

The New Midlife Self-Writing

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1 Rachel Cusk The Expansive

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1 Rachel Cusk

The Expansive

I'm certain autobiography is increasingly the only form in all the arts. Description, character—these are dead or dying in reality as well as in art.¹

—Rachel Cusk to Kate Kelloway

In this chapter, I engage Rachel Cusk, “The Expansive,” and the titular essay of her memoir of post-divorce life, *Aftermath* (2012). “Aftermath” is an essay that, while narrating a finalized divorce, is oriented toward a future that is described as unknown, but always certain. “What will happen” is the question that undergirds every look backward. I argue that, like her fellow midlife self-writers, she, even at her most bleak, narrates nervous breakthrough, not nervous breakdown. Likewise, I submit that we cannot classify *Aftermath* as a “misery memoir.” In its subtle evisceration of self, there is a conviction that improvement is possible; excavation, not evisceration, is the book’s concern. Indeed, what makes “Aftermath” stand out among other self-writing dealing with divorce, what makes hers new, is its confidence; Cusk narrates soul-scraping events and communications, but evinces no slippage of self. I submit that this forward-looking characterizes each of our four self-writers and so this chapter forms a template for future discussions.

Even if writing *Aftermath* resulted in what Cusk described to a journalist as “creative death,” and no little public opprobrium, she ends “Aftermath” with optimism (this is true of all of our writers).² To understand this trajectory, we should turn to the end of the essay for a passage that can serve as a tool to understand the rest of the essay. In the penultimate paragraph, she suggests that the hardship she and her children have suffered is the price that they have paid for

an expansion of mind and sentiment that has left them more vitalized and welcoming:

Looking at other families I feel our stigma, our loss of prestige; we are like a gypsy (*sic*) caravan parked up among the houses, itinerant, temporary. I see that I have exchanged one kind of prestige for another, one set of values for another, I see too that we are more open, more capable of receiving than we were, that should the world prove to be a generous and wondrous place, we will perceive its wonders.³

The word “generous” is a noteworthy and fruitful way to speak about Cusk’s reorientation to the future after her look back. Her prose is clear and unencumbered; this is part of its pedagogical, even andragogical, style.

The key passage cited above includes a simile. The simile is the rhetorical device at the heart of Cusk’s project; in this she is expansive. Similes, along with clarity and philosophical problems, also constitute Cusk’s pedagogical style. Indeed, “Aftermath” (and *Aftermath*) begins with a paragraph composed of one sentence, ending with a simile: “Recently my husband and I separated, and over the course of a few weeks the life that we’d made broke apart, like a jigsaw dismantled into a heap of broken-edged piece.”⁴ This is a more conventional, albeit effective, simile, which she will return to over the course of the book.

The simile prefaces a meditation on her young daughters and their different ways of playing as a form of argument, signaling that this essay will function, in part, as social science and philosophy: “An argument is only an emergency of self-definition, after all.”⁵ She quickly recalls what seems to be Freud’s notion of the death drive, “the human need for war” that merges *eros* and *thanatos*, that moves from civilization to its discontents.⁶ These are theses that grow from the simile. Such bold and confident assertions function as hands held out to shake on fundamental truths about human nature. This is pedagogical; it is, in part, wisdom literature. When considering the pedagogy within the pedagogical style—if we style her a teacher—her classes take place around a table with her at the head, a configuration that recalls the workshop.

Similes have a key role to play in the forward-looking self-writing; they are one of Cusk’s main innovations, and a mark of her midlife style. Indeed, her memoir of motherhood, *A Life’s Work* (2001),

published just over a decade before *Aftermath*, contains only a few similes. The plentiful similes in “Aftermath,” characterized by leaps forward, have an odd position in her self-writing as her “truths” wage war with counterfactual clauses. And yet, Cusk makes of the simile a guiding aesthetic of expansion: Her similes are always forward moving; they jump far, breaching the outlandish, unmooring the grim tone, finding conceptual adventure, even if the simile is “like” something unfortunate or bad. We should note as well that the simile also borrows much from the hypothesis. A simile begs to be ratified, approved of. Similes enlarge “Aftermath,” make its stakes seem urgent.

Similes are thus both a stylistic and a conceptual choice. At times, Cusk plays with them, expanding them or using them as a point of departure into the factual. As she struggles in “Aftermath” between the “the story” and “the truth,” she occasionally literalizes the similes as, for instance, with a simile from the realm of divorce itself. This suggests that the stakes in writing a memoir are the stakes of writing and conceptualizing overall.⁷ “For me,” she postulates, “life’s difficulty has generally lain in the attempt to reconcile these two, like the child of divorce tries to reconcile its parents.”⁸ And then, in the following sentence she literalizes the simile, the figurative: “My own children do that, forcing my husband’s hand into mine, when we’re all together.” In this way, she literalizes and expands the simile, makes it factual, and sets it up as another kind of simile.

Metaphor also has a role to play in “Aftermath.” Still setting up her intervention into the status quo of post-divorce life, she attests to the gravity of the changes with recourse to a plate, an image that adorns the first cover of *Aftermath*.

A plate falls to the floor; the new reality is that it is broken. I had to get used to a new reality. My two young daughters had to get used to the new reality. But the new reality, as far as I could see, was only something broken. It had been created and for years it had served its purpose, but in pieces—unless they could be glued back together—it was good for nothing at all.⁹

This is not the first time a broken plate enters the self-writing of midlife emotional destitution.¹⁰ Such a plate was Fitzgerald’s metaphor for himself in *The Crack-Up*, at the time of “cracking.” Cusk is narrating transition, not breakdown, although both, perhaps *sans le savoir*, are in the tradition of women mystics both religious and secular, from Teresa of Ávila to Jean Rhys, who proffer the notion of two deaths

or “blows,” one during life and one leading to death, the former of which, in the case of “Aftermath,” leads to a “new reality” which overwhelmed and transformed Cusk, just as it “cracked” Fitzgerald, “like a plate.”¹¹

Both Fitzgerald’s and Cusk’s stories are those of the aftermath; what makes hers new is its shaky but confident belief in the future; there is no giving up in “Aftermath.” Cusk does not follow Fitzgerald and his sense of hopelessness. In Cusk’s vision, inspired by her grammar school lessons on medieval England, the flip side of “aftermath” is “prelude.”¹² Aftermath, *contra* Fitzgerald, thus ultimately means another act, another chance:

The point was that this darkness—call it what you will—this darkness and disorganization were not mere negation, mere absence. They were both aftermath and prelude. The etymology of the word ‘aftermath’ is ‘second mowing,’ a second crop of grass that is sown and reaped after the harvest is in.¹³

Nevertheless the “story” of “Aftermath” begins with regression, not forward-looking. When well-meaning friends speak to Cusk about “the new reality,” she feels like she is going backwards: “‘The new reality’ was a phase that kept coming up in those early weeks: people used it to describe my situation, as though it might represent a kind of progress. But it was in fact a regression: the gears of life had gone into reverse.”¹⁴ We will examine this notion of progress in what follows, asking if *Bildung* is possible without a fixed end point.

In “Aftermath,” Cusk’s regression is short-lived and ends with the issue of the children that she shares with her husband in their custody battle: “There was nothing left to be dismantled, except the children, and that would require the intervention of science.”¹⁵ Providing fuel to her critics, Cusk answers the question that threatens custody disputes based on parity: “Should a woman have precedence over a man when it comes to children?” She wants custody of her children and finds that sentiment hard to reconcile with her other beliefs: “The children belong to me; once I would have criticized such a sentiment severely, but of certain parts of life there can be no foreknowledge.”¹⁶ In her quest for custody, she lucidly breaks “the treaty that gave [her] equality,” and her implicit pledge not to “invoke the primitivism of the mother, her innate superiority, that voodoo in the face of which the mechanism of equal rights breaks down.”¹⁷ Cusk is an essentialist in this stage of her divorce.

Cusk is prompted to confront her position in the couple by her husband's anger, by his claim that she is taking the role of the "male oppressor."¹⁸ She does so by comparing her marriage to her parent's *ménage* and, more specifically, by working through her own relationship to womanhood, trying to understand herself as a product, in part, of her parent's marriage. She pinpoints the era when she was a child and her mother was at midlife. Cusk speaks for herself but also for other women of her generation from economically privileged families in which the mother did not work but the daughter did, pushed to succeed by the very mother who never worked outside the home; the mother's efforts are rewarded by the daughter's success which, despite her encouragement, opens up a seemingly inevitable chasm between the two. This leaves her with a career but also bereft of a kind of womanhood that she identifies in her mother and other women: "In that world of femininity where I had the right to claim citizenship, I was an alien."¹⁹ And here we come up on one of the complexities and surprises of "Aftermath." Its self-writing is not so much an essay about her husband and her marriage or even her children, as it is an inventory of her mother and an analysis of her relationship to her. Her chief concern is understanding herself and her woman-being through the lens of her mother, a task that makes her both appreciative and cruel ("That youthful beauty was gone now, all used up, like the oil that is sucked out of the earth for the purpose of combustion."). This is fruit of deep ambivalence and her own self-professed inability to fully understand her own relationship to womanhood and coupledness.²⁰

Thus, for the comfortable middle class women of Generation X, the mother is not a template. And so Cusk turned to her father for a template that would serve her, but it was not quite right; it did not open a vast enough horizon. She has recourse to a simile to articulate how her father was also ill suited as a template:

[I]n the generational transition between my mother and myself a migration of sorts had indeed occurred. My mother may have been my place of birth, but my adopted nationality was my father's. She had aspired to marriage and motherhood, to being desired and possessed by a man in a way that would legitimize her. I myself was the fruit of those aspirations, but somehow, in the evolution from her to me, it had become my business to legitimize myself. Yet my father's aspirations—to succeed, to win, to provide—did not quite fit me either: they were like a suit of clothes made for someone else, but they were what was available. So I wore them and felt a little uncomfortable, a little unsexed, but clothed all the same.²¹

Like so many of her women peers, Cusk is an avatar of the goddess Athena: the goddess of wisdom and war, but most pertinently, the goddess born of her father. These unwitting followers of the goddess figuratively wear men's clothes and cross-dressing is one of many motifs Cusk uses to describe her upbringing and her success in a "man's world" as she grew up: "Cross-dressed I met with approval, for a good school report, a high grade. I got into Oxford, my sister to Cambridge, immigrants to the new country of sexual equality achieving assimilation through the second generation."²² The polyvalent notion of feminism is mixed with this; in her self-inventory she submits that the appellation feminist (her ex-husband's refrain "Call yourself a feminist") cannot describe her: "What I lived as feminism were in fact the male values my parents, among others, well-meaningly bequeathed me—the cross-dressing values of my father, and the anti-feminine values of my mother. So I am not a feminist. I am a self-hating transvestite."²³ Although the last is not a sentence that has aged well, it captures something generational.

The resulting gulf of misunderstanding between mother and daughter appears unbreachable. Yet, when Cusk tries to locate womanhood in general, as well as her own womanhood, it remains inaccessible, conspicuous in its absence. Her mother, whose beauty Cusk returns to repeatedly, is perceived by Cusk as at her least feminine during "the exercise of her maternal duties: likewise they seemed to threaten not enhance her womanliness."²⁴ And yet, she describes her mother as wedded to male values and the way in which they can determine a woman's life as well. Her analysis is grim:

I suppose it would have been reprehensible, in Britain in the late twentieth century, for her to have told us not to worry about our maths, that the important thing was to find a nice husband to support us. Yet her own mother had probably told her precisely that. There was nothing, as a woman, she could bequeath us; nothing to pass on from mother to daughter but these adulterated male values.²⁵

Cusk ultimately realizes that her husband played a role in their marriage similar to that of her mother. And this attempt at equality failed in part because he had become repulsive to her even as he cared for the children, creating time for her to work. Once again she turns to clothes to explain: "We were a man and a woman who in our struggle for equality had simply changed clothes. . . . Except that I did both things, was both man and woman, while my husband—meaning well—only

did one."²⁶ She hates in her husband the very attributes that she hated in her mother: "I hated my mother's unwaged status, her servitude, her domesticity, undoubtedly more than she herself did, for she never said she disliked them at all."²⁷ Cusk had come to see her husband like that.

But there are other paradigms of womanhood that Cusk considers in "Aftermath." As I foretold in the introduction, all of the books under study notably contain some reference(s) to the classroom. In this also they are pedagogical. The first woman considered by Cusk is a former schoolteacher, an "elephant-ballerina" torn between "bulk and femininity," who went to Oxford and subscribes to male values, as we see when we learn the content of her courses:²⁸ "She gave great consideration to Offa of Mercia, in whose vision of a unified England the first thrust of male ambition can be detected . . ."²⁹ Cusk merges the pedagogical style with accounts of pedagogy. It is a narrative move shared by all the self-writers I investigate in this book.

Another paradigm is offered by her mother's friend Sally, childless and corpulent, who refuses a cake recipe because she would "eat the whole thing in one sitting."³⁰ This is a formative moment that gives her foreknowledge about womanhood: "In some obscure sense, Sally had given the game away. Not knowing any better, she had opened up a chink in the tall wall of womanhood, and given me a rare glimpse of what was on the other side."³¹ Cusk has another understanding of pitfalls in the fierce order of femininity, to adapt a title by Michel Leiris. As noteworthy of her statement is her childlessness: "Always at stake is the question of female identity beyond reproduction," writes Susanne Schmidt.³² For this essay in particular, we can trace an arc back to Montaigne, whose essays concerned themselves with a selected theme that he walked through in many different ways, testing corners; Cusk here waltzes through womanhood, testing it.

In the end, Cusk looks forward to a different mode of womanhood and to a new, less constrained family life. She says goodbye to the home that she lived in it with her now ex-husband; when it was both "both shelter and prison."³³ In the final pages of the essay, she concludes that what crushed her family also liberated them. Watching families sing Christmas carols, she muses: "We're not part of that story any more, my children and I. We belong more to the world, in all its risky disorder, its fragmentation, its freedom."³⁴ The world is constantly evolving, while the family endeavors to stay the same. She is forward-looking but she eschews traditional autobiographic trajectories; there is no triumphalism, no goal, no exhortation—she has borne witness to her own life. She emerges out of "the jungle of middle life," finely tuned and wise.³⁵ For, with its similes, taxonomies,

and questions, this is wisdom writing, more of which we will find in the chapters to come.

In terms of digital absence, it is worthwhile to speculate as to why marks of the Internet age are absent from Cusk's writing, leaving a noteworthy omission, for so much of our knowledge gathering and so much of our communication and social interactions take place in this way. We thus begin here the discussion, which I will continue in subsequent chapters, of how each of our writers manages this. I argue that a distaste for representations of new media in writing is more specific to Generation X and older generations than younger generations. I put forth the thesis that digital communication overall (e.g. emails, tweets, messages) is characterized, in part, by its visual aspect which leaves the publisher with the impossible task of making it look real and really is outside the scope of the written book even as verisimilitude increasingly demands it. Should writing go multimodal? This is a question we are left with by every writer we look at.

Notes

1. Kate Kelloway interview with Rachel Cusk, *The Guardian*, August 24, 2014, www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/24/rachel-cusk-interview-aftermath-outline, accessed May 18, 2021.
2. Kate Kelloway interview with Rachel Cusk (see note 17).
3. Cusk, Rachel, "Aftermath" *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (New York: Picador, 2012), 3–27, 27.
4. Cusk, "Aftermath," 3.
5. Cusk, "Aftermath," 3.
6. Cusk, "Aftermath," 4.
7. Cusk, "Aftermath," 4.
8. Cusk, "Aftermath," 4–5.
9. Cusk, "Aftermath," 4.
10. I would like to thank my former student Hayden DeBruler for revealing the generative force of the cracked-plate metaphor.
11. Fitzgerald, F. Scott, "The Crack-Up" *The Crack-Up* (New York: New Directions, 1931), 69–84, 72.
12. Cusk, "Aftermath," 6.
13. Cusk, "Aftermath," 6–7.
14. Cusk, "Aftermath," 4.
15. Cusk, "Aftermath," 5.
16. Cusk, "Aftermath," 10.
17. Cusk, "Aftermath," 11.
18. Cusk, "Aftermath," 8.
19. Cusk, "Aftermath," 14.
20. Cusk, "Aftermath," 12.
21. Cusk, "Aftermath," 12–13.
22. Cusk, "Aftermath," 13.

23. Cusk, "Aftermath," 15, 21.
24. Cusk, "Aftermath," 8.
25. Cusk, "Aftermath," 13.
26. Cusk, "Aftermath," 22.
27. Cusk, "Aftermath," 21.
28. Cusk, "Aftermath," 5.
29. Cusk, "Aftermath," 6.
30. Cusk, "Aftermath," 9.
31. Cusk, "Aftermath," 9.
32. Schmidt, Susanne, *Midlife Crisis: The Feminist Origins of a Chauvinist Cliché* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2020), 10.
33. Cusk, "Aftermath," 16.
34. Cusk, "Aftermath," 25.
35. Cusk, "Aftermath," 16.