lejeune³): the suspicion that the narrative may not be completely truthful because of its written form often leads to suggestions that the author willingly manipulates both reality and readers. The ambivalent responses to her work give us insights into the social and cultural context into which it was produced, and enable us to explore the effect of a mother's account of her own experience of motherhood, an experience which seems to be at the interface between the public and private spheres. For all the interest such a thematic reading can have, I intend to look at the memoir from the perspective of the literary genre of auto/biography, by looking at how Cusk negotiates the writing of her subjective experience. My premise is that Cusk's essay takes it for granted that her experience of motherhood is ineffable. This may help explain why Cusk deploys an ornamental style which enables her both to point to the reality that she finds impossible to express (the feeling of estrangement experienced when she became a mother), while at the same time keeping it at a distance. Even if Cusk uses her own life as the conscious material of her text in *A Life's Work*, she is not concerned with the morally and socially acceptable reactions she should promote, but with the literary innovations that she is forced to devise in order to counter the impossibility of conveying that which she is seeking to express. This is what she calls "literature":

The values of literature and the values of life are to the novelist what the chisel and the block of stone are to the sculptor ... Whether a thing is called fiction or fact has no particular bearing on the chisel and the block of stone, on the pursuit of truth and beauty, even on the task of fabrication itself. (LW 1)

- 3 If Cusk stressed the political aspect of her work in the original introduction (LW 11), an idea that she has repeated on several occasions since in *The Guardian*, the preface to the second edition of *A Life's Work* was the occasion for her to assert the literary nature of her text. Incidentally she refers to herself as a “novelist” in the quotation above, i.e. a writer of fiction, although she has chosen the auto/biographical genre. She underlines a fundamental element in the reception of her work, which is the fact that the images she conceives to try and tell her story have been regarded as unnecessary frills in an account that could be straightforward. What the image of the sculptor emphasizes is the process of creation, the praise of the artist’s work. Here, Cusk asks the long-lasting question that every autobiographer has to address at some point: why write a personal account and why publish it? It is precisely literature – in the sense of the art of writing – that has made readers and critics uneasy when reading her memoir. Literature is her answer to the realization that her subjective experience is impossible to convey: “[she] was cited everywhere as having said the unsayable” (Barber 2009). Saying the unsayable can be regarded as one of the functions of literary events.⁴ The unsayable certainly has to do with taboos (on which societies are founded) but it is above all the object of Cusk’s literary exploration: “My purpose in writing *A Life's Work* was not to annoy these women, but to put into words an experience, new motherhood – that seemed to me to be utterly beyond the reach of language” (Cusk 2001). The question of the literary innovation and style of this memoir on motherhood, its attention to language, needs addressing. Cusk’s controversial work seems to seek to sound out the unsayable nature of the object she has chosen. Cusk paradoxically chooses the autobiographical mode, which she claims to find uninteresting, and which is bound to make her the target of criticism (LW 3).⁵ Seeing how the subjective experience of motherhood may fail to be passed on to others, we will look at Cusk’s answer to the conundrum, which lies in a style replete with images that seek to express, rather than explain, a subjective experience which, in Cusk’s writing, seems to be defined by a sense of loss, as if women themselves could easily be excluded both from the experience of others and their own. It is as if this moment could only become meaningful after writing it, in its aftermath, to use the title of Cusk’s latest memoir. This will help reveal the scandalous truth, as it were, that one is not born a mother, but rather becomes one: “Women must and do live with the prospect of childbirth: some dread it, some long for it, and some manage it so successfully as to give other people the impression that they never even think about it” (LW 7).

1. Misconceptions or the Supposed Lack of Accounts on Motherhood

- 4 When *A Life's Work* was published, Cusk was well aware that her memoir was not a breakthrough: “literature has long since discovered and documented this place of which I thought myself to be the first inhabitant, and there are countless poems and novels that could take the place of those I have chosen” (LW 16). Cusk indeed quotes passages from novels, poems, or essays, such as *The House of Mirth*, or *The Secret Garden*, but also self-help books. The abundance of references, whether they be literature or self-help guidebooks, is a *topos* of memoirs on motherhood, new mothers being intent on finding out beforehand what they should expect of the experience (Hanson 2004). Despite these references, the common idea is still that motherhood is the *terra incognita* of the modern world, at least according to feminist thinkers such as Adrienne Rich and Naomi Wolf, who both claim that too little has been said about it, or in a manner that is dishonest: “My own story, which is woven throughout this book, is only one story. What I carried away in the end was a determination to heal ... the separation between mind and body” (Rich 40);⁶ “Should pregnancy and birth remain such sanitized rites of passage that we can’t speak graphically or honestly about them?” (Wolf 7) To readers of Cusk’s memoir, this means that both writers have already done what Cusk sets out to do. Yet both Rich’s and Wolf’s accounts were oriented towards some political goal, when

Cusk's is resolutely subjective and personal. In Rich's critical assessment of motherhood, the radical activism of the American poet surfaces in every page; and Wolf's memoir ends on "A Mother's Manifesto," which shows the author's political engagement. Cusk's account is much shorter, less directed at her audience and certainly more personal than anything else, despite the social satire which pervades the first pages. Contrary to what Cusk says about not finding any books that deal with motherhood, quite significantly this literature has thrived in recent years: memoirs have boomed, especially in the wake of debates on breastfeeding,⁷ which led partisans of new educational methods to write texts that would testify to the validity of their own method. Feminist thinker Elizabeth Badinter has attempted to show how medical discourses on motherhood have multiplied lately (Badinter, 2010). Rachel Cusk's memoir likewise accumulates references in order to illustrate that none of the information that is available to her is of any help, or easy to find:

There are books about motherhood, as there are about most things. To reach them you must pass nearly everything, the civilized world of fiction and poetry, the suburbs of dictionaries and textbooks, on past books about how to mend your motorbike or plant begonias and books about doing your own tax return. Childcare manuals are situated at the far end of recorded human experience, just past diet books and just before astrology. (LW 117)

- 5 With pointed humour, Cusk expresses the feeling of being, as mother, left aside, reified ('things', 'bikes', 'begonias') and perhaps un-registered. The isolation of the woman faced with a condition that is beyond the reach of common experience (quite literally in that anecdote where the narrator tells us that searching for books on motherhood is like looking for a needle in a haystack), and yet common enough, is puzzling, because these books and narratives *do* exist. Cusk seeks to show that each mother experiences a feeling of being the first, or that her experience of it, despite the number of other women having gone through it, cannot be reduced to the experience of others. This is the opposite of what many (French) feminists in the 1970s and 1980s thought when they argued that in becoming a mother, a woman would get closer to other mothers (Badinter). As Lacan suggested in a sentence that has caused such a scandal, women exist but the woman doesn't: the difficulty of this Lacanian theory would require an article in its own right, but suffice it to say here that Lacan says that feminine subjects do not lend themselves to generalisation, because of the lack of a signifier that could represent them as whole/ unified.⁸
- 6 My point here is to underline the fact that, despite the number of sources trying to grapple with the experience of motherhood, none seems to have a definite and complete effect. Cusk testifies to having read (or heard) numerous, extensive accounts of motherhood, from various sources: the medical staff, the fictional books she reads, the medical books, the self-help books, newspaper articles, brochures, etc. References abound, and rather long quotations from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, and others, rub shoulders with more down-to-earth creations: "Have you got a copy of *Emma*? I'm asked at the hospital, in what is patently not a reference to Jane Austen" (LW 31). *Emma* is a character from a graphic novel that the NHS has produced so that new mothers know how to deal with their child(ren). In a fashion that is redolent of the way Foucault analyses discourses on sexuality—according to him discourses have proliferated at the same time as society seemed to turn the topic into a taboo (Foucault 78), —it seems that the more motherhood is discussed, the more ineffable the subjectivity of the motherhood experience becomes, so that stories and accounts multiply. All these references point to the fact that Cusk considers that motherhood and pregnancy remain an enigma that needs deciphering, and she launches into an interpretative process which the multiple references to "literature" (in the sense of all that's published on the subject) cannot but emphasise (LW 33).
- 7 Yet what Cusk marvels at is that these discourses have had a blinding effect on women's experience. The latter seems to have dwindled into the background as it is replaced by a scientific approach in which humanity must be mastered, if not erased: "[The male doctor] has delivered babies like kittens, like feathers, like thoughts, babies that hardly exist. I sense he would like them not to be in there in the first place, but to grow them himself in a seed tray" (LW 46).⁹ Throughout the memoir, the doctors' interventions are both oppressive and

patronizing, looking at the human as objects. Their discourse is often the target of Cusk's wry humour because, despite its scientific quality, it falls short of being comprehensive, so that the author always seems more confused by the knowledge it carries than she should. This discourse reifies that which is alive, seeing women and their babies as objects being assembled in a factory. Cusk is bewildered by the fact that motherhood reveals women's bodies as public spaces, with women immediately judged guilty of abusive treatment: "I read newspaper reports of women in America being prosecuted for harming their unborn fetuses and wonder how this can be; how the body can become public space, like a telephone box, that can unlawfully vandalize itself" (LW 40). Cusk's account of motherhood is first and foremost an essay on the multiplication of discourses that build an image of a body that has lost its connection with the subjectivity of experience. The personal, intimate nature is kept at bay, because these various accounts of motherhood screen it. All her experiences seem to be set against an experience of reading. "I read somewhere" (LW 40, 99, 131, 145) is a phrase that recurs throughout the memoir, giving birth to a grotesque network of images: she exemplifies this with her coinage of the word "motherbaby" to describe the monster which she is told to identify with in these medical guidebooks: "Mother and baby are one, a composite creature best referred to as mother-and-baby or perhaps motherbaby. . . . Back at home, the slow-moving bulk of motherbaby wanders the fragile rooms, as brainless and clumsy as a dinosaur" (LW 99). Clearly the image is meant to be amusing, but it can be read as a sarcastic reference to the precepts of those that defend the idea of "bonding," an instinctual and privileged relationship between mother and child (Kalus *et al.*). Based on scientific surveys, this promotes a vision of motherhood that Cusk derides both in its reality and its normative aspect. Later on, she describes the kind of pictures that are "supplied" with the brochures from the Leche League (LW 104), although she doesn't name the lobbying group, only to conclude: "the connection with the real is never made" (LW 126). For Cusk, therefore, prescriptive discourses tend to avoid grappling with the reality of an experience that is irreducibly individual and subjective. In other words, they seem to be estranged from the object they pretend to be describing. These discourses are therefore used by Cusk to show the imaginary function they play in the soon-to-be-mother's mind, but also to reveal that none of these theories effectively describes the experience of the individual woman. No matter how scientific they are they fail to express the multifarious emotions that a woman will experience on becoming a mother. Any advice, bar the literary texts she quotes (LW 145 is a reference to Coleridge), is therefore turned into ridicule: "colic, like a Swiss train, arrives and departs on time" (LW 66). The comparison and the choice of the verbs show how the medical discourse fails to capture the reality of her daughter's suffering. This comparison is likely to shock some people who easily sympathise with the baby's suffering or who will remember their anxiety as parents. However, that would be missing the point of Cusk's essay, which precisely seeks to debunk those prescriptive and scientific discourses in order to make her own experience heard. Hence her constant hesitation between the personal and the political, between the essay and the memoir.

2. The Failure of Language and the Horror of the Body

8 If the connection with the real is never made, it may well be because it is impossible to make. Cusk intends to search for the object behind the veil. She is so attuned to what hides the real that she can think of little else but to write something about this unbridgeable gap in the subject's experience. In his later teaching, Lacan defines the body as a site of *jouissance* which is connected to the real but which is forever lost because of the fact that human beings are subjected to language (Lacan 1975): the symbolic castration is what Lacan refers to when he analyses the way *Das Ding*, the Thing, is unreachable because of the fact that human beings speak. Language and its division between the signifier and signified divides the subject, who is caught in language, and experiences a feeling of loss which is manifest in the way humans never manage to say what they mean (Lacan 1994). This theory helps understand why so many things are said about motherhood and so little seems true. Medical discourse, which is a practice that is not reduced to the mathematical formulae of logic, is also caught up in the logic of the symbolic castration, even though it often covers it up, is in denial: Cusk's deprecation

of this discourse seeks to bring up the issue, revealing a sense for that which is barred by language. The imperative to lift up the veil of these discourses and false images can be seen in two modes in Cusk's writing: first she emphasizes the idea that pregnancy and motherhood have an alarming, monstrous dimension that is generally kept at bay by the medical profession and tradition; on the other hand, she spawns a metaphorical language that enables her to go beyond reality.

9 Motherhood puts the subject at risk because it plunges her into an enigmatic and disordered reality that is beyond the reach of language.¹⁰ Cusk sarcastically comments on that idea in Darwinian terms: "I often think that people wouldn't have children if they knew what it was like, and I wonder whether as a gender we contain a Darwinian stop upon our powers of expression, our ability to render the truth of this subject" (LW 136). Her sarcasm can be noticed in the apparent contradiction between Darwin's biological theories and the cultural concept of "gender," a distinction that Cusk cannot ignore. Her assertion however signals the failure of her project, since her memoir is nothing but the fabrication of yet another text adding itself to pre-existing discourses, a feature of memoirs which I have called experiencing the impossible (Boileau 2008). Pregnancy and the baby are the occasion for Cusk to become aware of the horrendous, meaningless nature of the body, something which scientific knowledge and the tradition generally hide: "I stare into the insatiable red cave of her mouth" (LW 109), she says of her baby, when she discovers that she's supposed to observe no limit to her daughter's hunger: "It's impossible to overfeed a breastfed baby. This last claim suggests to me that feeding is entirely meaningless" (LW 104). Cusk focuses on these holes that appear in the supposedly well-informed texts that she reads, and they all concern a real (monstrous) dimension of the body: she deplores the absence of "the dawning of some sort of understanding of how the baby is supposed to come out" (LW 23). In other words, she desires to know something that, she feels, has never been expressed.¹¹ But this aspect cannot be easily described and the novelist is left with no other option but to half-say the truth of it, as Lacan would say, through metaphors.

10 After delivering her daughter, an event that is not recounted, she tells us: "Pregnancy is a hallucination now. The mystery of the baby inside me has passed unsolved" (LW 57). No rational explanation is given to the blackout, and I would argue that the sophistication of Cusk's writing can be a way out of the conundrum. Images and films seem to become truthful only when Cusk adds her own image to them, thereby showing the difference between explaining and expressing, and the appropriation of experience through images: "Occasionally there are photographs, images of women transfixed as if at the moment of death" (LW 23). In the same way that Cusk piles up discourses on motherhood, she superimposes similes and metaphors, and it is in the discrepancy thus created that she hopes to express something beyond reality, and of the real ('moment of death'). Mothering in fact has been a moment of awakening for this novelist, a moment when she realized that the absence of knowledge points to the existence of some truth that she cannot grasp because it is beyond the usual signifiers of everyday language: "Like a trailer for a horror film, the adult body hints broadly at what must remain uneasily within the precincts of the imagination until legitimate entrance to its full unfolding is attained" (LW 18). We see here the "horrific" dimension of that event and yet the fascination it causes.

11 The function of her extensive use of a metaphorical and highly elaborated language (a feature of all her writings) paradoxically exposes and exorcises that horror. For instance, Cusk explains why young parents may be impervious to their parents' advice: "People without children certainly don't seem very interested in anything that people with have to say about it: they approach parenthood blithely, as if they were the first, with all the innocence of Adam and Eve before the fall" (LW 136). The far-fetched comparison, which twists the (Biblical) reference as well as the object of the comparison, is evocative rather than explanatory. It is a *tour de force* because autobiography has traditionally been defined by the necessity of a truthful language, devoid of images.¹²

- 12 In the first chapter, Cusk observes her gender embodied, as it were, in the changing room of a swimming pool.¹³ The human body appears in a way that is generally “muted by clothes and context” (LW 17), in a way that is frightening and makes her uncomfortable:

Though I too have the body of a woman, the sight still briefly arouses in me a child’s fear, a mixture of revulsion and awe for these breasts and bellies and hips, this unidealised, primitive flesh which, forgetful here of its allure, seems composed purely of reproductive purpose. (LW 17)

- 13 The mask is dropped and Cusk almost seems to blame the physical for having natural functions, and for its propensity to reproduce. When she catches a glimpse of her female companions’ bodies, Cusk doesn’t see them innocently. Usually hidden from view, although women are often photographed pregnant, the physical aspect of the body comes as a shock when it is unveiled (quite literally in this scene). In no way is the body either erotic or celebrated, as the body of pregnant women is wont to be. What Cusk focuses on is what constitutes sexual difference, and the parts of the bodies she looks at exacerbate these very features in a grotesque way: women’s bodies do not seem to obey the rules of propriety that generally ensure they be “idealised.” The bodies are perceived in a dismembered fashion, and bits and pieces of beheaded bodies are seen moving around, detached from the body as a whole:

Veined, muscled legs stalk to and fro; bare arms untangle matted hair and towel skin that quivers with exertion. Breasts and bellies and hips, customized with moles and scars, with skin smocked or smooth, engraved like runes or blank as new-sculptured marble: declarative and material, they exist as objects, communicating by form alone. (LW 17)

- 14 The description of these disjointed parts of the body, a description of flesh, turns women into obscene objects. The narrator admits that this vision fosters a desire for other women’s bodies but, in observing, she points out truths about bodies that are usually hidden: the metaphors and comparisons show that the body is spoken, that it is the site of a construction that can only point to the persistence or existence of a reality that is unreachable by ordinary signs. The role played by primary identification in providing humans with an imaginary consciousness of their bodies as separate and complete has been theorised.¹⁴ Yet motherhood seems to call this in question, leading Cusk to a re-appraisal of what she thought she had felt ever since she was a child. All the discourses about the bodies of women, in some way or another, fail to provide an image that holds. The fragmentation of the bodies at the swimming pool is a vision that the experience of motherhood enhances for Cusk, when she meets her own monstrosity and becomes abject. The inscription of the letter on the body, which is contained in the expression “engraved like a rune,” unites writing with the body. This preliminary scene therefore contains images of a body that is deprived of its mythological accessories while becoming a site for the exploration of the novelist, who is seen grappling with reality in a way that shows both the dislocation of bodies that leaves people speechless, the impossibility of showing them as a whole, and the necessity for a new symbolization in order to articulate writing and the real. “Naked, [the bodies] have a narrative quality, like cave paintings” (LW 17) is one of the sentences that open this passage. The real body, as opposed to the imaginary body, can thus point to its effect on the subject:

Sometimes there are children in the changing rooms and I see them stare in the way I used to stare, and half want to still: in illicit wonder and terror at the suggestiveness of the adult physiognomy, its frank protrusions and fur and patina of age or experience bespeaking untold mysteries of pleasure and pain, of copulation, gestation and birth.” (LW 17-18)

- 15 Children’s eyes are the way for the narrator to capture something of the innocence and original bewilderment at the body of others, their own desire intermingled with their lack of understanding. The body speaks, or rather is spoken, it is the site of a language and it appears in its real aspect, not only the bodily function but also a vision of dislocation that is terrifying. And this happens when Cusk becomes acutely aware of her own body. This scene is thus programmatic of Cusk’s memoir: to try and reach with “untold mysteries of pleasure and pain” behind the veil of the imaginary.

3. Pointing to the emptiness of reality

16 Our modern world is one that is characterized by the failure of narration, if we are to believe W. Benjamin¹⁵ and Adorno. Cusk tries to capture an experience that is yet impossible to say in a classical fashion. The experience of giving birth is not communicable, as it is characterised by an absence, a sense of loss. In Cusk's terms, it has already happened: "All that is clear at this point is that I have replicated, like a Russian doll" (LW 56). Cusk's rejection is based on a literal understanding of the idea of reproduction. Comparisons, surprising and trivialising, repeatedly cast us into a world of fiction, which is shocking because literature transforms Cusk's own experience of motherhood into an object for the novelist's stylistic invention, as opposed to the supposed pure autobiography, whose only interest should lie in facts. But I hope to have shown that truth, for Cusk, can only be said through fiction. Cusk seeks a way to convey the radical experience of otherness that she felt, and in the following quotation we see how "truth" combines with a comparison: "For in truth, my experience of birth was more like an appendix removed than what most people would understand by 'labour'" (LW 60).¹⁶ Cusk negotiates this sense of loss with cold, distant images that are likely to infuriate many who have gone through the experience of motherhood as a surplus of being. "The experience of motherhood loses nearly everything in its translation to the outside world" (LW 9). This clichéd formula becomes quite violent for parents and would-be parents because Cusk expresses the indecisiveness of her bond to her daughters, something which usually is covered up by the moral and socially constructed imperative to 'love' one's children. Moreover, Cusk confesses that her experience is not readily available to her, that it is through the fictional construction that she manages to capture it. Auto/biography cannot do without fiction, not in the sense of auto/fiction, but in the sense that writing is a construction that preserves from both dislocation, lack of meaning, and absence of the real.

17 Cusk ridicules all attempts at a "straightforward" (her term for it) account of motherhood, which might result in making the reader feel that she doesn't take her subject seriously: "The story of pregnancy is best recounted in trimesters" (LW 23), she tells us, showing the vacuity of all the advice she is told in comparison with the elusive nature of the experience itself which is irretrievably lost:

The fact that I have never personally encountered such a disciple of truth, have neither heard nor read during the course of my life a straightforward account of this most ubiquitous of happenings, suggests to me the presence of an additional horror surrounding the mystery: that somehow, during those tortured hours, some fundamental component of oneself is removed, so that afterwards although one looks and sounds more or less exactly as one did before, one is in fact a simulacrum, a brainwashed being programmed not to bear witness to the truth. (LW 24)

18 Who is there but the novelist to seize that truth? For "literature," she says, "tactfully tones down references to the ultimately solitary nature of childbirth" (LW 33). Here, however, she talks of the medical literature, the literature of those that are blinded by their knowledge of the mechanical structure of the body. Cusk asserts her right to individuality, which is the function of a memoir, while she expects her fictionalised account to half-say some truth about it that only fictional construction can explore. Motherhood becomes an experience of othering and the novelist is seen once again as a voyeur, both in fear and awe of what she can catch a glimpse of:

I cohabit uneasily with myself, with the person I was before. ... I go through her memories like an imposter, prurient and faintly scandalised. Her self-involvement, her emotional vulnerability alarm me. I inhabit her loves, her concerns, with the detachment of a descendant piecing together family history. (LW 103)

19 The metaphorical language expresses this experience better than the phraseology of medicine or the affirmative language of feminist documents.¹⁷ Cusk turns herself into a story, in the hope that it can "catch"¹⁸ her.

20 In the chapter entitled "Don't Forget to scream," Cusk describes the family life that is lived in Oxford, with all the sarcasm and unabashed disgust she feels at contemporary women.¹⁹ This seems to summarise the underlying project behind her account of motherhood: the imaginary

preserve that Oxford has created for these provincial housewives conceals the real in a fashion that is redolent of the way medical treatment and discourse, through their injunctions, blind women as to what they should expect from the birth of their child: “There was little crime here, or chaos, or traffic, or noise, or dirt, or difference. It was all held at bay, as if by a magic circle, by the ring road, beyond which lay a tundra of the unwanted” (LW 165). The symbolic together with the imaginary reject the real. It is not so much that Cusk’s writing enables her to express that real, which remains forever lost, but rather that she decides to evoke its existence, to point to it, where she locates the sense of loss that she paradoxically experienced when she gave birth to her two daughters.

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Notes

1 Although strictly speaking a ‘memoir’ has a definition of its own, I will use the term in its loose sense of an auto/biography, and in order to avoid falling into any specific generic category in this early stage of my analysis of the work.

2 All further references to R. Cusk, *A Life’s Work, On Becoming a Mother*, 2008 (2001) will be to this edition.

3 Ph. Lejeune, *L’Autobiographie en France*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1971. We can quote J.J. Rousseau’s *Confessions*, M. Leiris’s *L’Âge d’homme*, James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* and B. Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* as instances of the outrage caused by auto/biography. The spelling of “auto/biography” with a slash has become common practice and here again it serves my purpose: “While autobiography is the most widely used and most generally understood term for life narrative, it is also a term that has been vigorously challenged in the wake of postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment subject. Privileged as the definitive achievement of a mode of life narrative, ‘autobiography’ celebrates the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story” (S. Smith and J. Watson [eds.] 3).

4 The fact that women writers are often the subject of harsher reviews has been amply commented on. For a synthesis of these arguments, see Boileau 2008.

5 Criticisms have been particularly violent and seem to have haunted Cusk (“The Language of Love”).

6 A few pages above, Rich also says that motherhood has been “unmentioned” in the histories of men.

7 Apart from Rich and Wolf, we can quote Fiona Shaw’s *Out of Me*, London Virago, 2001 (1997), Helen Simpson’s *Hey Yeah Right Get a life*, London, Vintage, 2001, Anne Enright, *Making Babies, Stumbling into Motherhood*, London, Vintage, 2004, Joanna Briscoe, *Mothers and Lovers*, Phoenix, New Edition Edition, 1995, Sian Busby, *The Cruel Mother*, Short Books Ltd, 2005. In France, we can refer readers to Éliette Abecassis, *Un Heureux événement*, Paris, LGF, “Livre de Poche,” 2005, Marie Darrieussecq, *Le Bébé*, Paris, P.O.L., 2002, Nancy Houston, *Le Journal de la création*, Arles, Actes Sud, “Babel,” 2001 (1990).

8 “When any speaking being whatsoever situates itself under the banner “women,” it is on the basis of the following – that it grounds itself as being not-whole in situating itself in the phallic function. (...) There is no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital W indicating the universal.” (Lacan 1975, 72)

9 A similar scene appears in N. Wolf, 14-18.

10 “Pregnancy is a dramatic ordeal: a splitting of the body, the division and coexistence of self and other, of nature and awareness of physiology and speech. This fundamental challenge to identity is accompanied by a fantasy of wholeness, of narcissistic self-containment. Pregnancy is a sort of institutionalized, socialized and natural psychosis.” J. Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” *The Portable Kristeva*, 364.

11 In a 2011 French film, *17 Filles*, based on a true story, 17 teenage girls decide to have a baby at the same time, leaving their parents and teachers powerless. In order to put them off, the headmaster of their school shows them a video of a woman giving birth. The video is bloody, and carries a strong image of monstrosity. All the teenagers try to look somewhere else or put their hands to their eyes to avoid looking at the images, making this reality forever hidden from them. The pregnant teenage girls on the other hand stare at the images as if they saw through them, without realizing what was shown to them. It is almost as if the crudity of these images estranged them from the experience ahead instead of giving them a foretaste of it. Muriel et Delphine Coulin, *17 Filles*, 2011.

12 Ph. Lejeune, *Moi aussi*, Paris, Seuil, « Poétique », 1986, 13 or 26; D. R. Shumway, “The Star System in Literary Studies,” *PMLA*, vol. 112, n°1, 1997, 85-100.

13 A similar scene exists in *Misconceptions*, but it isn’t placed at the beginning and reveals a different approach to the question.

14 J. Lacan, « Le Stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu’elle nous est révélée dans l’expérience psychanalytique », *Écrits*, 92-99. See J. La Belle, *Herself Beheld, The Literature of the Looking-Glass*, Cornell, Cornell University Press, 1988 and S. Benstock (éd.), *The Private Self, Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

15 “Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. And if sometimes a person is led to ask for a story, unease amongst the guests may well be felt in a more and more manifest way. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.” (Benjamin 114)

16 The character of *In The Fold* keeps reproaching her husband for having no interest in her ordeal: “Why have you never asked me how it felt having Hamish?” (40)

17 Of course these feminist texts are also valuable, but very often in Naomi Wolf’s *Misconceptions*, for example, this results in a simplification in patriarchal terms in which the conclusion is always that everybody has it wrong, cf. 72-82.

18 Cusk is frequently associated with Woolf and this is a reference to Woolf daring novelists to catch Mrs Brown. V. Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1928.

19 L. Garner, *op.cit.* This is especially true in *Arlington Park*.

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Nicolas Pierre BOILEAU, « A Novelist in Changing Rooms: Motherhood and Auto/Biography », *E-rea* [En ligne], 10.2 | 2013, mis en ligne le 18 juin 2013, consulté le 19 avril 2016. URL : <http://erea.revues.org/3243> ; DOI : 10.4000/erea.3243

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Résumés

A Life's Work, Cusk's first memoir, in which she recounts her experience of motherhood, remains Cusk's most controversial work. She tries to grasp the feeling of estrangement she experienced when she gave birth and the way bonding with her daughters was a slow process rather than an instantaneous event. What critics have tended to focus on is what I would call the thematic reading of this text – the sociological and cultural debate that it opens up about the representation of what motherhood is –, these discourses which Cusk attacks. However, they have failed to address the literary implication of Cusk's appropriation of memoir writing, which, because it is defined by something which is impossible – at attempt at capturing the reality of an experience which is idealised, imaged and partly beyond words – gives way to creative solutions that undermine preconceived ideas about both the feelings motherhood should engender and the form any account of that experience should take. Written from a Lacanian perspective, this article addresses the scandalous nature of a creative memoir on motherhood.

Le premier récit autobiographique de Cusk, *A Life's Work*, dans lequel elle raconte son expérience de la maternité, est l'œuvre la plus controversée de l'auteur britannique. Elle essaie de saisir le sentiment d'altérité qu'elle a ressenti en devenant mère et la manière dont le lien entre elle et ses filles s'est construit au lieu d'être inné. Les critiques ont porté sur une lecture thématique de l'œuvre, à savoir les discours culturels et sociologiques qui entourent la question de ce que devenir mère signifie. Ce sont des discours que Cusk dénonce vivement. Cependant les critiques n'ont pas perçu la dimension plus littéraire de cette œuvre qui pulvérise les règles de l'écriture autobiographique, cet art qui se définit comme un impossible – parvenir

à saisir dans l'écriture une réalité fondée sur les idéaux, les images et les représentations mais également sur une grande part qui échappe au langage. Cusk trouve ainsi de nouvelles modalités créatives qui sapent les idées préconçues sur la forme et le contenu de ce que la maternité devrait déclencher. Écrit dans une perspective lacanienne, cet article s'intéresse à la manière dont une œuvre autobiographique sur la maternité peut devenir scandaleuse par sa créativité littéraire.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : autobiographie, psychanalyse, maternité, autofiction, écriture féminine

Keywords : auto/biography, psychoanalysis, motherhood, memoir writing, women's writing