

ON NOT MEETING RACHEL CUSK

The *Outline* trilogy (2014-18) and autofiction

You can say anything you like about fiction. It might be true but it is still fiction. It may be fiction but it may well be true. It can hide a multitude of author-selves and be made of all lies and all truths. You cannot trust anything it says or anything the author says about it, unless you do. It is all done with mirrors—by which I mean that it is all mirrors. Novels are halls of mirrors; balls of mirrors. When you get an infinity effect of all the mirrors working together to bring depth is when you might start to feel secure. And this is because that is the truth of it, ‘the lie’ that will expose ... unspeakable truth’, as Philip Roth says in *Operation Shylock* (1993). And an essay might even be fiction.

Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* trilogy does this all the time. We do not know if what it shows is true or even realistic but it has been called ‘auto-fiction’. We do not know if what she has said about avoiding stories and distrusting them is true and some critics have said she has embraced story in a new way. In a recent interview for the *LRB* one thing she said struck me as really being true: ‘my self-examination is brutal’. Mirrors can, obviously, go either way and can give you mere surfaces, or extra hidden depths. There are dangers as well as opportunities but it takes a writer of some genius to handle the magic of mirrors to such a stunning novel-stage effect as Cusk does here.

In retrospect, not meeting her seems a good move, as I admire her writing so much, for one thing. It also rings true with re-reading the trilogy as a mirror-act that my not meeting of her was a deliberate act, or another work of reflective fiction, albeit one in tribute to her writing. It feels like I add to her effectiveness.

Just over a year ago, I had just finished reading the novels and I read an interview with her online which mentioned the name of her home village. Coincidentally I was going on holiday to an old-fashioned seaside town not far from there. I was working on some poems, based on the book of Ecclesiastes, which is similarly unsparing in its self-examination. By the end of the week I had finished my first draft and had not been out of the town all week. I thought I would drive somewhere and buy myself lunch, maybe in a village pub nearby. On the OS map, I noticed her village had one pub, so on a whim I drove there.

Whatever else it was about, the first novel *Outline* was all about writing. Now I think that even more; it is *all* about writing. What her characters, who dominate the text, say, is also her talking about writing. First time, I did not quite get why I thought it so brilliant, but I think this is why. I felt the effect of the mirrors but I was fooled by the act. Now I know it is mirrors, I admire it even more. Let me give you some examples.

On the first page, her first character, visited by the writer-narrator, is talking about software that detects ‘employees most likely to rob and betray’. So the author of the author is talking of a person who is discussing the unreliability of persons being discussed. This is a three-mirror effect, well known to stage magicians, which makes you feel vertiginous, insecure and also that you are seeing something you might not be supposed to see, all at the same time. This is the nucleus of her effect. It is funny, scary and somehow thrilling. It is the real thing presented as magic, stacy and convincing. It is story and it is truth.

The second in the trilogy, *Transit*, starts in the same way, with a discussion of software being more personal than a person. The undermining of the reader and the author is again simultaneous, the veils are moving, the veil of mirrors offering flashes of humour, serious teasing and useful distortions.

The central chapter of *Outline* gave me a clue, where the writing group tell their stories. As someone who has taught writing for many years, this struck me as being highly fictionalised. So the trick of seeming to disappear which some critics have noticed and admired, somehow disappeared as an image. These are a series of selves, as well as a series of characters, especially the most realistic, which is the one who will not join in the monologues and promises to complain. It was real and it was self-reflection which contained its own undermining. This was a kind of meta-fiction with an apparently unselfconscious surface. And I loved it, partly because it performed its magic without me noticing. Even now I had noticed, I was delighted again rather than disgusted. 'I don't know who you are,' says the disgruntled student, which seemed to be repeated in the infinite sense of self-questioning.

Critics have also picked up her use of the word 'outline' at the end of the first novel. This is 'an anti-description', like something blank, 'negative', to which one might add the word 'capability'. It is strength from weakness. The blank outline is filled with various selves. The character talks on the next page of 'her mirror, but these day she found herself without reflection'. The author can do vanishing tricks with mirrors.

I had disappeared to the coast to write my poems. Ecclesiastes also specialises in self-undermining towards the truth and one of the poems I worked on has the self-admonishing refrain: 'You're talking to yourself, mate.' This I something often said when someone is complaining too much. It did not strike me at the time, but for me these novels had sidestepped that one to dazzling effect. I know of no halls of mirrors on piers now, but I would like to visit one. I seem to remember them being hilarious, revealing and liberating.

The pub in the village was a bit posh but bustling and friendly. I found a quiet, small bar, of the kind a writer might seek. I spotted a small table by the window and asked if I could sit there to have lunch. It was reserved. In my half-serious mind, I thought, yes, for Rachel Cusk and her husband. I ordered some expensive soup and sat down nearby.

The very end of the novel plays with words as mirrors, briefly, where 'solicitude' and 'solitude' are reflected against each other in slips of language and meaning. This is both undermining and touching, as she is with her various selves/characters. There is a brutality which is true to her 'self-examination' but also an unjudging tenderness of distance, as in the call the narrator gets from her son, who is very literally lost, as well as distant.

One of the few times the narrator speaks (in chapter VII), she talks of 'passivity' and wanting 'nothing at all' and the combination of playful, devastating vision and cosmic humour that comes from this extremism is all the more convincing. In a hall of mirrors one sees the carnival of the self in all its true distortions.

Transit, while beginning in a similar way, represents a shift of focus to setting rather than character. A series of properties, of ownerships and custodies takes the characters and their self-framings out of the mirror and into ownership. It is an inevitably more complicated picture but darker and funnier; even more devastating. Property is the desire to own ourselves and our lives and she makes it a ripe frame for human folly.

The novels which make the same move in the second volume and where the leading character is likewise a writer, is Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe trilogy: *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995) and *The Lay of the Land* (2006). The second novel sees Bascombe being a realtor and is painfully hilarious. The trilogy also explores the creative insecurity of character, maybe in a more masculine or

obvious way. It is strange how my own reading experience is mirrored. I have hardback first editions of the last of both trilogies and both I have re-read, which itself is unusual in contemporary novels. Ford has a Pulitzer Prize, but Cusk's work seems to me to take the task further in a more original way.

In *Transit*, a wonderful section in the hairdressers brings back the multiple mirrors. The sympathy and suffering of a child having a haircut gives a kind of empathetic quality to the pain, which allows the laughter, as well as the intelligence, to shine. There are people in the novel who seem taken over by property rather than the other way round. The dogs that critics have noticed are mirrors too, where an inarticulate writing student is coaxed to describe a kind of grace in the dogs, which the humans find unavailable.

The Sportswriter also has a deeply undermining depiction of creative writing teaching and *Transit* presents another teacher as obtaining 'distance from her own life', where she 'felt duped' by students 'into believing herself to be generous, selfless, inspiring, when in fact she was just a self-sacrificing victim.' Other people become frames of the diminished self.

The café in chapter III of *Outline*, with its huge photograph of customers, like a living mirror, 'terrifyingly real', is there in *Transit*. A café is described as 'a noisy, harshly lit place, full of mirrors and metallic surfaces'. Vanity, as in Ecclesiastes, is the subject and the claustrophobia builds towards the most devastating view being saved for the middle-classes in the final section. Less cruel but somehow more affecting than *Abigail's Party*, all the adults are deeply shallow and all the children are crying. The hero of the book might be the male child who talks to the narrator of living on Mars: she calls it 'a good plan'. Another briefly glimpsed hero is someone's father who escapes and marries a woman who sells 'cleaning products door to door', then moves to 'a hideous bungalow in the bad part of the town' and loses all his money. By then we feel we do not blame him.

The novel ends with Faye escaping from the house back to the 'solitude' which ends *Outline*. She has, a few pages back, told us she seeks 'to see the forms and patterns' but it would be a mistake to think her a cold writer. The attention she gives somehow to all the selves and places evokes not only comedy but pathos. In the centre of the novel one of her children telephones, as throughout the trilogy, and their small, tender problems put the present frame into context. 'Why does everything have to be so weird?' She says she is doing her best and he replies, 'That's what adults always say ...' With this double frame, we feel that we are all children doing their best with the weirded, mirrored world and its frames.

The poetic ending has Faye feeling 'change far beneath me, moving deep beneath the surface of things' reminding us and her of the place of the child, earlier in the chapter and the desire for a fresh planet, for a world less distorted.

A bit out of place myself, an unposh man with expensive soup, I was relieved when no-one who could have been Rachel Cusk came in, or sat at the reserved table for two. I had escaped from my escaping dream of meeting. What do you say if you do meet someone you admire? My tendency is not to bother them, but I know from experience that no-one really minds being told you admire their work. I remembered being an artist appearing at a folk festival, when I had gone to the urinal early in the day. 'Are you Adrian May?' someone asked. 'Yeah, I suppose I am, even at this time of the morning,' I told him.

Not even sure that I would recognise her, if she had come in, I thought I might have been brave enough to say I loved her writing but it felt better to finish my nice

soup and return to my own, less publishable seaside holiday. No writers appeared as I departed.

Again like Richard Ford, the final novel in the trilogy sees the comedy and the poetry go even higher. There is a structure of reflection, variation and recapitulation, or of character, setting and heightening, where the comedy ends with a big celebratory event. Shakespeare does this with the convention of a wedding at the end of a comedy, but here we revisit the literary festival as a locus of the placing of character in their highest dreamings.

Kudos gets straight into finding the least apparently so people interesting, with no preamble except a poem by the great Stevie Smith, a shared favourite writer, about disappearing, as an epigraph. We are immediately taking flight and on a plane again with no messing about and revealing an almost saintly interest in the other, which still somehow is about the soul of the writer, as it is always throughout the trilogy. This time the man on the plane is her opposite, trying to control his life but not fitting, just as he does not fit the small aircraft seat. There is a sense of speeding up and at the same time deepening the insights revealed, towards a dazzling energy of pain and laughter.

Thus we get to the story of Pilot the dog, another repeated motif. The name 'Pilot' has its obvious contextual significance but is also the name of God in sentimental Victorian ballads; the reversed, mirrored dog. The dog mirrors the whole family and the writer in his extremity of size and sensitivity. The bigness of sensitivity is all through the first sections of the novel, another infinity effect. The family's musical daughter is an image of the artist in her ordinary brilliance and allergy to lying and insincerity. The pain of authenticity is shown in multiple ways and the whole life and death of this family is there in the dog's death, as well as the battered need to go on and this all in the first thirty pages.

We know quickly that Cusk is doing triumphantly what she has done before. In another interview I saw online I remember her saying she had found a way to leave the boring bits out and now she is doing it for real. The layout of the three novels gets faster too, from numbered chapters to unnumbered, and finally to spaces only to delineate sections.

After the dog, we are swiftly into the questioning of writing and publishing. 'The only topic is yourself,' says the publisher to the larger, unfitting writer whose stock-in-trade is not fitting her frame, here to insightful effect. We have another picture of a writer, another poet, escaping. Everyone is another Rachel Cusk, especially Linda, the endearingly disillusioned writer.

Then we accelerate into more interviewers who rarely ask a question. This is both funny and disturbing. Reference to *Transit* comes in the form of someone she has met before who seemed to live in a perfect place, so the triple effect of past, present and previous, forming another kind of trick. The perfect place turned out to be a trick too and we begin to realise that within the trick all is being revealed. Illusions are being abandoned at increasing speed. 'It felt like we were writing a story together,' the interviewer, or monologist, says.

At times I felt like I was reading T.S. Eliot talking of wanting to limit personality in his work, while the super-sensitiveness of his poems is always overwhelming. Literary events are in places with 'so many reflecting surfaces' and 'circled by increasing aimlessness' (pp. 103-4).

Another return from the first novel is the character of Ryan, who seems chastened with difference and even illness but 'what I had interpreted as signs of misfortune were in fact signs of success' (p.114), so he is even more odious than ever

and the effect is doubled. There is even a character like her who asks questions to get 'mellifluous replies' and then resorts to the question the narrator has asked of the class in the first book, of the 'what did you notice' kind to students.

There are honest and egotistic questioners who rarely get beyond their vanity of interviewing themselves. When we get the sense of wanting to run away, which grows with the pace, one of the things the narrator is to avoid is a session on 'contemporary interpretations of the Bible', which felt uncanny to me with my Ecclesiastes poems. Another 'vanity of vanities' is to be stripped away. I am amazed that anyone wants to interview her or even glimpse her, unless they have a taste for this ancient, painful laughter. Perhaps I was also making my humility absolute as I drove back to my self-catering holiday flat in the town full of retirees.

'Could a spiritual value be attached to the mirror itself ...?', the narrator wonders (p.183). By now, I felt the book was writing me. Towards the end of the novel we almost visit a burnt church, deliberately left in its burnt state, except that it is closed, so even the simulacrum of vanity is denied in the vanishing effects. By not meeting her I felt I had contributed to the denial, as well as to the escape, though mine was from obscurity to even more obscurity.

The ruthlessness of the agenda here leads to an inevitable escape, the one we had been promised. The escape is like our other shared favourite writer, D.H. Lawrence and reminded me of his story 'Sun', where an escaped woman is confronted with the physical reality of an indigenous non-intellectual man. However, it would be a mistake to think that this was all it is, although even at that level it feels good.

Faye, the narrator is on a male nudist beach, going for a swim and sees a man urinating. There are other reflections here also, as she is entering the world of the ancients, of the ancient Greeks of literature, like Pindar, who she has mentioned earlier. She is going swimming, joining the reflection and is mockingly reflected by a male homosexual world, one which is also taking the piss.

This magnificent novel, ending a magnificent trilogy might then seem like the ultimate end of writing, a kind of seeing of the apparatus of mirrors flat-packed and pointless, in a kind of exhilarated desperation. But 'when you've got nothing, you've got nothing to lose', as Bob Dylan says in 'Like A Rolling Stone'. This great song is another rich shout of comic disgust at the world's vanity, which seemed like an end. After it, though, came the simple story-telling, even, of the songs on the album *John Wesley Harding* and other great subsequent works.

The mirror trick that strips all vanities is not a preamble to nothing but a ritual cleansing of the artist to go on to greater things, even in apparent simplicity. At least I hope so and cannot wait for what she does next. Other critics seem to love and hate Rachel Cusk at the same time and in this she mirrors Martin Amis, who also wrote a great work on vanity, his best novel *Money* and who is also enviably talented, which might be what people really resent.

I had no trouble of the success kind at all, as the poems I returned to have stayed appropriately humble, in that no bugger will publish them (until the brilliant Rosewood Press came along, much later). They did offer my own parallel to the trilogy texts that I found so refreshingly alive. My own clumsy mirror device has not diminished Cusk's power at all for me but shown it working its magic. Is she planning to disappear or to become a poet? I do not believe so, as she is already a poet in her elevated prose and she can disappear while still being massively present. It is not often I read a writer whose favourites are my own: D.H. Lawrence and Stevie Smith, the only two writers I used to offer PhD supervision about, though never with any takers. In another interview I saw, she seemed to really want to disappear, somehow

contriving to lose the microphone in her clothing, as if to amplify in preference some new other self. But hanging out with her fiction is personal, true and wonderful – even if this is itself fiction and even if I did not meet her, exactly.

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