

**'A Compound Fenced Off From the Rest of the World':  
Motherhood as the Stripping of One's Self in Rachel  
Cusk's A Life's Work**

Alice Braun

► **To cite this version:**

Alice Braun. 'A Compound Fenced Off From the Rest of the World': Motherhood as the Stripping of One's Self in Rachel Cusk's A Life's Work. *Etudes britanniques contemporaines - Revue de la Société d'études anglaises contemporaines*, Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2016, Bare Lives/Virginia Woolf: Becoming Photographic, 53, <<http://ebc.revues.org/3802>>. <10.4000/ebc.3802>. <hal-01656829>

**HAL Id: hal-01656829**

**<https://hal-univ-paris10.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01656829>**

Submitted on 7 Dec 2017

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**'A compound fenced off from the rest of the world': Motherhood as the Stripping of One's Self in Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*.**

« *Un bunker coupé du reste du monde* » : la maternité comme dépossession de soi dans *A Life's Work* de Rachel Cusk

Alice Braun

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/3802>

DOI: Unknown platform

ISSN: 2271-5444

**Publisher**

Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

Brought to you by SCD Université Paris Nanterre



**Electronic reference**

Alice Braun, « 'A compound fenced off from the rest of the world': Motherhood as the Stripping of One's Self in Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*. », *Études britanniques contemporaines* [Online], 53 | 2017, Online since 01 October 2017, connection on 07 December 2017. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/3802>

---

This text was automatically generated on 7 December 2017.



*Études britanniques contemporaines* est mise à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

---

# 'A compound fenced off from the rest of the world': Motherhood as the Stripping of One's Self in Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*.

« *Un bunker coupé du reste du monde* » : la maternité comme dépossession de soi dans *A Life's Work* de Rachel Cusk

Alice Braun

---

- 1 In 2001, Rachel Cusk published *A Life's Work*, a memoir recounting her experience surrounding the birth of her first child. Seven years later, she wrote an article in *The Guardian* in which she tried to make sense of the impassioned reactions from some reviewers, and her own sense of bafflement at some of the most vitriolic responses to what she at first deemed to be a work of minor interest (Cusk 2008). In *A Life's Work* Cusk tried to make an honest and coherent narrative of her pregnancy and the first year she spent with her first child, adjusting to her new role as a parent and dealing with ambiguous emotions about motherhood. Essentially, she realised that as the mother of a young child she had to relinquish her freedom of movement and action. Even worse, she realised that she could no longer work—until she was able to write this narrative.
- 2 Very soon after the book came out, she became the focus of an intense media scrutiny—she was equally praised and vilified in the press, and was invited to publicly talk about her work as if she had just been at the origin of a major groundbreaking literary event. The hostile reactions usually were of two different kinds: some reviewers accused her of indulging in the representation of aspects of a woman's life no one really cared about—as if an experience shared by such a significant part of humanity could be so easily overlooked. Motherhood, from that point of view, is not a worthy literary subject and should be confined to the dark recesses of the bedroom. In another article Cusk wrote in

*The Guardian* in 2009 called 'Shakespeare's daughters', she reflected on what was deemed worthy of literary interest in the public's mind: 'This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room' (Cusk 2009). No one wants to read about breastfeeding or postpartum, the majority goes. We want to read about war and other such important matters.

- 3 What also struck Cusk in her overview of the critical reaction to the book is that some of the reviewers, mostly women and often mothers, did not hesitate to actually criticise her ability as a parent, doing away with the mediation of representation, as if her parenting skills were actually available for judgment. Cusk was not exactly surprised by those self-righteous comments, because she says they were typically part of the experience of being pregnant and having a young child. As she recounts in her memoir, when she became pregnant, she felt that her whole body was taken over by society as the bearer of another life.

Again and again people judged the book not as readers but as mothers, and it was judgment of a sanctimoniousness whose like I had never experienced. Yet I had experienced it, in a way: it was part of what I had found intolerable in the public culture of motherhood, the childcare manuals and the toddler groups, the discourse of domestic life, even the politics of birth itself. In motherhood the communal was permitted to prevail over the individual, and the result, to my mind, was a great deal of dishonesty. (Cusk 2008)

- 4 But isn't this disposition to pose a moral judgment on a literary work consubstantial with the topic chosen, that is boring, trivial motherhood? When Hemingway gave an autobiographical account of his time in the Spanish War of Independence, did anyone ever think of judging his combat skills? The very fact that he took part in this inherently respectable endeavour was enough to grant him hero status. As for a woman giving birth to her first child, because it is an experience that is deemed common, if not 'communal', to quote Cusk, regardless of its intensity and sometimes traumatic aspect, it can be taken over by the next person to be judged and assessed.
- 5 I believe the public outrage over Cusk's memoir can be brought down to two main reasons. A lot of the negative judgment on Cusk's ability as a parent actually consisted in attacks on her character and her supposed 'Me! Me! Me!' attitude (Cusk 2008). Cusk was indeed deemed selfish because she wrote a book about motherhood instead of just being a mother—and keeping silent about it. The underlying scandal here is: who is taking care of the baby? The critical onslaught that followed the publication of the book is particularly revealing of how we perceive the status of the artist who chooses to be a mother in our society. Her mothering role is expected to take priority over her role as an artist. As she becomes a mother, Cusk realises that she has been stripped of some of her social privilege as an educated, middle-class artist living in London. She feels relegated to a form of oppressive obscurity as she realises that the baby is taking up of all her creative energy. As Nancy Chodorow has shown in her essential study on motherhood, this sacrifice is only expected of women in the context of our patriarchal society, whereas men are never really under the obligation to let go of their social status. Arguably, the other reason why she shocked so many reviewers and readers alike has to do with the very images she chose to represent her own experience. Part of Cusk's dismay is due to her inability to make sense of her experience, let alone represent it. In his paper on *A Life's Work*, Nicolas Boileau makes the case that the main issue Cusk is grappling with in her memoir is that of

an accurate representation not of the actual facts of motherhood, but of her experience of this reality:

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 emphasises 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. (Boileau 8)

- 6 Moreover the literary tradition doesn't prove to be of much help, as Cusk realises, when she learns about becoming a mother, that there is a stupendous dearth of realistic accounts of pregnancy and early motherhood in canon literature. As she stumbles through the fog of her first year, she tries to hold on to literary representation for dear life, yet she only finds a few texts, which she uses to punctuate her own narrative, with references to Edith Wharton, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Charlotte Brontë, Olivia Manning and Adrienne Rich. One of the only realistic representations she can think of is that given by Leo Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, which paints a rather bleak picture of the false alternative given to women who try to be both individuals and mothers. For Cusk, the book is a follow-up to the baffling conclusion of *War and Peace* in which the fearless Natasha is last seen exhibiting her children's dirty nappies before fading out of narrative focus:

Instead he wrote *Anna Karenina*, excavating the woman extant in the mother and demonstrating her power to destroy, for motherhood is a career in conformity from which no amount of subterfuge can liberate the soul without violence; and pregnancy is its boot-camp. (Cusk 2001, 24)

- 7 The word 'boot-camp' sets the tone—at this point, Cusk has launched into the string of totalitarian metaphors which will come to characterise her representation of motherhood. As she becomes pregnant she realises:

[...] modern pregnancy is governed by a regime breathtaking in the homogeneity of its propaganda, its insignia, its language. No Korean cheerleading team was ever ruled with so iron a rod as pregnant women in the English-speaking world. I long to receive some signal of subterfuge, some coded reference to a resistance. My sex has become an exiguous, long-laid, lovingly furnished trap into which I have inadvertently wandered and from which now there is no escape. I have been tagged, as if electronically, by pregnancy. My womanly movements are being closely monitored. (Cusk 2001, 33)

- 8 Pregnancy as an ideology is compared to a fascist regime, and the experience of it is akin to a violent, arbitrary form of confinement. Cusk's ongoing likening of pregnancy and early motherhood to an experience of labour camp-like confinement is probably what outraged her readers the most, when popular culture would have us represent these experiences as the most supreme form of happiness a woman can ever hope to achieve. Because her experience of motherhood is so thoroughly life-changing and even traumatic, the only imagery she can resort to in order to adequately relay her experience is the extreme imagery of totalitarianism. One mistake would be to assume that Cusk was trying to give us a straightforward, transparent account of her experience. She is only aiming at an 'honest' representation, one that is faithful to her perception of the facts. And in contemporary representation, the experience of totalitarian confinement has become the arch-metaphor of all extreme experiences. This is testimony to how little space has been left to the representation of intimate dramas, and especially those which unfold in the privacy of women's bedrooms. How to articulate the sense of utter collapse and deprivation that can be felt by some new mothers? I would like to show in this paper

why and how Cusk is resorting to the radical imagery which has shocked some of her readers. Because motherhood for Cusk at first feels unimaginable and unnarratable, and because so little has been (honestly) written on the subject, she chooses to share her experience as a way to reorder it and make sense of it with the help of literature. And in so doing she is working towards devising new ways of articulating women's experience.

## 'A compound fenced off from the rest of the world': B(e)aring Life

- 9 There are roughly two types of imagery Cusk resorts to in order to account for her experience of motherhood: that of Gothic horror and that of totalitarianism. There are definite echoes of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' in Cusk's text, particularly in the baby's introduction of a sense of *unheimlich* in the house which transforms the most banal aspects of daily life into endless sources of terror:

It is only when I walk through the front door to my house that I realise things have changed. It is as if I have come to the house of someone who has just died, someone I loved, someone I can't believe has gone. The rooms, the furniture, the pictures and possessions all wear an unbearable patina of familiarity: standing there I feel bludgeoned by tragedy, as though I were standing in the irretrievable past. Minutes later the same rooms, the same possessions arouse in me a terrible panic, the panic of confinement. (Cusk 2001, 56)

- 10 Perkins Gilman's short story presents itself as fiction (albeit autobiographical fiction), and does not aim at an authentic representation of experience. The source of the horror which pervades the text precisely comes from the simultaneous presence and absence of the baby, who is whisked away from the narrator's and our sight, and remains outside the frame, a lingering ghost-like presence. In Cusk's memoir, the baby is very much a central presence in the text, but she is a cipher, formulating demands that are both urgent and unreadable. The baby is a monstrous creature which can never be appeased, and she engulfs the narrator in her essential fragility: 'Once I feed her for almost two hours. That should do it, I think. Five minutes later she is crying again and I stare into the insatiable red cave of her mouth' (Cusk 2001, 106). Yet the 'ghosts and monsters' imagery is more typical of the 19-th century, in which teratophobia and claustrophobia were some of the most common metaphorical representations of extreme female experiences.<sup>1</sup> In her memoir, Cusk resorts to a more contemporary set of images. Moreover, in Perkins Gilman's story the narrator was locked up in a room by her husband, but in Cusk's narrative, the baby holds the key to her symbolic clausturation. The narrator is an emancipated young mother, an affluent Londoner and a successful writer, and she is free to go where she pleases, in theory. Yet when she tries to attend a concert only a few weeks after her daughter's birth, she realises that she cannot escape her cell for very long as she is forced to rush back home to comfort a crying baby. Yet the panic she feels doesn't only stem from the very restriction of her movements. The walls of her cell are immaterial and invisible, as she soon realises in the lobby of the concert hall where she is trying to speak to her mother-in-law over the phone: 'People mill around me, passing out into the London night. They are not only ignorant of the strife-torn region in which I now live; they are as remote from it as if it lay on the other side of the world' (Cusk 2001, 88) As we can see here once again, the text is saturated with images of war, internment and even torture. Indeed, Cusk's narrative can be read like the progression of the inhabitant

of an Orwellian dictatorship who wakes up to her own alienation only to be locked away in a prison, or even a labour camp.

- 11 After being subjected to the propaganda of pregnancy, and its constant restrictions on the mother's body disguised by parenting books as benevolent advice, she has to face the horror of birth itself. Strangely enough she cannot find a truthful account of birth anywhere, in spite of how common an experience it is. She can only conclude that there is an 'additional horror surrounding the mystery' (Cusk 2001, 27), and that the women who have been through labour have been lobotomised as part of the process. The excessively medicalised experience of birth seems to foster that suspicion in the narrator, and her account of her own experience is reminiscent of some psychiatric hospital narratives like *Faces in the Water* by Janet Frame or *The Bell Jar*, by Sylvia Plath, with the maternity ward filled with women silently trolleyed off to the C-section room. As she enters the operating theatre for her own delivery, she is reminded of pictures she has seen of 'execution chambers'. By the time her baby is born she has become akin to a camp inmate as she withers away behind the gates of her own home.

At its worse moments parenthood does indeed resemble hell, in the sense that its torments are never-ending, that its obligations correspond inversely to the desires of the obliged, that its drama is conducted in full view of the heaven of freedom; a heaven that is so often passionately yearned for, a heaven from which the parent has been cast out, usually of his or her own volition. (Cusk 2001, 130)

- 12 One can therefore measure the sense of outrage that this text created in its readers—surely having your first baby can't be compared to being locked up in a prison? Isn't it even morally questionable to think of equating the two? The metaphorical nature of the references to totalitarian imagery does introduce some distance between the experience and its representation as arbitrary confinement, essentially in terms of degree—yet in terms of structure, it does shed light on the extent to which the young mother is essentially stripped of her old self with its familiar boundaries as she finds herself in charge of another human being's survival.

My survival testifies to the fact that I, too, was cared for, and yet again and again I experience images of abandonment, of lack of love, unable to stop myself from pursuing ghoulish narratives of what would happen if I left her, if I went out for the day, if I failed to pick her up when she cried or refused to feed her. (Cusk 2001, 87)

- 13 The narrator realises that her everyday life is now inhabited by matters of life and death as her parenting efforts are the only thing standing between the baby and her death by lack of care.
- 14 Her life has now become centred on her duty to keep her baby alive, mostly by making sure she does not go hungry. Like an inmate in a labour camp, her main concern is survival, not so much hers as her own baby's, and the obsession with children's safety is also fed by the totalitarian ideology of parenting books complacently relayed by visiting social workers. Sometimes the roles even seem to be reversed as she becomes the jailer, and her baby the prisoner: 'Every time she cries my breasts appear like prison warders investigating a disturbance, two dumb, moonfaced henchmen closing in on her, silencing her, administering opiates' (Cusk 2001, 107). Both seem to be locked up in the prison of their bare existences: the baby isn't a civilised being yet, but merely a struggling little animal, and the mother must revert to that very state herself. Although the experience is transient, it is essentialised and stuck in time by its very intensity. 'Caring for her is like being responsible for the weather, or for the grass growing: my privileged relationship with time has changed, and though these tasks are not yet arduous they already

constitute a sort of serfdom, a slavery, in that I am not free to go' (Cusk 2001,135). In the first volume of the *Homo Sacer* books, Agamben describes the concentration camp as the very locus of 'bare life', a place where humans are reduced to their mere survival and where they are treated not as rational, functioning citizens, but as bare lives frozen outside of time, essentialised by day-to-day survival. In motherhood, Rachel Cusk is confronted to the experience of bare life in the form of a screaming, hungry baby while she also endures extreme fatigue due to sleep deprivation.

It is also a method used in torture camps, as new parents will eagerly be told, usually by other parents; a piece of apocrypha frequently recounted in the manner of an SOS, an urgent call for rescue from a domestic torture camp to whose existence the free world displays a profound indifference. (Cusk 2001, 167)

- 15 The experience of bare life as surrender of one's rational self is the common denominator between the experiences of motherhood and of totalitarian internment. And as much as we can be outraged by Cusk's likening of the two in a description that runs counter to the usual idyllic representations of motherhood, it also helps to understand the sense of utter disaster and helplessness which befalls the narrator when she is expected to be at her happiest. The domestic space has transformed into a camp which she longs to escape in order to get back to the 'free' world, where she once used to come and go—and work—as she pleased.

## 'The world is at its desk': a Life's Work—Really?

- 16 For Claire Hanson, who has also written about *A Life's Work*: 'Motherhood for Cusk is an experience which has no narrative and no logic, or at least none that is discernible from a maternal point of view' (Hanson 9). There is nothing worse for a writer than being incapable of writing a narrative. Yet as the narrator of Cusk's memoir becomes a mother she discovers that she no longer has any control over her own experience, most of it being dedicated to her and her daughter's bare life:

My daughter emanates unprocessed human need where the world is at its most civilised; and while at first I am on the side of that world, which I have so recently left, and struggle to contain and suppress her, soon, like so many mothers, I come to see something inhuman in civilisation, something vain and deathly. (Cusk 2001, 137)

- 17 Being a mother is described here as incompatible with her being a rational, productive individual with a story of her own. The harsh reality of her enslavement is made even worse by her inability to make sense of the experience by putting it into words. She is colonised, her free will obliterated and her story erased as she becomes 'Motherbaby', which is the title of one of the chapters in the book. For Ruth Quiney, the 'unprocessed human need' triggers a sense both of panic and outrage, and the realisation that the mother is now enslaved to her baby's survival is perceived as 'acutely threatening to the self-identification of the late-capitalist woman, leading to perceptions of a bodily takeover, maternity subsuming motherhood' (Quiney 28). The narrator also realises that she is, humiliatingly perhaps, only a member of the species as she takes part in the age-old ritual of reproduction. Quiney shows that with the arrival of her first baby, Cusk must renounce and grieve her individuality and independence, which she had taken for granted as a liberal, upper-class Western-educated woman. At this point her identity as a well-off writer is supplanted by her role as a mother and bearer of another life. She can



no longer be a functioning, productive individual with a story of her own, she is only part of the continuum of motherhood, toiling away in silence.

- 18 One morning following a chaotic night, the narrator wakes up at 9.30 am lying next to her daughter who has just woken up screaming. It is both too early and too late to make anything of her day: 'Other people have gone to work, to school, while we slept: the world is at its desk' (Cusk 2001, 81). Her confinement to her home is excluding her from the organised, streamlined world of work, she is no longer a productive member of society. For Guillaume Le Blanc, that is one of the warning signs before an individual slips into invisibility: she is no longer making any meaningful, socially rewarding contribution to society. In his book called *L'invisibilité sociale* he explains how some individuals simply stop being part of the group because they no longer fit the accepted criteria for social meaningfulness, often because they do not have a job and do not hold a specific title to social interaction. Like the narrator in 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', the writer narrator in *A Life's Work* is forbidden to work, not by a tyrant-like husband, but by her very condition as a mother. Her life story is as it were broken, in the sense that it does not coalesce into a clear and definite narrative; to paraphrase Le Blanc, she is unable to work, and as a result her story does not 'work' anymore either<sup>2</sup> (Le Blanc 29). She is slowly erased by her domestic experience, and as she says in the introduction: 'Looking after children is a low-status occupation. It is isolating, frequently boring, relentlessly demanding and exhausting. It erodes your self-esteem and your membership of the adult world' (Cusk 2001, 17). As Nancy Chodorow has shown, with the emerge of the nuclear family the responsibility of mothering became 'more isolated and exclusive' (Chodorow 5). As childcare became more focused on mothers and less on the community as a whole, it also began to be viewed as a contribution to society distinct from work as purely production.

With the development of capitalism and the industrialisation that followed, production outside the home expanded greatly, while production within the home declined. [...] Production outside the home became identified with work as such, the home was no longer viewed as a workplace. Home and workplace, once the same, are separate. (Chodorow 4)

- 19 That explains why we usually feel so reluctant to view mothering as a form of work, albeit a type of emotional work, but rather as a condition. The use of the word 'work' in the title *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* can thus be read ironically from that point of view. The 'work' of motherhood cannot be perceived by the narrator in the here and now other than pure brute-like labour, but with the distance of time, there is a perception that it may become real 'work' both in the capitalist and the artistic sense of the word. Becoming a mother, and not, as we may think, having and raising children, is, she says 'the hardest work I have ever done' (Cusk 2001, 186). Yet it is a work that is not as socially recognised and valued as becoming a writer and actually producing a body of literary work.

## 'The book of repetition'

- 20 The reasons why we struggle to see motherhood as an actual type of work and a contribution to society in general are probably similar to those reasons why the book created such a sense of outrage when it came out. Many of the readers Cusk quotes in her *Guardian* article express their disgust at seeing so many details about the experience of motherhood being shared in public, not unlike the horrified looks a mother will sometimes get if she happens to be breastfeeding in public. This attests to another aspect

of our perception of motherhood in society as an experience which must be conducted in silence. Ruth Quiney also takes a look at the reviewers' reaction to Cusk's memoir and notes:

The critical classification of maternal confessional works as self-indulgent, dull and indecent is a reassertion of traditional generic standards (according to which embodied, and particularly feminine, experience is relegated to 'low' culture) and a reaction to the works' open subversion of the Good Mother's saintly silence. (Quiney 26)

- 21 The real transgression is that a mother should even have written a book about her experience and published it with a prestigious house like Faber and Faber, giving such a seemingly trivial narrative a stamp of respectability and a claim to universality. There is a sense that Cusk's book should have belonged to the more homely and 'specialised' category of advice books, but should never have left the circle of mothers to be brought out in the world of 'serious' literature. Even though Cusk tried to give an 'honest' representation of her experience, she definitely aimed at presenting her experience as a purely existential one, extending beyond the boundaries of gender, as if she were trying to force it out of the bedroom. On a deeper level, the sense of unease identified by Quiney also testifies, as Quiney suggested, to our reluctance at imagining a mother writing, or even a writer mothering, as if a woman had to be one at the exclusion of the other. The energy the writer channels into a book, or any other literary creation, is not put to the service of the baby, who should be the sole receiver of her mother's care and attention. A woman should be engrossed by her baby, not by her artistic endeavours.
- 22 As Susan Stanford Friedman has shown in her article entitled 'The childbirth metaphor', childbearing has been used by many male authors, especially in the Romantic period, as a metaphor for creativity. Yet for Stanford Friedman this recuperation of female experience only points at the essential inequality between men and woman regarding the issue of motherhood in the context of patriarchy. For Cusk, a female author, having a child means the death of her creativity as she ends up locked away in the work-camp her home has become. For a male author to represent the creative process through the metaphorical lens of childbirth is a recuperation of female experience and a denial of its sometimes traumatic reality. As Stanford Friedman shows, a man being locked up in his own home is a far more unnatural experience and suggests injustice or foul play:
- Confinement of men suggests imprisonment—indignities to, not the fulfilment of manhood. Delivery from confinement suggests the restoration of men's autonomy, not its death. Confinement of women, in contrast, alludes to the final stages of pregnancy before delivery into the bonds of maternity, the very job of which has suppressed their individuality in patriarchy. (Stanford Friedman 52)
- 23 In her memoir, Cusk tries to offset this recuperation of female experience by representing motherhood as it would feel like from the point of view of patriarchy. Cusk aims to show that there needs to be a representation of motherhood that is respectful of women's experience, and does not use it as the metaphor for other more socially valued achievements. An author can 'father' a work of art, but never 'mother' one. Or, as Stanford Friedman says, 'babies are never books' (Stanford Friedman 58).
- 24 Yet who will write for mothers? As she tries to list the different references to motherhood she can find in literature, Cusk is only too aware that the experience of motherhood and of female domesticity in general is the great unthought of literature.<sup>3</sup> In her article entitled 'Shakespeare's daughters', in which she examines the legacy of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and de Beauvoir *Second Sex*, she finds herself in slight opposition with Woolf's

ideal female writer locked away in her room, willingly cutting herself from the realities of the rest of the house. What Cusk is calling for is for a woman to be able to write from the middle of the house, both literally and figuratively, as a wife and a mother. In the article, she reflects once again on the controversy that surrounded the publication of her memoir:

In my own experience as a writer, it is in the places where honesty is most required —because it is here that compromise and false consciousness and ‘mystification’ continue to endanger the integrity of a woman’s life—that is most vehemently rejected. I am talking, of course, about the book of repetition, about fiction that concerns itself with what is eternal and unvarying, with domesticity and motherhood and family life. (Cusk 2009)

- 25 Where we expect a narrative, and especially a life narrative, to make sense in a forward, linear way with a clear beginning and end, Cusk is writing in *A Life’s Work* in a circular pattern which follows the dull and repetitive aspects of one’s experience as a young mother; but she is also offering a blueprint for her ‘book of repetition’. It is a book that would be shaped to best suit the experiences shared by many women of motherhood, conjugality and domesticity, with its day-to-day narrative of recurring tasks and events.
- 26 When reading Cusk’s memoir, I kept wondering, just like many of her hostile reviewers, where is the father? Her own mother? Why didn’t she try and figure out an actual daycare solution rather than vaguely trying to find a babysitter? What if she’d been suffering from postpartum? Shouldn’t she have sought treatment? I felt struck at how strongly the book resonated with my experience as the mother of a one-year-old, and just like many of Cusk’s critics, I tried to ask the text for practical answers, when it certainly was not written for that purpose. And I wondered, why do we feel that we can make her experience our own? Why can’t she speak in her own voice and not just as part of an unbroken continuum of mothers? Cusk’s memoir can be re-individualised if we read it as a trauma narrative, recounting the trauma of having her self stripped bare, her carefully constructed identity shattered by the experience of motherhood. As she explains in her introduction, writing the narrative is for her a way of healing the wound, as she struggled to put the right words on what was at a time a mute, instinctive experience. By inscribing this memoir in the context of her literary oeuvre she is also reinscribing her experience of motherhood within the context of her identity as a writer. The intense, traumatic encounter with the bare life of ‘Motherbaby’ is worked through and resocialised thanks to the production of a literary work with its attendant prestige. Yet the work and its shadowy companion in reality are forever intertwined as she realises that the attacks on her book feel just as painful as if they had been attacks on a child of hers. At the end of ‘I was only being honest’, Cusk recalls how she used to cycle with her girls to school to the reprobation of the mothers who felt they had taken the much more sensible decision to drive their own children. Self-righteous and judgmental, the women who judged Cusk for her seemingly dangerous choice of commuting style did not seem to realise that they were the real danger, and not the other way around. In the end, Cusk says, a mother knows what is best for her children, and writing this memoir felt like doing what she had to do. Maybe books and babies are (sometimes) the same after all.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AGAMBEN, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.
- BOILEAU, Nicolas Pierre, 'A Novelist in Changing Rooms: Motherhood and Auto/Biography', *E-rea, Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone* 10.2 (2013), last accessed at <https://erea.revues.org/3243> on May 22, 2017.
- CHODOROW, Nancy, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978.
- CUSK, Rachel, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, New York: Picador, 2001.
- CUSK, Rachel, 'I Was Only Being Honest', *The Guardian* March 21, 2008, last accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/21/biography.women> on May 22, 2017.
- CUSK, Rachel, 'Shakespeare's Daughters', *The Guardian* December 12, 2009, last accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/dec/12/rachel-cusk-women-writing-review> on May 22, 2017.
- DARRIEUSSECQ, Marie, *Le bébé*, Paris: POL, 2013.
- FRAME, Janet, *Faces in the Water*, London: The Women's Press, 1961.
- FRIEDMAN, Susan Stanford, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', *Feminist Studies* 13. 1 (1987): 49–82.
- GILBERT, Sandra, and Susan GUBAR, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), New Haven: Yale UP, 2000.
- GILMAN, Charlotte Perkins, 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' (1892), *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, London: Penguin, 2015.
- HANSON, Clare, 'The Book of Repetition: Rachel Cusk and Maternal Subjectivity', *E-rea, Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone* 10.2 (2013), last accessed at <https://erea.revues.org/3259?lang=fr> on May 22, 2017.
- LE BLANC, Guillaume, *L'invisibilité sociale*, Paris: PUF, 2015.
- PLATH, Sylvia, *The Bell Jar* (1963), London: Faber & Faber, 2005.
- QUINEY, Ruth, 'Confessions of the New Capitalist Mother: Twenty-First-Century Writing on Motherhood as Trauma', *Women: a cultural review* 18.1 (2007): 19-40.

## NOTES

1. See Sandra GILBERT and Susan GUBAR in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.
2. In the original French, LE BLANC says that a life that ceases to matter is a life that fails to materialise, to produce a body of work ('faire oeuvre').
3. In 2013, Marie DARRIEUSSECQ also released a book about her experience of motherhood, and ended up with similar candid questions featuring on the back cover: 'What is a baby? Why are there so few babies in literature? What to do with the discourse surrounding them? Why do we

say 'baby' and not 'the baby'? What is a mother? And why women rather than men?' (My translation).

---

## ABSTRACTS

Society and the media would have us believe that giving birth to a child and the first months of motherhood are the happiest moments in a woman's life. In a controversial memoir about the birth of her first child, entitled *A Life's Work*, Rachel Cusk shattered the myth of the blissful mother and the idyllic relationship with her first child, which attracted a lot of resentment from readers and reviewers, especially mothers. 'I was only being honest', she replied in a *Guardian* article in which she tried to make sense of all the hostile reviews which were published when her book came out. The outpour of vitriol, it seems to her, was a reaction to her betrayal of a well-kept secret: young mothers are not as happy as we would like to believe they are. Cusk's memoir is an intensely personal account of an experience all mothers have shared, but which is almost never represented in literature: the young mother is stripped of her social self and enslaved to the survival of her baby, whose existence is at this stage in her life limited to bare life. The mother then, finds herself imprisoned in 'a compound fenced off from the rest of the world', with other mothers, midwives, doctors and social workers as her jailers, in a totalitarian world ruled by the ideology of parenting books. The mother needs to let go of her social self, of her 'qualified political life' to quote Agamben, and accept to reduce her activities to the bare necessities of her child's wellbeing in the concentration camp that her own house has become. In this paper, I would like to show that by resorting mainly to images of imprisonment and authoritarianism, Cusk is tackling the representation of motherhood as the stripping of one's social self and thus offers her readers a provocative reflection on the great unthought of literature: motherhood.

La société et les médias voudraient nous persuader que la naissance et les premiers mois d'un enfant sont les plus beaux moments de la vie d'une femme. Dans un mémoire controversé sur la naissance de son premier enfant, intitulé *A Life's Work*, Rachel Cusk a brisé le mythe de la mère comblée et de la relation idyllique avec son premier enfant, ce qui lui a valu beaucoup de ressentiment de la part des lecteurs et des critiques, et en particulier chez les mères. 'J'ai juste voulu être honnête' a-t-elle répondu dans un article pour le *Guardian* dans lequel elle a tenté de comprendre pourquoi son livre avait attiré autant de critiques hostiles à sa sortie. Cette frénésie critique, d'après elle, était une réaction à ce qui a été perçu comme la trahison d'un secret bien gardé : les jeunes mères ne sont pas aussi heureuses qu'on voudrait le croire. Le mémoire de Cusk est le récit profondément personnel d'une expérience que toutes les mères ont partagé, mais qui n'est pourtant quasiment jamais représentée dans la littérature : la jeune mère est dépossédée de son soi social et devient esclave de la survie de son bébé, dont l'existence est à ce stade de sa vie, limitée à la vie nue. Sa mère se retrouve ainsi emprisonnée dans un 'bunker coupé du reste du monde', dont les geôliers sont les autres mères, les sages-femmes, les médecins et autres assistantes sociales, dans un monde totalitaire régi par l'idéologie des ouvrages sur l'éducation des enfants. La mère est obligée de se défaire de son soi social, de sa 'vie politiquement qualifiée', pour citer Agamben, et doit accepter de réduire ses activités au strict minimum dans le souci du bien-être de son enfant au sein du camp de concentration qu'est devenu son foyer. Dans cet article, je souhaite démontrer que, en ayant recours essentiellement à des images d'emprisonnement et d'autoritarisme, Cusk propose une représentation de la maternité comme

dépossession sociale de soi et offre à ses lecteurs une réflexion déroutante sur l'un des grands impensés de la littérature, la maternité.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** autobiographie, Cusk, genre, maternité, mémoire, soi, totalitarisme, traumatisme, travail, vie nue

**Keywords:** autobiography, bare life, Cusk, gender, memoir, motherhood, self, totalitarianism, trauma, work

## AUTHOR

### ALICE BRAUN

Alice Braun has been a *maître de conférences* at the university of Nanterre since 2009. After a PhD on the works of Janet Frame, she is now focusing on the question of the self in female authors' autobiographical writing with a specific focus on the representation of motherhood.