

## **'To Leave or to Remain'**

Trauma, Loss and the Reinvention of the Self in Rachel Cusk's  
Outline trilogy

IDA MARIE WULLUM

**SUPERVISOR**  
Charles I. Armstrong

**University of Agder, 2022**  
Faculty of Humanities  
Department of Foreign Languages

Master



## Abstract

This thesis will examine trauma and loss in Rachel Cusk's Outline trilogy: *Outline* (2014), *Transit* (2016) and *Kudos* (2018), and how it opposes and supplements another narrative, that of conversion and the reinvention of the self. I will track the tension between the model of personal trauma and loss of the main character and the conversion or rebirth narrative that unfolds in the novels. The trilogy introduces us to Faye, a writer who has recently divorced her husband after seven years of marriage and who is living alone with their two sons. This shock of modern life is something Faye, over the course of three novels, tries to cope with – she searches for a new way of living in the world. But, moving on from her lived trauma turns out to be more difficult than expected and we witness a constant pull between wanting to reinvent the self and being incapable of doing so as the trauma from the past keeps on coming back. By listening to the stories from people she meets while travelling: on planes, at cafés, during dinners and while she teaches writing courses, we discover that her own story is always submerged in the stories of her interlocutors. A collection of shocks of modern life quite similar to her own unfolds in front of us as we read.

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## Introduction and theory

She got up and went away  
Should she not have? Not have what?  
Got up and gone away.

Yes, I think she should have  
Because it was getting darker.  
Getting what? Darker. Well,  
There was still some  
Day left when she went away, well,  
Enough to see the way.

Stevie Smith, 2015 (1-9).

The poem “She got up and went away” is one of Stevie Smith’s unpublished poems written in the early 1960s. It is also printed as the epigraph of Rachel Cusk’s novel, *Kudos*, the last in the *Outline* trilogy. It is a poem that challenges and occupies space without really doing anything with this space. It expands its simple lines by interrogating them and opening them up. However, what is opened up and why this happens is not clear. The speaker gets up and goes away, but we do not know where to or why. The poem seems to cycle through meaningless repetitions that end nowhere. But, if we focus on form instead of just meaning, the poem’s repetitions are not meaningless at all, they serve to challenge our understanding of space and structure and what we can do with it. The speaker in Smith’s poem is going away – perhaps leaving something behind, either that of structure or she could even be looking for something new. It could be about a transformation, a conversion, in the sense that it means the leaving of one place and arriving at another. It could for instance suggest leaving behind or moving on from a traumatic experience.

In this thesis there are two narratives I wish to track in Rachel Cusk’s *Outline*-trilogy: one concerns the melancholic model provided by trauma theory, while the other concerns a process of

reinvention of the self as it is understood by sociologist Anthony Giddens in his work on modernity and the self. We will look at how the experience of trauma shatters the self and affects the main character's ability to move on and reclaim her life. Important topics to address within these frameworks are the self, the place of the self and the idea of home. The topics will be explored in order to track the development of the narrator in these narratives. The idea of leaving or losing the home (as a consequence of divorce) and trying to come back home, in the trilogy, are closely linked with the experience of trauma. Furthermore, we will look at the place of the homeless self and how it effects the process of reinvention and moving on. While exploring these ideas in the trilogy we will try to understand whether a form of absolution is provided for the main character. Before commencing my analysis of the trilogy, I will give a theoretical introduction dealing with the framework of trauma and a contextual introduction of the environment in which trauma exists in the novels. However, first of all I will introduce Rachel Cusk and her *Outline* trilogy and give a general overview of her work.

### **Rachel Cusk and the *Outline* trilogy**

Rachel Cusk was born in Canada in 1967 and spent her earliest years in Los Angeles, before her family moved to Britain in 1974. She studied English at Oxford University and published her first novel *Saving Agnes* (1993) when she was 26. The novel revolves around femininity and social satire which became the most important topics of her novels for the next decade. Later she has written non-fiction and autobiographical works such as *A Life's Work* (2001) and *Aftermath* (2012), which are quite controversial, open memoirs about the challenges of motherhood and divorce. *A Life's Work* has perhaps received the most virulent types of criticism, mostly from other women accusing her of no less than “child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness, of doom-mongering and, most often, of being too intellectual” (Cusk, 2008). These are quite violent critiques as Cusk herself claims that “[she] was only being honest” (ibid., 2008).

In *Aftermath* Cusk writes about her divorce from her husband after a marriage of ten years. One of the reasons for the divorce was Cusk's insistence that her husband quit his job to stay home with their daughters so she could devote herself to her writing. Cusk felt during this time to be “both man and woman” (Cusk, 2012), having ceded all the classical female responsibilities to her

husband. It somehow severed her connection to her femininity and made her suspicious of feelings of maternal softness, as she herself claims: “I perceived in the sentimentality and narcissism of motherhood a threat to the objectivity that as a writer I valued so highly” (ibid., 2012). Her autobiographical works are therefore a contribution to the representation of the experience of women in novel writing, reflecting upon the difficulty of writing, finding the time to write and being a mother.

After the publication of *Outline* (2014), *The New Republic* published the headline: “Mommy Meanest, Can the most hated novelist in Britain redeem herself?”, reminding readers of the bad press Cusk has suffered since her first novel in 1995. The violently negative response she got after the publication of *A Life’s Work* left Cusk in a state of silence. She was unable to write as she used to, seeing that both traditional, realist fiction and memoir had failed so utterly according to her critics. In her search of a new storytelling mode, she finally ended up with *Outline*. Although *Outline* can function as a stand-alone novel, she wrote two more novels with two year intervals to complete a trilogy: *Transit* (2016) and *Kudos* (2018).

In her trilogy Cusk has managed to create a quite new form of narration where the main character, Faye, mostly stays in the shadow of other people’s stories and voices, and where her own story remains submerged in these narratives. The way the novel is written reminds us of the form of Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922), Woolf being one of Cusk’s most important inspirations (Metcalf, 2009). The latter novel follows the life of Jacob Flanders as it is conveyed through the opinions and accounts of everybody except Jacob himself. Woolf tantalizingly moves Jacob around in the book like a strange and obscure object, and she gradually brings him into focus, without revealing anything truly real about him. She uses this technique presumably to show how people are unknowable, that you may never truly know someone, you may only attempt to know a person subjectively. In other words, the novel reflects upon the fact that we see people how we imagine them instead of how they really are, as Woolf explains early on: “It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor entirely what is done [...]” (Woolf, 1992, p. 24). However, *Jacob’s Room*, despite its obvious blurring of its main character, is actually a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of the coming-of-age of Jacob as we follow his development through other people’s accounts of him, their interpretations and also misinterpretations of him. *Outline*, on the other hand, is not a coming-of-age novel. The main character is in desperate need

of a piecing-together again after a shattering divorce from her husband three years earlier. I will come back to Woolf later in this thesis – especially on the topic of literary form and narration and on some perspectives on the self, women and art.

An important characteristic of the *Outline* trilogy is that it carries clear autobiographical traits, where the main character is based on parts of Cusk's own life: a writer, recently divorced with two children. The *New Yorker* has called her novels "autobiographical fiction" (Blair, Elaine 2015), a form which has seen a rebirth since the writings of Marcel Proust and his *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Many contemporary writers have turned to autofiction, we can mention amongst others Karl Ove Knausgård, Jenny Offill, Ben Lerner, Michel Houellebecq (to some extent) and the young French novelist, Edouard Louis, whose breakthrough novel *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014) was published the same year as *Outline*. Those who are familiar with Cusk's previous work, especially her memoirs, will expect to read her new novels in this context, as autobiographical or autofictional. Much of what has been written about the trilogy has kept this perspective in mind, constantly searching for ways to connect the fictional world of the main character, Faye, with the real world and Cusk's life. Indeed, many of the experiences found in Cusk's memoirs can also be found in *Outline*.

The relationship between fiction and personal experience in *Outline* is well described in Katharina Stava Teigen's master thesis from the University of Bergen. She looks at how autobiographical story and personal identity are linked by close-reading *Outline* and some of Cusk's memoirs. Teigen shares this approach with Hannah Vincent in her PhD from the University of Sussex on creative writing and autofictional form. Vincent describes at great length literary form and experience in *Outline* through the use of what she calls a *proxy* – a literary character through which the author may process personal experiences. However, although I acknowledge the value these readings of Cusk bring to the field of autofiction, in this thesis I will be careful not to conflate Cusk's life with her fictional main character Faye. If and whenever such a link is found necessary for the analyses, it will be signalled, but not otherwise. In other words, this thesis will not follow the standard autofiction approach to this trilogy. I do however want to point out Gérard Genette's work on paratext, where he claims that both biographical and fictional texts are part of the author's oeuvre and together, they help us to better understand the work as a whole (Genette, 1991, p. 261).

Much of the discussion around the trilogy has revolved around the self and identity which are central topics in autofiction. The reason for this is well described by Hywel Dix when he claims that autofiction is often the result of some lived trauma by the author which creates a need to explore and reconsider the properties of the self (Dix, 2018, p. 4). Cusk's trilogy is no exception from this rule and the effects of this trauma could be described in the novel through the lens of trauma theory – which is why the first part of our discussion will explore this aspect in *Outline*.

Karen Valihora's reading of the trilogy will be important in this thesis. In her essay, Valihora claims that: "self-determination, or autonomy, is the holy grail of the psychoanalytic understanding of human maturation through separation – if not divorce" (Valihora, 2019, p. 33). This autonomy must "wrest" self out of others because the projections of self on to the people around us is regressive. She takes us through Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* to show how our dreams are the internalisation of others – and in turn how Faye and other characters represent Freud's dreamers. Valihora briefly demonstrates that while Faye is listening to other people's stories, their sub-conscious is sometimes revealed – listening is an important part of Faye's role in the novels. Regaining autonomy becomes the goal of Cusk's work according to Valihora, which is seen as an exit from conventional structures. Valihora argues that this goal is "pursued over the trajectory of these three linked instalments, from *Outline*, through *Transit*, to *Kudos* (ibid., 2019, p. 33). Her reading therefore privileges a conversion narrative.

The points I have raised in connection to Smith's poem in the beginning of my introduction, will prove to be highly relevant for my reading of the *Outline* trilogy (leaving, transformation, exit). I will provide some new insight on Valihora's observations as well contradict parts of her reading. Although she takes us through Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* to address the unconscious, she only mentions trauma in passing, as others have done before her. I aim to delve further into how a belated reaction to trauma is represented in the novels. She also introduces the idea of a homecoming in *Transit*, but never provides us with the deeper analysis of how this affects the self. A homecoming means having left home in the first place – creating a sense of deracination of the self. Valihora's main argument is, as stated before, that Faye regains her autonomy, and that *Kudos* celebrates that of an exit – an exit from narrative conventions and from marriage. In her end statement she argues that: "Cusk enables the reader to find, in idealizations, bids for freedom,

and dreams of exaltations, something better” (ibid., 2019, p. 35) – a statement I will come to disagree with.

I wish to point out that Cusk’s trilogy is a quite recent publication, and that academic scholarship has not fully engaged with her novels yet (except through autofictional readings). Although she mentions influential authors to her work such as Woolf and Camus - and we can certainly find evidence of this in our reading of her trilogy, there is still no academic agreement on how to approach and read her novels. Valihora’s essay provides us with a foothold in our discussion – through Freud and the psychoanalysis, a homecoming and the idea of a conversion. Cusk herself also explains that she was “internally chaotic” while growing up and she struggled to translate herself into this “rigid outside world”. But in her early thirties “[t]he first real liberation came with reading Freud and becoming interested in psychoanalytical writing” (Wade, 2019). We will attempt to enlarge this foothold by the use of other intertexts as well: Camus, Woolf and Houellebecq (to some extent). Before moving on to present some central aspects of trauma theory, we will look at the context in which such a theory is articulated.

### **Theoretical framework: Giddens, modernity and the project of finding the self**

According to Roger Luckhurst “trauma is a concept that can only emerge within modernity, [...] as an effect of the rise, in the nineteenth century, of the technical and statistical society that can generate, multiply and quantify the ‘shocks’ of modern life” (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 19). Cusk’s trilogy is a collection of stories that represent these “shocks of modern life” narrated by different people the main character meets in her life. What is immediately striking about these stories is how similar all the characters’ grievances seem. Most of them are divorced, some more than once, some have lost contact with their children, others are struggling single mothers and others again carry secrets of deceit and jealousy. Common for most of them, however, are unstable or failing relationships and the never-ending coming to grips with the new sense of reality such a separation brings. These stories are also quite familiar to us as we read because they are realities found all around us in our society today. Numbers from the Office for National statistics show that the average overall divorce rate in for example England and Wales is at 33.3%, based on all marriages over the past fifty years. In other words, about a third of all marriages over the past fifty years ended in divorce (Office for National statistics, 2019). Divorce has become part of modernity and

modern life. Although there were probably many flawed relationships in more traditional times, divorce was disapproved of, and families were not as often uprooted as they are today. Understanding the context of modernity will be important for this thesis as we shall see when examining the novels and the aspect of trauma and the self.

Modernity is generally defined through what we know as the Progressive Era or the Age of Reason from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and onwards. The term seeks to describe the ensemble of practices, attitudes and social norms that arose during the Enlightenment period and the Industrial Revolution. Some have argued that modernity ended after the Second World War in 1945, when postmodernity took over as a more accurate description of Western societies. But this is not a universally accepted view. Sociologist Marc Augé has even moved on from the term postmodernity. He is arguing for what he calls “surmodernité” or supermodernity – a time in modernity where less and less of our time is spent in the collective, as a family, and increasingly more time is spent in solitude: in front of computer screens, commuting to work, at shopping centres etc.

One of the most leading figures on modernity is sociologist Anthony Giddens. In his work on modernity and the self, he argues that “modernity can be understood as roughly equivalent to the industrialized world” and that modernity is a “post-traditional order” where the self becomes a “reflexive project, sustained through a revisable narrative of self-identity” (Giddens, 1991, pp. 32-33). Changes to society, especially to family structures, have created what Giddens calls “shell institutions”: social structures that still go under the traditional names (family, marriage, etc.), but which have lost their traditional traits, hence the label “post-traditional”. He uses research by Wallerstein and Blakeslee when discussing the new social structures in society (family, marriage, divorce), and describes the new sphere of personal relationships as “risky” and even dangerous. The reason for this is that sexual and marital life have become mobile, unsettled and open, and although these institutions may in their new guises introduce new possibilities, in the form of individual choice and emancipation, they are more fragile than before (Giddens, 1991, p. 12).

Most important for the discussion in this thesis is Giddens’ account of divorce and the self, as a divorce is the reason for our main character’s trauma in *Outline*. Giddens argues that “going through a phase of mourning [...] is the key to reclaiming oneself after divorce” (ibid., p. 11). Anyone who decouples from their partner faces the task of “establishing a new sense of self”. The

reason for this is that in a long-term relationship or marriage the individual identity of each person becomes tied to the other and to the marriage. After a broken long-term relationship or marriage, each individual must therefore search for other images and “roots for independence” to find a way to live alone again (ibid., p. 11).

In this thesis, understanding the context of modernity is important when reading Cusk’s *Outline* trilogy through the lens of trauma theory and as the reinvention of the self. According to Giddens, the world of high modernity: “intrudes deeply into the heart of self-identity and personal feelings. The ‘new sense of identity’ which Wallerstein and Blakeslee mention as required following divorce is an acute version of a process of ‘finding oneself’ which the social conditions of modernity enforce on all of us” (ibid., p. 12). We see here a tension between the experience of trauma after a divorce and the need to recreate the self again. In this thesis we will explore these two opposing, yet complementary narratives in the *Outline* trilogy: How is the narrator, Faye, suffering from trauma after the divorce and can she find a way to recreate the self after her experience of trauma, or is she lost somehow? Let us now move on to the theoretical framework of trauma and loss

### **The representation of trauma and loss**

In medicine, trauma describes when a patient has suffered a severe physical injury causing serious pain that may result in prolonged disability, or even death. The word trauma originates from Greek τραύμα, meaning “wound”, and throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it solely referred to a wound from an external cause. During the late nineteenth century, the notion of *psychological* trauma was introduced and today, according to Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, this has changed and psychological trauma has almost become “big business”. They argue that we seem to be living in a “trauma culture”, raising questions about identity, inclusion and belonging in relation to trauma (Bond, Craps, 2020, pp. 3-4).

The understanding of psychological trauma was explored after the world wars where returning soldiers were diagnosed with “shell shock”. The term PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) first became common in the 1980s. This was also when trauma slowly became a literary theory, showing interest especially in Sigmund Freud’s concept of belatedness which was

introduced in 1895 (Bond, Craps, 2020, pp. 28-42). Belatedness meant for Freud afterwardness, a deferred action or “après-coup” (Lacan), or again, as Jean Laplanche described it: “a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma after the event” (Laplanche, 1976, p. 41). Belatedness is, according to Freud, a period of amnesia after a traumatic event. Cathy Caruth has later argued that belatedness is an unconscious characteristic of trauma and even a necessary one in order to process the traumatic event. She argues that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past” (Caruth, 1996, p. 3) because the experience of trauma does not reside in the past (from the infliction of the trauma), it exists in the delayed address of this trauma. “The story of trauma”, is for Caruth, “the narrative of belated experience” (ibid., p. 7).

Freud described two oppositional responses to loss, the loss of a loved one or the loss of an ideal: mourning and melancholia. As a response to loss, mourning is considered a healthy reaction where the patient deals with his or her grief by eventually being able to let go of and replace the lost object (Freud, 1917, p. 250-251). Mourning’s conceptual counterpart is melancholia, which is a response to loss where the process described above cannot take place. The person remains unable to let go of what was lost, “clinging to the object” (ibid., 244) and is thus also unable to re-engage with life. An important concept in this thesis, linked to mourning and melancholia, is Freud’s idea of the *repetition compulsion* which can be understood as the desire to return to the earlier state of things, an insistence on re-enacting the initial experience of the traumatic event. For Caruth this compulsion to repeat a traumatic experience and the wish to return to the post-traumatic period can actually threaten to collapse the distinction between past, present and future (Caruth, 1995, p. 6). A symptom of repetition compulsion is seen in the return of memories to consciousness through nightmares and flashbacks.

Building on from Freud’s work on mourning and melancholia, Dominick LaCapra explains that: “I have argued [...] that mourning might be seen as a form of working-through, and melancholia as a form of acting out” (LaCapra, 1999, p. 713). Melancholia, or coming to terms with and moving beyond the trauma, is related to the process of “working-through”, whereas melancholia is related to the process of “acting-out” according to LaCapra. He suggests that the way to move on from trauma must be to find a way to reconnect with the present instead of being trapped in endless repetitions of the traumatic event. Only then is it possible to look to the future. Freud’s explanation of mourning and melancholia were as oppositional responses to trauma,

LaCapra, on the other hand sees them as mutually exclusive responses to loss: “I would like to argue that the perhaps necessary acting-out of trauma [...] should not be seen as foreclosing attempts to work through the past” (ibid., p. 699).

I wish to point out also that the specific trauma we will investigate does not follow the traditional markers of trauma, namely the violent impact. This is a common misconception of what trauma *must* be the reaction to – either a violent or life-threatening experience, which is seen from most of the research done on trauma patients diagnosed with shell shock after the World Wars. As Bond and Craps point out, psychological trauma has evolved and includes today questions about identity, inclusion and belonging in relation to trauma. This evolution of the idea of trauma is also addressed by Laura Brown who suggests the concept of “insidious trauma”, which is trauma that does not do bodily harm at the given moment, but harms “the soul and spirit” (Brown, 1995, p. 107). A key point regarding insidious trauma is that it is not developed in response to a single moment or event but is instead developed over time. The experience of the breaking of a long-term relationship or marriage can create similar types of responses as to traditional trauma. Divorce creates a loss of an ideal, namely what used to be home and what constituted the family – the individual must therefore find a way to work through and beyond the feeling of loss of this ideal.

Other critics will be of help in my thesis such as Carl Jung and Gaston Bachelard in the discussion on the representation of the unconscious. Furthermore, Edward Casey, Rosi Braidotti and partly Julia Kristeva will be important in the analysis of the subject and the place of the self. The intertexts I will use are by Camus, Woolf and (partly) Houellebecq. The method used in this thesis will primarily consist of close reading the texts, especially when working on instances of a belated address to trauma. I am also at times, using a comparative approach when reading passages from Camus, Woolf and Houellebecq to further my observations. Finally, I will briefly look at narratology which is necessary when discussing and understanding the subject in Cusk’s novels. Here, once more, Woolf will be of use together with the work of professor in comparative literature, Dorrit Cohn.

## Chapter overview

By using the theoretical and contextual framework I have presented, the following chapters will explore the relationship between trauma and the narrative of recreation of the self in Cusk's *Outline* trilogy.

The discussion in our first chapter will focus on how the traumatised mind of the main character manifests itself in the first novel of the trilogy, *Outline*. Faye has recently divorced her husband and uprooted the family. She is living alone with her two sons and has moved from their family home. As she is travelling to Greece, she experiences multiple recurring memories of her family at the sight of other families around her. As we lay out these occurrences of flashback caused by her lived trauma, we will proceed to look at her reaction in relation to the loss of her family. She is in a state of melancholia and is experiencing a cessation of interest in the outside world. To better demonstrate her situation, we will use the novel by Albert Camus, *The Outsider* as we read *Outline*. Both Faye in *Outline* and Meursault in *The Outsider* display an attitude where the world has lost meaning, which is a common reaction to loss.

Chapter two will focus on the overlapping between *Outline* and *Transit*. We will consider Faye's possible recreation of the self by following the tenets of the stoic way of life. Further on in this discussion, we will consider the importance of the loss of a home and the meaning of home. We will argue that Cusk is attempting a "homecoming" akin to the way it is understood in Greek mythology. With the help of texts by Karl Jung and Gaston Bachelard we shall look at the importance of the home and how it can connect to the psyche: especially how the changing of a home affects the unconscious. In this chapter we will argue that the home-psyche narrative eventually interferes with Faye's adoption of the stoic philosophy – her wish to find a new way of living in the world.

In the third chapter, having failed to follow the stoic way of life, we will observe how Faye in *Transit*, is placeless and how the deracination from the home has made her into a nomadic subject. In this discussion we will make use of Casey, Braidotti and Woolf as we explore the place of the modern subject and the mobility of the subject. Here, Woolf's work will be of importance as she is often a key reference for arguments concerning the fluidity of the subject. Woolf's particular form of writing will be useful to us as we track a similar kind of fluid subjectivity in

*Transit*. While working on Woolf and Cusk we will also seize this opportunity to bring in observations on the female artist and how this also constitutes an important part of Faye's self.

In the final chapter I will move on to the last novel in the trilogy, *Kudos*. As the previous chapters will have established, the main character is traumatized, deracinated, and partly effaced as a subject and struggles to find a way to reinvent the self. This concluding chapter will look at the value of suffering (i.e., the value of trauma), and how some characters in the novel attempt to avoid pain – which in turn is a rejection of the educational purpose of suffering, as described by British poet John Keats. The experience of pain and the difficulty of expressing pain, in *Kudos*, is also pointed out by Valihora. Our focus here will be to consider the possibility for reinvention through religious conversion – to strengthen this observation we will consider a brief comparative reading with a passage from Michel Houellebecq's novel, *Submission*. As this chapter will demonstrate, *Kudos* is a difficult read in terms of finding a resolution.

## 1.0 “I saw a vision of what I no longer had”: Trauma, loss, and the meaninglessness of existence in *Outline*

The blurb written on the back of the cover of *Outline* says that it is “a novel in ten conversations” that portrays a woman “learning to face great loss”. To a much greater extent than *Transit* and *Kudos*, *Outline* overtly focuses on the representation of trauma and loss in the main character, Faye. The first conversation spans barely two pages but sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Faye meets with a billionaire before her flight to Athens and the conversation is messy and erratic as the man talks about a variety of different things - software development, literary magazines, lawyers, a blueprint for a floating wind farm, his Sunday activities playing drums and the fact that he is expecting his eleventh child. It is a quick “outline of his life story” and some projects for the future, but as Faye points out, she finds it extremely difficult to “assimilate everything [she is] being told” (Cusk, 2014, p. 4). His life story is scattered across these two pages like a puzzle in a thousand pieces, seemingly waiting for someone to find out where to start. This mini-conversation gives us a taste of what we can expect from this novel, because this story is effectively also Faye’s story. Having experienced trauma, her identity and story is scattered into pieces all over the novel waiting to be pieced together again.

When we first meet Faye, she is travelling from London to Athens, to teach parts of a summer course on writing – as she herself is a writer. Three years earlier, she divorced her husband after seven years of marriage. She has been living alone with her two sons in the old family house in the countryside before recently moving to London. Early on in the novel, although very little is revealed about her past, we understand that Faye struggles to reconnect with the world and with herself after the divorce, which has left a gaping wound in the past. The self has been shattered by a trauma:

[...] I had lived alone with my children for the past three years, and where for the seven years before that we had lived together with their father. It had been, in other words, our family home, and I had stayed to watch it become the grave of something I could no longer definitively call either a reality or an illusion (Cusk, 2014, p. 11).

The inability of seeing the difference between illusion and reality underlines Faye's current condition of disorientation in the world after her divorce and the destruction of the family. We remember how Giddens argues that our identities become tied to the other in a long-term relationship or marriage, and indeed to the marriage itself. When this knot is untied, each individual faces the task of "establishing a new sense of self" (Giddens, 1991, p. 11). As explained by a neighbour Faye meets on the plane who is also divorced: "It was with her [his ex-wife], after all, that his identity had been forged: if she no longer recognised him, then who was he?" (Cusk, 2014, p. 23). The man no longer has an identity of his own, his identity existed only as tied to his wife and the marriage they had. When this is broken a process of refinding the self must begin if he wants to re-engage with life and learn to live alone. The plane neighbour's story is important for our understanding of Faye's situation, which is very much the same. The untying of Faye's previous life and marriage has seemingly left a similar loss of identity, a wound in the past. Over the course of this novel, Faye will show signs of this wound by her uncontrolled reliving of moments (flashbacks) with her lost family.

In this chapter we will examine how Faye shows signs of a belated manifestation of the traumatic event in accordance with the theories of Cathy Caruth. There is a disruption of the past and present when reliving a traumatic event. The delayed response to the trauma of uprooting the family is visible in *Outline* through a series of memories where Faye uncontrollably relives moments in her past. These flashbacks are mainly triggered by observing other families and internalizing their moments of happiness. The image of parents and children and especially that of father and child are what create and re-create a belated manifestation, a delayed response to the traumatic experience. We shall see how Faye seems to be trapped by these repetitions of flashbacks in a state of melancholia, acting out the traumatic event.

The second part of the chapter will explore another response to loss, namely the numbing effect of trauma and the feeling of a lack of meaning. In order to better demonstrate this loss of meaning in life through Faye, we will link *Outline* with Albert Camus' novel, *The Outsider*. It is especially Camus' main character, Meursault, who is interesting in this analysis as he is perhaps the most known character for expressing the meaninglessness of existence – according to Camus' philosophy of the absurd. However, not the absurdist view of life but rather the indifferent and passive attitude he demonstrates throughout the novel will be our focus.

## **1.1 Finding the melancholic model: The image of the family**

As the tone is set after her lunch-meeting with the billionaire, Faye boards the plane to Athens where she ends up sitting next to the divorced man, usually referred to by Faye as “my neighbour”. The scenes in the novel with the plane neighbour are the most important to our analysis of Faye’s manifestation of the traumatic event. He is quite a few years older than her and has experienced divorce more than once. Despite this, he does not appear to have been able to find the self to learn to live alone again as Giddens suggests. He seems to be trapped in a series of repetitive actions after his last divorce. We will come back to the analysis of the plane neighbour in the second part of this discussion, but first I wish to stay with Faye and her signs of reliving the traumatic event. The plane neighbour is one of few people Faye talks with more than once in the novel - on the plane and later when he invites her on a boat trip after they arrive in Athens. It is during this first boat trip that Faye shows signs of acting out.

Faye and her neighbour drive out on the sea and find a spot to stop the boat. As soon as they arrive, Faye hears a baby crying from afar and notices a family of five on the neighbouring boat. As she observes them, she watches the father pacing up and down the deck carrying the baby on his shoulder, trying to comfort it. Faye explains to her neighbour how she has noticed a while back that she struggles to filter her perceptions. Her description of this feeling resembles the occurrence of the unbidden return of thoughts she can no longer control:

it was as if I had lost some special capacity to filter my own perceptions, one that I had only become aware of once it was no longer there, like a missing pane of glass in a window that allows the wind and rain to come rushing through unchecked. In much the same way I felt exposed to what I saw, discomfited by it (Cusk, 2014, pp. 74-75).

What she describes can be seen as a lack of control of her perception, she has become vulnerable to what she sees and incapable of shutting out certain impressions. Caruth argues that the response to a traumatic event can take the form of “repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviours stemming from the event” (Caruth, 1995, p. 4). It is the “intrusiveness” of these images that is of interest here, as it underlines to what extent Faye has lost control of her perception as she describes. This lack of control is what ultimately makes her experience a reliving of memories or moments with her family. She is “exposed” to what she sees and “discomfited” or disturbed by it, in other words some of the things she now sees may trigger a belated response to the trauma.

Let us have a look at one such episode where Faye is unable to “filter” her perception. As Faye and her seatmate from the plane continue their conversation, the family on the neighbouring boat is still present. When Faye goes swimming from the boat, she continues to observe this family describing all their movements and actions. The small gestures of the family are told in such detail, that what she is describing resembles more like a memory than a present-time occurrence:

The baby stopped crying and the family immediately began to stir, changing their positions in the confined space as though they were little clockwork figures rotating on a jewellery box; the father bending and putting the child in its pram, the mother rising and turning, the two boys and the girl straightening their legs and joining their hands so that they made a pinwheel shape, their bodies glittering and flashing in the sun. I suddenly felt afraid, alone in the water, and I returned to the boat [...] (Cusk, pp. 86-87).

What Faye is seeing starts disrupting the present, much in the way we have seen Caruth describing the reliving of a traumatic event - as disrupting the past and the present. Upon observing the family Faye is witnessing a faded memory of her own family together. The description of the children as “glittering” and “flashing” like the experience of reliving a memory, in flashes. There is also the careful description of their movements as “clockwork”, in other words, predictable movements which signals that this may have happened before. Simultaneously, the image of clockwork invokes the idea of time, and perhaps more specifically, going back in time. Trauma stops the chronological clock. A trauma patient’s most difficult recollections are therefore unrelated to time as trauma fixes the event permanently in imagination and memory. The scene then, disrupts the line between the present and the past making Faye relive a moment with her family.

I wish to briefly develop on Faye’s description of the family as “clockwork figures”, as it brings up an interesting connection to Freud’s essay *The Uncanny* (1919). Freud elaborates on the concept of the uncanny or *Das Unheimliche*, defining it as something like, mysteriously or strangely familiar. The phenomenon was first described in psychoanalytical circles by Ernest Jentsch in his essay *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1906). In the essay, Freud attempts to understand the *uncanny* in the human psyche partly through Jentsch’s work and partly through a focus on a short story by Ernst Hoffman, *Der Sandmann* (1816), or *The Sand-Man*, which is a story that creates “uncanny effects” as he calls them. The short story tells the tale about the student Nathaniel and his childhood recollections of the terrifying “Sand-Man” who tears out children’s

eyes if they do not go to bed, and feeds them to his own children in the moon. In the story we find uncanny effects especially in the life-like doll Olympia.<sup>1</sup> The strange familiarity of such objects as automatons, wax figures and artificial dolls creates in the spectator a certain doubt as to whether an animate being is alive or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be animate. Freud argues, much as Jentsch, that for the spectator of such objects there is a feeling that: “automatic, mechanical processes are at work, concealed beneath the ordinary appearance of animation” (Freud, 1919, pp. 4-5). In stories like Hoffman’s the reader is left with this uncertainty of whether the doll Olympia is a human being or an automaton and this creates a feeling of anxiety or uneasiness.

If we return to the passage from *Outline* once more, Faye’s relived memory inhabits this eerie, uncanny effect as the family she sees on the boat appears to her as “clockwork figures on a jewellery box”. Faye describes their mechanical movements where the father is “bending and putting the child in its pram”, the mother is “rising and turning” and the children are joining hands creating a “pinwheel shape”. It creates uncertainty, as Freud argued, of whether the people she sees are human or automatons. This would also explain her reaction to this scene when she suddenly realizes that she is alone in the water and is struck with a feeling of sudden fright and solitude before she hurries back to the boat. Reliving a traumatic event is often a frightening experience.

When Faye sees the family on the boat for the first time, she reflects upon what exactly it is that she sees that makes her react so strongly. Her language expresses a profound feeling of loss:

When I looked at the family, I saw a vision of what I no longer had: I saw something, in other words, that wasn’t there. Those people were living in their moment, and though I could see it I could no more return to that moment than I could walk across the water that separated us. And of those two ways of living – living in the moment and living outside it – which was the more real? (Cusk, 2014, p. 75).

Faye expresses here a state of melancholia as described by Freud. She is unable to let go of what she has lost, her family, which creates a situation where when she sees another family *all* she sees

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Uncanny* Freud does not disagree with Jentsch that Olympia creates uncanny effects, however he does dispute that the doll is the central uncanny element in the story. The uncanny element Freud wishes to focus on is the idea of being robbed of one’s eyes which he then links to the concept of the repetition compulsion.

is what she has lost. A certain type of blindness keeps her from seeing the family as just a family and not the family she lost. The passage also shows a disrupting of past and present, in the sense that the family becomes “a vision” of what she used to have. In other words, sometimes when she sees a family in the present, she is thrown uncontrollably back into the past of what she used to have and of what she lost. This image is also present in Faye’s description of living “inside or outside the moment” and not actually being able to decide which of the two is more real than the other.

There is a point to be made here on opposition between illusion and the real. What Faye sees opens onto a question of whether what happened was even real – what she sees may be nothing more than a hallucination – and this uncertainty is also part of a traumatic response. The relationship between reality and illusion is addressed multiple times in the novel. After the boat trip back in her apartment in Athens, Faye comments on a wooden model of a boat hanging on the wall. The sail on the boat appears to be moving in the wind but “when you looked more closely [...] the sails were attached to countless tiny cords” so fine that they were nearly invisible. All you had to do to break the illusion of wind in the sails to “the sight of a mesh of fine cords” was to move a couple of steps closer. The owner of the apartment, Clelia, “intended to illustrate the relationship between illusion and reality” (ibid., p. 52). We remember how Caruth argues that the traumatic event only exists in its belated response by taking possession over the one who experiences it. The reason for this is that at the time of its occurrence it could not be assimilated or fully experienced. There is a collapse of understanding of the traumatic event, a “gap” that carries the force of the event “at the expense of simple knowledge and memory”. As Caruth continues, it is “ [...] its [trauma] very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on [...]” (Caruth, 1996, pp. 3-4). As Faye told her seatmate earlier about her family home after the traumatic event (i.e., the divorce): “I had stayed to watch it become the grave of something I could no longer definitively call either a reality or an illusion” (Cusk, 2014, p. 11). The impact of the event cannot be known or understood, and it is this lack of understanding of the event that creates a dissonance between reality and illusion.

I wish now to turn my attention to the image of not just the family as the lost object, but more specifically the image of a father and a child, which is an image that haunts Faye more than once. Back on the plane to Athens, before the boat excursion with her neighbour, Faye takes notice of

and observes a man walking up and down the aisle jiggling a baby. She ends up fixating on this image, describing it carefully:

Each time the man with the baby passed I saw the network of creases in his shorts, his freckled arms covered in coarse reddish fur, the pale, mounded skin of his midriff where his T-shirt had ridden up, and the tender wrinkled feet of the baby on his shoulder, the little hunched back, the soft head with its primitive whorl of hair (Cusk, 2014, p. 17).

Once more we have a passage where the image and the scene are conveyed carefully and detailed as with the observation of the family on the boat. To some extent it is as though Faye is taking part in the scene herself. She describes the father's arms and his clothes in contact with the baby in his arms, how they are "ridden up" as he carries the child. Then she turns to the baby, observing it with rather maternal and sentimental words such as "tender, wrinkled feet", "a little hunched back" and "soft, whorled hair". There is a warmth and closeness in her descriptions of the baby, making the scene very intimate, as if she were talking about her own child. Her two sons are much older now, but her careful description of the father and child arguably signals yet again the reliving of a past event. She apparently imagines herself observing her sons as babies, holding them, feeling the hunched back, the wrinkled feet and soft whorled hair. It becomes another relived memory of her family-life.

In the passage Faye has, as mentioned, a specific focus on a father and a child. The woman or mother is either not present as in this passage or blurred in the background like we saw in the previous passage with the family on the boat. Either way, she is not with the children the same way the father is. This may underline the point, that in fact Faye could be seeing herself in a memory from the point of view of the mother, reliving a past event of her husband carrying her children. Here another scene amplifies the point. When Faye is on her way to the excursion on the boat in her neighbours' car. While rushing through the streets of Athens in thundering traffic, Faye observes how her driver, not always watching the road, lunges between lanes. This frightens her and makes her fall silent. Suddenly, in the middle of the chaos, from her car window she spots a little boy and his father on a scooter:

[...] for a while [we] drove alongside a man on a scooter, who had a little boy of five or six seated behind him. The boy was clinging to the man [...]. He looked so small and unprotected, with the cars and metal palisades and huge junk-laden lorries rushing inches his skin. He wore only shorts

and a vest and flip-flops on his feet, and I looked through the window at his unshielded tender brown limbs and his soft golden-brown hair ripping in the wind (Cusk, 2014. p. 61).

This description shows signs of concern and worry for the unprotected child, a kind of motherly concern perhaps. The little boy is also described as having “tender limbs” and “soft, golden hair”, connoting innocence as he clings to his father through a world of danger. In all these passages we can observe Faye’s obsession with the past, with the loss of her family and in particular the image of a father or husband and the children. The passages we have observed so far express the “acting out” of the traumatic event, showing that Faye is indeed unable (as Freud would argue) to let go of what she lost. Faye is in a melancholic state, unable to fully re-engage with life and she keeps internalizing the lost object as a way of staying loyal to it.

In this first part of this chapter we have looked at passages, mainly from the first part of *Outline*, that may be read as examples of a delayed reaction to the traumatic event, what Freud and others have called belatedness. The belated reacting is seen through the unbidden return of flashbacks and hallucinations of Faye’s family upon observing other families. In accordance with the ideas of Cathy Caruth, the flashbacks threaten to destabilize or collapse the distinction between past and present and even between reality and illusion. The divorce from her husband three years prior and the uprooting of everything that constituted Faye’s reality has created a feeling of loss where she is unable to move on or let go. She remains in a state of melancholia, continually acting-out the past in the present. In the next discussion we shall develop this observation further by the use of the intertext *The Outsider* by Albert Camus, tracking a narrative of loss of meaning in the wake of the traumatic event that Faye has experienced.

## 1.2 “Even Beckett... had been destroyed by *meaninglessness*”: Camus and the meaninglessness of existence in *Outline*

After the publishing of *Aftermath*, Cusk has explained how she suffered a “creative death” and how she was, for a long time, searching for a new form to convey what she was feeling at that time. In an interview in *The White Review*, Cusk refers to Albert Camus when attempting to explain her struggles at that time:

Abundance. The desire to externalise yourself, and put yourself into space. That kind of negative equity – you see it in plenty of modern novels. Camus is the person who is at the back of all of this. There are plenty of novels that take on this economical style in order to signal very plainly that ‘the people here are alienated and this is about bleakness’. That really was not what I wanted to say, I didn’t want bleak. This isn’t necessarily a bleak book, it’s about what life becomes when you move beyond its established or recognisable forms for living, and, I suppose, what it might become (Cusk, 2015 in *The White Review*).

Albert Camus is presented here as a source of inspiration for *Outline*. Camus is “at the back of all this”: her attempt to represent the externalizing of the self and understanding life anew. In this part of the discussion, by building on from the previous part on a belated reaction to trauma, I want to pick up on Camus’ representation of the meaninglessness of existence. A similar loss of meaning is experienced by the main character in *Outline* as a consequence of her lived trauma. We will also examine parts of Camus’ essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which treats the same concept of meaninglessness, but more in the sense of repetitiveness. I will bring in Karen Valihora’s reading again here as it can help us elaborate on this idea in relation to Freud’s understanding of the repetition compulsion.

In *Outline*, we generally learn about Faye through other characters and their stories and the analogies they make to Faye. As she listens intently to their stories, we realize that her story is always submerged in the stories of the other characters – which underlines the importance of listening as a way of understanding the self (I will come back to this allusion in the conclusion). Towards the end of *Outline*, Elena, a woman who has survived the very traumatic experience of being mugged and almost killed, explains how she has lost the ability to see meaning in literature. She cannot help but “summing-up” as she calls it, summing-up new pieces of text by one single

word, like “tension” or “mother-in-law” and, she argues, “why go to the trouble to write a great long play about jealousy when *jealousy* just about summed it up?” (Cusk, 2014, p. 232). Even revered plays and books that she used to cherish, suddenly, after the traumatic event, allow themselves to be summed up like all the others: “Even Beckett, her god, had been destroyed by *meaninglessness*” (ibid., p. 232) she exclaims. What Elena is experiencing here is similar to what Freud described in his work *Mourning and Melancholia* as the distinguished mental features of melancholia – “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity” (Freud, 1917, p. 244). After the traumatic event of being mugged and nearly killed, Elena has lost interest in what usually was of great importance to her. Literature has become meaningless; it can all be summed up in one word. What is even more interesting about her story is that it is effectively an implicit summing-up of Faye’s current situation, or rather, a loose connotative analogy of what Faye is going through. Because like Elena, Faye has also lived through a traumatic event, although the two are different as Faye’s story fits better with the idea of loss, having lost her husband and the ideal of a family. Elena’s trauma is life-threatening and physically traumatic, but the delayed reaction to both events, as we shall see, is the realization of life as meaningless.

Faye's acquaintance from the plane also experiences the mental features of melancholia, like Elena – a painful dejection and cessation of interest in the outside world. After the divorce from his first wife, he was unable to move completely away from the house and lived on his yacht. He explains his reaction to the divorce to Faye: "For a few weeks he lived in a state of pure illusion which was really numbness, like the numbness that follows an injury, before pain starts to make its way through it, slowly but relentlessly finding a path through the dense analgesic fog" (Cusk, 2014, p. 14). His description of his own reaction to the traumatic loss of his wife and of the ideal of a family is described as numbness. It represents a state of mind where life has lost all meaning. Let us now delve into Albert Camus' understanding of the meaninglessness of existence.

According to Albert Camus, the meaninglessness of existence is based on our (i.e., humanity's) absurd relation with the world: we try to understand and to find meaning where in fact there is none. Camus wrote his novel *The Outsider* as an illustration of this meaninglessness of existence. In the novel, the main character, Meursault, appears to us as a complete outsider in society. That is to say, he does not act according to the social norms, practices and attitudes we

expect in a civil society. Meursault ends up murdering a man on the beach who was an enemy of his friend and is eventually sentenced to death for this act. However, this is not the reason why he is on trial or even why he is sentenced to death in the end. As we follow the process of the trial it becomes clear that it is rather his lack of the qualities mentioned above that ultimately is the cause of his death sentence. This lack is evident in the fact that he does not cry at his mother's funeral, or that he does not remember his mother's age – or, that he goes to watch a comedy at the cinema with his girlfriend the night after his mother's funeral. All such actions are seen as strange and as displaying inappropriate attitudes for a mourning son. At one point during the questioning his attorney yells in frustration: "Come now, is my client on trial for burying his mother or for killing a man?" (Camus, 2013, p. 96). What Meursault represents in the novel is the meaninglessness of existence, a life where being sentenced to death is as meaningless as life itself. Camus does however, present a way of overcoming this sentiment in his work, which I will come back to.

One of the most known scenes from Camus' novel is the famous sun-scene or murder-scene. This episode is exceptional because it captures the essence of Camus' novel by one single action. The passage is lengthy and slowly paced, focusing on anything but the actual murder where Meursault shoots an Arab man on the beach who approaches him with a knife. By the detailed description of the event, we are left with the understanding that the sun made him do it:

The burning sun struck my cheeks and I could feel drops of sweat gathering above my eyebrows. [...] it was my forehead that hurt the most and I could feel every vein throbbing beneath my skin. I was being burned alive; I couldn't stand it anymore so I took a step forward [...]. And this time, without getting up, the Arab pulled out his knife and raised it towards me in the sun. The light flashed off the steel and it was as if a long gleaming blade was thrust deep into my forehead [...]. All I could feel was the sun crashing like cymbals against my forehead, and the knife, a burning sword hovering above me. Its red-hot blade tore through my eyelashes to pierce my aching eyes. It was then that everything started to sway (Camus, 2013, p. 54).

In the scene the sun takes a primary role in the killing of the Arab. Its heat and strong light set the beach on fire, seemingly creating a life and death situation for the main character. Meursault's sweat covers his eyes and clouds his judgement, almost making him see the knife in front of him as a burning, shimmering sword. However, when we step out of this apparent illusion of what really happened, all we can say is that the reason why Meursault shot the man was because the sun was in his eyes, making him uncomfortable. The scene epitomizes the overall message of the novel,

that life has no meaning, no overarching order for us to live by. Taking a life is an absolute abhorrence, but Camus' protagonist does it anyway, and apparently as we have seen, for no reason at all.

In *Outline*, there is a scene that bears a striking resemblance to the murder scene in *The Outsider*: it occurs during Faye's last boat trip with her seatmate from the plane. There is of course no murder, primarily because this is not that kind of novel, which is to say, there are tragedies, but mostly revolving around family drama or, if there is a death, it is that of the family dog. There is, however, a similar atmosphere in this scene: a sense of instability and threat even. Faye has, for the second time, joined her neighbour from the plane on a boat trip in the afternoon. She has just come back from a swim after having rejected a kiss from him on the boat (which we will come back to later in this discussion). She rejected him, not in so many words, but by a passive, uninterested response. When she climbs up the ladder, she sees he is getting ready to depart:

I stood on the deck, dripping, and watched him, a towel wrapped around my shoulders where my skin hurt from the sun. He had a penknife in his hand, a large Swiss Army knife with a long ridged blade, and was cutting the frayed ends off the ropes with a sense of purpose, his thick upper arms bulging as he sawed. He retied the ropes while I watched, and then strolled along the deck towards me, the knife still in his hand. Had I had a nice swim, he asked. Yes, I said. Thank you, I said for taking the trouble to bring me somewhere so lovely. But he had to understand, I said, that I was not interested in a relationship with any man, not now and probably not ever again. The sun beat uncomfortably on my face while I was speaking. What I valued most was friendship, I said, while he played with the knife in his hand, snapping the different blades in and out. I watched pieces of steel appear and disappear in his fingers, each one so distinctly shaped, some of them long and narrow and piercing, others strangely spiked and horned. And now, I said, if he didn't mind, we probably ought to be going back (Cusk, 2014, pp. 177-178).

The careful description of the Swiss Army knife makes the tool almost come to life in his hand. Pieces of steel appear to be dancing between his fingers as he plays with it, assuming different shapes, much like how the knife in Camus' novel changes form from a small knife to a burning sword. All the while the sun lingers in the background, uncomfortably warm and burning, beating like a drum on Faye's face, just as the sun beat Meursault's forehead like a cymbal. The scene builds up over the duration of a page, but any violent action is eventually avoided by her neighbour reluctantly replying that "he also had things he needed to do" (ibid., p. 178). The scene has been

perfectly staged for a murder: Faye could have been stabbed and thrown overboard without anyone ever knowing. After all, her neighbour is a complete stranger she met on the plane, who, as far as we know, has never told her his name. She could have died that day, in the middle of the ocean, and no one would know, for no reason at all except for the burning sun.

Later during her stay in Athens, Faye meets up with Elena, who we described in the beginning of this chapter. As Faye tells her about her neighbour on the plane we are again reminded of Camus and the meaninglessness of existence. Elena is surprised to find out that Faye agreed to go on a boat trip with a complete stranger, and even more surprised that Faye seemingly was ignorant of the fact that this man was obviously expecting something in return. Elena then asks her friend about him:

What is he like? Do you like him? I closed my eyes and tried to summon up my feelings for my neighbour. When I opened them again Elena was still looking at me, waiting. I said that I had become so unused to thinking about things in terms of whether I liked them or whether I didn't that I couldn't answer her question. [...] But you still let him take you out on his boat, she said. It was hot, I said (Cusk, 2014, p. 184).

Faye has a rather peculiar answer to Elena's question. She has become unable to express how she feels in terms of liking someone or something. She refers only to near basic needs, i.e., being hot or cold, when she explains her reason for going on a boat trip with this strange man she only just met on a plane. The fact that Faye agrees to go out with him oblivious to his intentions, shows a lack of understanding of the outside world, which again shows that she has lost interest in it.

Moreover, this passage could have been taken directly from *The Outsider* – the way Faye expresses herself in this passage bears a striking resemblance to how Meursault reasons when he is asked difficult questions or in general when he has to respond sincerely to someone, which is something of which he is incapable. Let us have a look at one passage where Meursault is answering his girlfriend's questions about love and marriage, which shows the same kind of response as Faye in the above passage:

Marie came that evening and asked me if I'd marry her. I said I didn't mind; if she was keen on it, we'd get married. Then she asked me again if I loved her. I replied, much as before, that her question meant nothing or next to nothing--but I supposed I didn't. 'If that's how you feel,' she said, 'why

marry me?' I explained that it had no importance really, but, if it would give her pleasure, we could get married right away (Camus, 2013, p. 38).

Meursault is unable, or struggles, to explain something in terms of liking or not liking. He no longer sees any meaning in these kinds of expressions – expressing human sentiment. It is this indifferent attitude, or one that is perceived to be indifferent, that links Meursault and Faye so closely together – the fact that neither of them adheres to the social norms of comportment in society. They do not look for meaning in life as the rest of the characters in the novels do, friends, family or other. They do not look for meaning because, in Faye's case, she is experiencing a cessation of interest in the outside world due to her experience of trauma. Faye does not consistently behave this way throughout all three novels of the trilogy – her feeling identified in this chapter is related to a specific situation in the first novel.

### **1.3 Sisyphus' meaningless repetition or Freud's compulsion to repeat?**

To further develop the link between Albert Camus and *Outline* and the concept of meaninglessness, I wish to have a closer look at Camus' ideas behind *The Outsider*. Camus wrote his novel together with his philosophical essay on the absurd, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He did this because he was convinced that novels were the best tools to exemplify and convey ideas and different philosophies. Sisyphus, in Greek mythology, was cursed by the gods to repeat a meaningless action, that of pushing a big boulder up a hill and watch it roll back down every time he reached the top. This feat is something he must continue to do for eternity as the gods believed that: "[...] there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor" (Camus, 1979, p. 107). This futile action exemplifies, according to Camus, humanity's relationship with the world. In his essay, Camus argues that the world cannot be understood through reason, despite humanity's constant "appetite for clarity" (ibid., p. 23). The acceptance of existence as absurd results in a form of indifference towards external things, their having been stripped of meaning – hence the feeling of meaninglessness. In *The Outsider*, the people surrounding Meursault are, contrary to him, constantly searching for clarity to solve or to understand the world. They all keep pushing him to justify his actions or to express his emotions, especially concerning the death of his mother. They are searching for an answer to his seemingly indifferent, cold and passive attitude. This is why Meursault becomes an outsider to the people around him, an *étranger*, a stranger, precisely because

he represents the absurd in person: he seeks no meaning or clarity. Let us now have look at how Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* and the meaningless repetition is demonstrated in *Outline*.

In *Outline* the meaninglessness of existence (or absurdity) is pointed out in conversation yet again with Faye's acquaintance from the plane. On the plane trip to Greece, when Faye first starts talking with her neighbour, she comments on his rare ability to sometimes ask her questions in return, which is something very few characters ever do in the trilogy:

My neighbour turned to me again, and asked me what work it was that was taking me to Athens. For the second time I felt the conscious effort of his enquiry, as though he had trained himself in the recovery of objects that were falling from his grasp. I remembered the way, when each of my sons was a baby, they would deliberately drop things from their high chair in order to watch them fall to the floor, an activity as delightful to them as its consequences were appalling. They would stare down at the fallen thing – a half-eaten rusk, or a plastic ball – and become increasingly agitated by its failure to return. Eventually they would begin to cry, and usually found that the fallen object came back to them by that route. It always surprised me that their response to this chain of events was to repeat it: as soon as the object was in their hands they would drop it again, leaning over to watch it fall. Their delight never lessened, and nor did their distress. [...] The memory of suffering had no effect whatever on what they elected to do: on the contrary, it compelled them to repeat it, for the suffering was the magic that caused the object to come back and allowed the delight in dropping it to become possible again. (Cusk, 2014, pp. 17-18)

What Faye describes here is the absurd repetition of an action quite like Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the hill only to see it fall down again. It represents Camus' philosophy of the absurd – that life has no meaning. However, Faye also points out, in her anecdote about babies dropping objects to the floor, that the reason for their repetitive action is linked to pleasure when the object comes back. In Camus's essay, one of the essential lessons to take away from the myth of Sisyphus is to imagine that he is happy in doing his repetitive action with the boulder. The repeated action can, according to Camus, be seen as a victory because Sisyphus does not succumb to the desire for meaning. Rather, he accepts his trial. As Camus states: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy", because, as he says: "[t]he struggle itself toward the height is enough to fill a man's heart" (Camus,

1979, p. 111).<sup>2</sup> Let us come back to the idea of pleasure related to the action of repetition, this time through the perspective of the psychoanalysis and Freud.

The story of Sisyphus' curse to repeat the same action takes a different form according to Valihora's reading. She does not look to Camus but argues that it represents Freud's description of the children's game "fort da" (she does not fully describe it in relation to trauma, but mentions it as a reaction to loss only in passing as she furthers a more formalist reading of it). Indeed, what Faye's anecdote describes can be compared to a version of Freud's concept of "fort da" in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Where I disagree with Valihora here is when she claims that Faye, at the end of *Outline*, manages to "move beyond the circular narrative of repetition" (Valihora, 2019, p. 26). Her reading suggests a privileging of the conversion narrative. Let us first describe Freud's concept before we analyse its representation in *Outline*.

Freud discusses the concept of "fort da" after having observed his grandson of eighteen months playing: "[...] this well-behaved child evinced the troublesome habit of flinging into the corner of the room or under the bed all the little things he could lay his hands on, so that to gather up his toys was often no light task" (Freud, 1920, p. 10). He notes how the child repeatedly threw the toys out exclaiming "o-o-o-oh" only to watch them reappear or wait for his mother to retrieve them for him, to which he uttered "Da". Freud understood this as a complete game where he named the sounds "fort" meaning "gone", and "da" meaning "there" (disappearance and return). According to Freud the meaning of the game is to relive or repeat a situation where the mother goes away, which is a painful situation. He then asks how this action "accords with the pleasure-principle": the action contradicts the principle of pleasure which is that the living organism searches for pleasure. One of the explanations that Freud comes up with was that the child, through this game, attempts to take control over the presence of their parents by transforming an unhappy or painful situation into a happy one, where they are in control. The "fort da" game is one of four examples of repetitive behaviour explored in Freud's essay that contradict the pleasure principle,

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<sup>2</sup> I have presented the meaninglessness felt by the main character as a consequence of trauma, but the intertexts I have used in this analysis more specifically illustrate meaninglessness in a more existentialist, absurdist frame: the frame of Camus, *The Outsider*, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and additionally Samuel Beckett who is mentioned in the same context. Although Camus himself refused to be called existentialist, according to Adelino Braz, Camus proclaimed a certain type of existentialism, which he presented in the novel *The Outsider* and the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Braz, 2006, pp. 1-8).

hence his attempt to comprehend the mechanisms beyond this principle.<sup>3</sup> The concept is known as the repetition compulsion. It is a psychological phenomenon where a person repeats or recreates a distressing or difficult event, or the circumstances of an event, over and over.

In the scene where Faye describes her children dropping toys from their chair, she is referring to her neighbour's inability to understand that he finds himself in a series of repetitive motions. He has been married three times and every marriage ends in a painful divorce. Each divorce has its own tragic consequence: that of his losing all his assets, money, property or the custody of the children. However, he never seems to realize this repetitive compulsion that drives him to commit the same action which inevitably ends with the same result. There are two narratives playing out at once here. First there is that of the meaningless repetition of an action, possibly signifying the meaninglessness of life in a manner akin to the story of Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill, and then watching it roll down, again and again, for eternity. Then there is the narrative of the repetition compulsion whereby a person repeats the event of a distressful situation to somehow control the original trauma retrospectively by taking an active part in it. The use of the word control here is to reflect Freud's use of it where the person repeating the event wishes to turn a perceived negative situation into a positive one and is, in that sense, controlling the situation. Although Faye's neighbour is himself ignorant of these underlying narratives, he admits that his first marriage and the following divorce makes him repeat the past. He explains that "[n]ever again had he been able to absorb himself; never again had he been able to believe in that way (ibid. p. 16)" - in other words, as he did in his first marriage before its dramatic failure. To mend what happened, to control it, he keeps trying to go back, with other women, new marriages and consequently, new failures.

Faye even calls her neighbour out on this compulsion to repeat the past during their last meeting. "So much is lost [...] in the shipwreck", he tells Faye on their first boat trip, "[w]hat remains are fragments, and if you don't hold on to them the sea will take them too" – which means that he is completely trapped in a melancholic state, unable to replace what he has lost and move on. He keeps holding on to the fragments of a past, a marriage and its ideal image, never capable of working through his trauma. He then goes on to say that he still believes in love. "Love restores

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<sup>3</sup> The negation of the pleasure principle in these repetition compulsion examples also lead Freud to a line of thought ending in the concept of the "death drive".

almost everything, and where it can't restore, it takes away the pain" (ibid., p. 29). In other words, falling in love again takes away the pain because it allows him to relive the past for a brief moment. Faye realises this and tells him during their last meeting:

I wondered how he could fail to see the relationship between disillusionment and knowledge in what he had told me. If he could only love what he did not know, and be loved in return on that same basis, then knowledge became an inexorable disenchantment, for which the only cure was to fall in love with someone new. There was a silence (ibid., p. 175).

This passage explains the repetition compulsion and melancholic state her seatmate finds himself in. His actions are those of an "inexorable disenchantment", doomed to repeat themselves because he is unable to move on. Her neighbour never replies to her analysis of him: there is only a long silence before he tells her how attracted he is to her and tries to kiss her – which only proves his inability to break away from his current state.

Although Faye seems to see through her neighbour's repetition compulsion, she too is guilty of the same desire. She agrees to go on another boat trip with her neighbour, which is surprising considering the fact that she is not overtly impressed by his stories about his previous wives. She has also already seen through his character: He is single after three failed marriages and most likely on the hunt again, which is why he shows such interest in Faye. This brings us to the failed kiss scene on the boat. Her acquaintance awkwardly bends down attempting to embrace Faye as he brings his beak-like nose and dry face in contact with hers. The scene is grimly described with Faye sitting paralyzed, waiting for him to "at last [withdraw] back into the shade" (ibid., p. 177). As pointed out by Valihora, the use of birdlike features to describe her neighbour also to some extent reminds us of the ancient myth of Leda and the Swan: A great beak of a nose, claw-like hands and white fur on his arms creating wings (Valihora, 2019, p. 27). However, her neighbour is in no position to seduce anybody, it seems, as he becomes more of a "dry" and scaly prehistoric bat than a beautiful swan at the end of the scene. Faye manages to escape the uncomfortable silence after having rejected him and goes for a last swim across the cove:

I jumped over the side and swam across the cove, remembering the family on the boat that had been here last time, and feeling a strange ache almost homesickness for them, which became a feeling of longing for my own children, who suddenly seemed so far away that it was hard to believe they even existed (Cusk, 2014, p. 177).

Valihora suggests here that Faye, by refusing his kiss shows that she “wants a new storyline, one that demands an exit from the conventional structures” (Valihora, 2019, p. 27). In this case the conventional structures of marriage. However, this analysis is arguably too simple, especially considering that Faye remarries in *Kudos*: repeating what caused her trauma in the first place and repeating the same pattern as her neighbour in *Outline*: falling in love, remarrying, and divorcing. In the last chapter we will come back to Faye’s new marriage as part of a continuing repetitive structure. Valihora continues to argue that when Faye decides not to go out to the sea one last time at the end of the novel “[...] it is an achievement, earned through the recognition that she has moved beyond the circular narrative of repetition and the kind of enchantment on which it depends, the narrative in which she is trapped” (Valihora, 2019, p. 26). But Faye does not seem to have succeeded in moving on, as Valihora suggests. On the contrary, she appears to be guilty of the same desire as her neighbour, to relive and control the past. It could be that the only reason Faye agreed to go with her neighbour was to see that family again, to allow herself to relive moments in the past where her life was that of a family life. Let us consider this possibility in this next passage.

The first time she goes on a boat trip with her neighbour, during her first swim, she does contemplate on the feeling of an impulse that uncontrollably pulls at her: “[...] an impulse to move tugged at me as though it were a thread fastened to my chest. It was an impulse I knew well, and I had learned that it was not the summons from a larger world I used to believe it to be. It was simply a desire to escape from what I had” (ibid., pp. 73-74). She links this impulse to the desire for freedom, but it is possible that what Faye believes to be freedom is actually the desire to control the past and go back to what she lost, in other words controlling a perceived negative event by turning it into a positive situation. When Faye describes the impulse as “a desire to escape from what I had”, it could possibly mean to take back what she does not have, to reclaim the family she has lost. The passage in question shows Faye seeing the family as only what she has lost: “When I looked at the family, I saw a vision of what I no longer had [...]. Those people were living in their moment, and though I could see it I could no more return to that moment than I could walk across the water that separated us” (ibid., p. 75). She realizes the impulse, she even claims to know it well, but she is incapable of overcoming it or resisting it, which ultimately leads her out to the ocean again seeking to reencounter the family.

As this chapter has demonstrated, *Outline* may be read through trauma theory where Faye experiences a delayed reaction to a traumatic event, what Freud treated as belatedness. The divorce from her husband three years prior and the uprooting of everything that constituted Faye's reality has created a feeling of loss where she is unable to move on or let go. Cathy Caruth argues that in the event of a delayed reaction, the traumatic event may return, unbidden, as a dream, flashbacks or hallucinations and threaten to destabilize or collapse the distinction between past and present. We have seen this effect in Faye's constant remembrance of her own lost family triggered by seeing other families. In the next part of this chapter, we developed this observation further by the use of the intertext *The Outsider* by Albert Camus, tracing a narrative of loss of meaning in the wake of the traumatic event that Faye has experienced. Faye's attitude is often that of indifference, and she struggles to express emotions even when specifically asked to do so. This attitude was compared to the main character in *The Outsider*, Meursault, who also lives a life where meaning has eluded. We finally saw the contours of a counter narrative in Valihora's reading where Faye's refusal to go out again with the man on the plane shows that: "Faye wants a new storyline" (Valihora, 2019, p. 27). In other words, a wish to reinvent the shattered self again after the traumatic event, which will be central in the next chapter of this thesis.

## **2.0 In *Transit*: “I was trying to find a different way of living in the world”: overcoming loss and coming home?**

Happy are men who yet before they are killed  
Can let their veins run cold.  
Whom no compassion fleers  
Or makes their feet  
Sore on the alleys cobbled with their brothers.

Wilfred Owen, 1988, “Insensibility” (1-5).

The lines are taken from Wilfred Owen’s war poem “Insensibility”. The poem addresses a slaughter Owen himself witnessed as an Officer during the First World War. It contains many horrific truths that soldiers in war must face; death, shell shock, combat stress and other war-induced psychological trauma. Owen writes about the sufferings of war and how the soldiers must adapt in order to overcome and cope with them. In the first two lines he states: “Happy are men who yet before they are killed can let their veins run cold”, and later in the poem the message is repeated several times: “Happy the soldier” / “Happy the lad” / “Happy are these who lose imagination” – in other words, what Owen suggests is that to remain happy soldiers in war must rid themselves of their emotions, their veins must run cold. It becomes a discipline of self-preservation and of extraordinary control over one’s emotional state, which much resembles the principles found in the stoic philosophy. At the same time, we must keep in mind that Owen’s poem usually is interpreted as being ironical: he does not really wish to have this kind of happiness that keeps him from feeling pain. Owen’s ironical approach to exaggeratedly stoic behaviour is, as we shall see, well-founded.

This chapter will look at the transition from *Outline* to *Transit*. I will focus largely on *Outline* in the first part of this chapter, exploring Faye’s adoption of stoic philosophy there as a way of self-treatment to her traumatic past. I will explore the principles of stoic philosophy and how that philosophy is understood today in relation to trauma and the treatment of trauma. Building on from this, I will develop, briefly, on the larger idea of controlling or erasing human

emotions in the work – which would also continue our focus on “control” in the previous chapter. Here I will introduce Michel Houellebecq and his idea of erasing human emotion. Next, we will slowly move over to Cusk’s second novel in the trilogy, *Transit*. Here Faye’s stoic project, which she commits to in *Outline*, fails, as she attempts a homecoming to London. The apartment she buys is a renovation project which becomes more difficult to fix than anticipated. Little by little we come to realize that her new, broken, home represents her own shattered self, and that in this home her unconscious is lurking in the basement, in the form of a couple in their late sixties. At every strike of a hammer or removing of a wall, her unconscious threatens to break free, especially anger, as she tries to renovate the flat, and with it herself. But first, I will introduce stoicism as self-treatment to trauma and explore how Faye commits to this philosophy in *Outline*.

## **2.1 The stoic way of life as self-treatment to trauma**

The meaning of the word *stoicism* has developed over the past four or five centuries, but the popular understanding of it is explained by John Sellars – he explains that: “austerity, repression of feeling and fortitude [are] characteristics of a Stoical attitude towards life” (Sellars, 2006, p. 1). Stoicism referred to a school of Hellenistic philosophy in antiquity founded in 301 BC by Zeno of Citium. The stoic philosophy was not simply a set of philosophical claims: it was above all a way of life that would lead its acolytes to achieve unquestionable happiness. In brief, the central tenets of stoic philosophy are based on a materialist ontology where God pervades the entire cosmos as a material force (ibid., pp. 1-3). To achieve happiness, virtue alone is sufficient, external goods and circumstances are irrelevant or at least far less important. The stoics claimed that human emotions, being merely the product of mistaken judgements, can be erased by a form of what we today might identify as cognitive psychotherapy. The ideal Stoic sage would incorporate all these doctrines together and would be perfectly emotionless, rational, indifferent to material goods and circumstances. He would be, as famously stated by the stoics, “happy even when being tortured on the rack” (ibid., p. 3), which resonates with Wilfred Owen’s poem where the soldiers of war can remain happy if they rid themselves of their emotions and let “their veins run cold”. Owen’s poem is however, as previously stated, not at all a celebration of the stoic philosophy and how the soldiers may achieve happiness through it. The poem is a horrific reminder

of how war deprives men of their humanity, their emotions, that the only way to survive in war is to dehumanize the self.

Today, the US military are in fact working on applying the philosophy of stoicism and exploring how its tenets resonate in military life and may help in the treatment of patients suffering from PTSD. The *Modern Stoicism Organization* streamed an event called Stoicon in 2021, hosting Donald Robertson, the author of *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor* (2019). Robertson is a cognitive psychotherapist, and in his book he unveils the journey of Marcus Aurelius as he went from being a young noble to a Roman Emperor. Robertson explains how Aurelius was able to achieve his feat using philosophical doctrines and practices from Stoic thinking by which he built his emotional resilience to endure hardships and adversity. The book functions as a guide for its readers where Robertson combines these stories about Aurelius and his path to the Roman throne with modern psychology. The event organised by the Modern Stoicism Organization featured different speakers working with and in the military who applied the philosophy of stoicism especially to situations of stress and to manage memories of traumatic events. The message focused on how stoic principles could facilitate life in the military: adapting to the circumstances and accepting the moment as it presents itself, and keeping oneself from being controlled by desire, pleasure, fear of pain and instead trusting in reason to understand the world (Kissel, 2021).

Although Faye's traumatic experience does not compare to the trauma suffered by soldiers in war, she does struggle to manage her traumatic memories, as we have seen in chapter one. One of Faye's attempts of dealing with her trauma and finding "a new way of living" is, in effect, by adopting a stoic way of life. Through this philosophy, she attempts to transcend the human condition of desire and pleasure which leads to loss and suffering. Until now the loss of her family has led her into a state of mind where life is meaningless. In *Outline* and subsequently in *Transit* there are several passages where we observe Faye's attempt to follow the stoic idea of self-discipline. In the first novel she is in Athens, the birthplace of Stoic philosophy and the first time she refers to these ideas she is on the plane to Greece talking with her neighbour: "What I knew personally to be true had come to seem unrelated to the process of persuading others. I did not, any longer, want to persuade anyone of anything" (Cusk, 2014 p. 19). At this point she appears to be letting go of a former conviction. This is also linked to the idea of meaninglessness and trauma, as addressed in the previous chapter. It is not until she arrives in Clelia's apartment, where she will

stay while in Athens, that she begins to think of these ideas as providing a new way of living and of letting go of her traumatic memories:

I wasn't sure I would choose to sit through symphony after symphony any more than I would spend the afternoon reading the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and it occurred to me that in Clelia's mind they perhaps represented the same thing, a sort of objectivity that arose when the focus became the sum of human parts and the individual was blotted out. It was, perhaps, a form of discipline, almost of asceticism, a temporary banishing of the self and its utterances (Cusk, 2014 p. 54).

The discipline of asceticism that she claims Clelia practices, interests Faye. Listening to "symphony after symphony" seems as uninteresting as spending an afternoon reading the Encyclopaedia Britannica, but as a stoic even this boring act would represent happiness because a stoic "must *be* happy, regardless of circumstances" (Sellars, p. 32). Stoicism is closely related to asceticism, but where the ascetic lifestyle is more of a severe self-discipline avoiding all forms of indulgence, stoicism does not purposely pursue abstinence or suffering. It is a passive reaction to externally imposed suffering.<sup>4</sup>

Earlier we have seen how Faye criticised her neighbour for being part of a repetitive structure where his life revolved around marriage and divorce, in a never-ending attempt to relive and control the trauma of his past. However, when Faye confronts him with this, he himself claims that love is a rather good way to reinvent the self; he argues that falling in love again after a failed relationship is "a rebirth of identity" (Cusk, 2014, p. 175). Faye firmly claims to be beyond that stage in life, explaining that "[she is] not interested in a relationship with any man, not now and probably not ever again" (ibid., p. 178). She further states that "I had come to believe more and more in the virtues of passivity, and of living life as unmarked by self-will as possible" (ibid., p. 170), a statement that resonates well with her new way of life influenced by stoicism and self-discipline. Faye then explains to her neighbour that "there was a great difference [...] between the things I wanted and the things that I could apparently have, and until I had finally and forever made my peace with that fact, I had decided to want nothing at all" (ibid., p. 171). What she wants

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<sup>4</sup> One could argue that there are points of similarity between Camus' absurdist philosophy, because accepting existence as absurd results in a form of indifference to external things. Additionally, Camus sometimes cited Marcus Aurelius in his Notebooks (*Carnets*), more as a source for strength. It is unlikely that Camus was a stoic, perhaps he was more of a neo-stoic (Hanna, 1956, p. 224).

cannot, anymore, be obtained. The traumatic memory of the loss of her family harmony is all that remains.

Before turning to *Transit* to explore how Faye's attempt of a homecoming disrupts her stoic way of life, I would like to briefly consider the dangers of exaggerated stoic behaviour. Cusk is not alone in attempting to transcend human desire and emotions to prevent suffering. We find the idea also in the work of the polemical French author, Michel Houellebecq, although he seems to be taking it to the extreme. In both his novels *Les particules élémentaires* (1998) and *La possibilité d'une île* (2005) the idea of effacing human desire has been radicalised to the point of the creation of neo-humans, genetically controlled beings who have had their desires and emotions erased to spare them the feelings of loss, suffering and the fear of death. The goal of this process is to create a peaceful society rid of competition and war. *Les particules élémentaires* introduces the cloning of a genetically controlled species which is both immortal and sterile, without sexual desire and consequentially without the capacity to love. In *La possibilité d'une île*, a ravaged world is inhabited by a sect called the Elohim which also relies on the technology of cloning. The sect creates cloned, immortal neo-humans without desires or emotions. However, these new super humans turn out to be anything but a way out of the human condition of suffering if we are to believe the words of Daniell, one of the cloned beings in the novel:

I longer feel any hate in me, nothing to cling to anymore, no more landmarks or clues; only fear is out there, the truth of all things, the only physical horizon, indistinguishable from the observable world. There is no longer any real world, no world, no human world, I am outside time, I no longer have any past or future, I have no more sadness, plans, nostalgia, loss or hope; there is only fear (Houellebecq, 2005, p. 293).

If you erase desire and emotion to avoid loss and suffering, you erase what constituted the human being in the first place, and all that remains, according to Daniell, is fear.

Compared to Faye's way of stoicism and self-discipline, Houellebecq's radical erasure is somewhat different. For a long time Houellebecq has, through his novels, sought different ways of escaping human desire, emotions and suffering and he envisioned at one point a world finally at peace through "une conversion massive au Bouddhisme [a massive conversion to Buddhism]" (Bourriaud and Marchandise, 1998), which he claims was the aim of Arthur Schopenhauer's work

in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1818).<sup>5</sup> In that respect, stoicism can in some ways be considered the West's answer to Buddhism in its attempt to transcend the human condition and find happiness, a life free from desire and thus also free from loss and suffering. Houellebecq's other attempts to escape the human condition (aside from genetically erasing human emotion) include even more drastic measures like suicide, which he explores in his novel *Plateforme* (2001), and religious submission, as represented in his controversial novel *Soumission* (2015). Common for all Houellebecq's novels is that they fail to do what they set out to do, they fail to escape the human condition. This way of reading and understanding Houellebecq's novelistic oeuvre was pointed out in Thomas Amans' master thesis. He looked at cognitive and temporal perspectives in four of Houellebecq's novels and argued that the failure of love and the effacement of the individual lead to the breaking down of society and finally the disappearance of the human species (Amans, 2010).<sup>6</sup> Although Cusk has not explicitly shown interest in Houellebecq's work, they both treat topics related to the modernist era, where life has become more individualistic and where the individual struggles to find itself and connect with other people.<sup>7</sup>

In *Transit*, the idea of faux-humans or neo-humans is only slightly touched upon when Faye tells the story about a friend of her who, depressed in the wake of his divorce, explains how machines seemed more sincere in their concern for him than actual people:

[H]e often felt moved to tears by the concern for his health and well-being expressed in the phraseology of adverts and food-packaging, and by the automated voices on trains and buses [...] he actually felt something akin to love, he said for the female voice that guided him while he was driving his car, so much more devotedly than his wife ever had. There has been a great harvest, he said, of language and information from life, and it may have become the case that the faux-human was growing more substantial and more relational than the original, that there was more tenderness to be had from a machine than from one's fellow man (Cusk, 2016, pp. 3-4).

There is however nothing that suggests that Cusk will take the erasure of human emotions and desire as far as Houellebecq has, though transhumanism is one way of imagining the transcendence

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<sup>5</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World of Will and Representation*.

<sup>6</sup> Amans's four novels of investigation: *L'extension du Domaine de la Lutte* (1994), *Les Particules Élémentaires* (1998), *Plateforme* (2001) and *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005).

<sup>7</sup> This is especially true for Cusk's later work, the *Outline* trilogy and her most recent novel *Second Place* (2021).

of the human condition, especially that of suffering.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, contrary to Cusk, Houellebecq has a quite decadent touch to his writing where, often, his main characters are unlikable, misanthropic sex-addicts who, having understood that life has no meaning, fear death and aging. This is Houellebecq's way of criticising society as he claims to see this as part of today's culture. More than simply erasing human emotions, Houellebecq is concerned with human desire which he sees as something despicable, as it makes our societies cold, inhospitable, competitive, and unfit for love.<sup>9</sup> I will now move from *Outline* to *Transit* to explore the failure of Faye's stoic project.

## 2.2 The limits of stoicism and a homecoming

When we meet Faye again in *Transit*, she is in the process of buying a new apartment in London, despite the estate agent telling her that the property in question is “virtually uninhabitable” (Cusk, 2016, p. 8). The apartment is in need of substantial renovation, and as the estate agent explains: “obviously, it's not a place [...] where you could expect children to live” (ibid., p. 8). Her two sons must therefore move in with their father while the builders work on the flat. Faye's ex-husband is often absent while the sons live with him, and in his absence, they do nothing but argue and fight. An astrologer emails Faye to tell her that: “she could sense that I had lost my way in life, that I sometimes struggled to find meaning in my present circumstances and to feel hope for what was to come” (Cusk, 2016, p. 1). The inability to reconnect with the present and have hope for the future is, as we remember, a state of melancholia. In this part I wish to link the concept of melancholia with Faye's homecoming through the Stoic idea of emotional detachment.

The concept of “homecoming”, *nostos* (νόστος), comes from Greek and is originally taken from Homer's *Odyssey*. It meant first and foremost “return home from Troy by sea” (Bonifazi, 2009, p. 481). In Greek literature a *nostos* generally was the tale of an epic hero who returned home by sea going through numerous and arduous trials to get home. The tale also includes a shipwreck (to be stranded in an unknown location), incorporating the idea of “The Shipwrecked

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<sup>8</sup> A bit later we will explore religion and conversion in *Kudos* where the idea of suffering shall be seen as something valuable.

<sup>9</sup> He claims in the same interview with Bourriaud & Marchandise that « [n]on seulement je ne les aime pas, mais effectivement je souhaite leur disparition [It's not only that I don't like them (human desires), I wish for their disappearance] » (Jouannais, Bourriaud & Marchandise, 1998).

Sailor” (ibid., p. 483).<sup>10</sup> The homecoming is not only physically challenging for the traveller, but there is also a focus on an elevation of identity or a rebirth of identity. Faye has, in some ways, already been shipwrecked in Greece during *Outline*, and we understand this through her conversation with her neighbour on the plane: “The older he got, the more it [his first marriage] represented to him a kind of home, a place to which he yearned to return” (Cusk, 2014, p. 15). Though it seems the trials her neighbour had to go through to get there have been too challenging, since he still appears to be shipwrecked: “so much is lost, he said, in the shipwreck. What remains are fragments, and if you don’t hold on to them the sea will take them too” (ibid., p. 28). Her neighbour has not yet reached home and probably never will since he is trapped in a melancholic state.

Faye, on the other hand, has now crossed the sea to come back to London. She used to live here, many years ago with a boyfriend, Gerard: “How long ago was it that you left London? Gerard said. It must have been – what – fifteen years?” (Cusk, 2016, p. 19). And contrary to Faye, during these 15 years, Gerard seems to have successfully recreated his self after their break-up:<sup>11</sup>

I was struck again by how little he had altered since that time, except that he seemed somehow to have been filled in. In those days he was a sketch, an outline; I had wanted him to be more than he was, without being able to see where the extra would come from. But time had given him density, like an artist filling in the sketched-out form (ibid., 2016, p. 19).

In comparison to Gerard, Faye remains an outline, she has not moved on. In Homer, the link between home and *nostos* is very clear through the tale of coming home. In modern times we find the link through the word “nostalgia” which is combined by the two Greek roots: νόστος (nostos - “homecoming”), and άλγος (algos - “pain”). Faye’s homecoming to London seems to be an act based on nostalgia. The term *nostalgia* dates back to 1688 and used by the Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer (1669-1752). It was originally a medical term used to describe Swiss soldiers during military service in foreign armies. It meant a psychological state of longing for the past (Bonifazi, 2009, p. 490). According to clinical psychologist Valentina Stoycheva nostalgia is

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<sup>10</sup> The Shipwrecked Sailor is an Egyptian tale dating back to the Middle Kingdom (2050-1750 BC). The tale is about an Egyptian Captain who returns from an unfortunate voyage to Nubia. Many of the narrative motives we find in Greek literature come from Ancient Egypt (Bonafazi, 2009, p. 483).

<sup>11</sup> Contrary to Faye, Gerard appears to have successfully created a new life for himself – gender seems to matter in the process of finding the self. In the next chapter we will look at the female artist as opposed to the male artist.

a natural instinct. Stoycheva specializes in traumatic stress, a traumatic event divides our timeline into now and then, a before and an after. Together with Joel Weinberger, Stoycheva is the author of *The Unconscious: Theory, Research, and Clinical Implications* (2019), a study that explains how trauma creates a longing for a period in life where things were safer, when we felt protected from the the traumatic event. Nostalgia is therefore a natural instinct where the traumatized person seeks to rely on a sense of normalcy and comfort. In an interview by Danielle Campoamor in *The New York Times*, Stoycheva mentions what are called “transitional objects” in the discussion on nostalgic behaviours. These objects may help people transitioning from one stage in their lives to the next or help them understand or control specific stressors. A transitional object can be anything from clothing, a loved movie, a favourite stuffed animal, or a person, in the sense that one tries to seek out old friends. This is what Faye does by moving back to London and meeting her old boyfriend, Gerard. Nostalgia, claims Stoycheva, “increases your ability to self-soothe during a stressful time”. However, seeking the past (object or place) for comfort, may also be unhealthy, as the mind can make you see the past through rose-coloured glasses (Campoamor, 2020).

According to Freud, as explained in chapter one, mourning and melancholia are very similar but different responses to loss. I now wish to expand a bit further on their differences to connect stoicism with the idea of a home-psyche in *Transit*. Much as in stoicism, mourning and melancholia are also reactions of emotional detachment. If one intentionally follows a stoic philosophy of life however, there is a will behind it, a conscious choice to detach oneself from one’s emotions to better control suffering. As already established, mourning and melancholia are reactions to a loss where the emotional detachment takes the form of a “cessation of interest in the outside world” and the “loss of the capacity of love” (Freud, 1917, p. 244). In some ways we can say that the detachment from her emotions that Faye lives as a stoic can also be seen as a process of mourning, where, as Freud argues: “reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object” (ibid., p. 244). Therefore, in the case of mourning, the patient is able to either replace the lost object or move on from it, thus enabling her to free the ego. Mourning, in other words, takes place in the *conscious* mind, the patient is aware of who is lost and what in this person has been lost. However, in the case of melancholia, the lost object (loved person) appears to be withdrawn from the consciousness of the patient. She may be conscious of whom she has lost, but not what has been lost in this person. Contrary to mourning, melancholia takes place in the *unconscious*

mind (ibid., 244-246). It is through the acquisition and renovation of a new flat that we shall find Faye's unconscious and detached, or rather, repressed emotions.

While Freud had an idea of the human psyche in which eros (life instincts, libido) functions as driving force for all other mechanisms, his successor, Carl Gustav Jung, had a more architectural model of the psyche. Jung envisioned it as a house:<sup>12</sup>

Descending the stairs, I reached the ground floor. There everything was much older. I realised that this part of the house must date from about the fifteenth or sixteenth century. The furnishings were mediaeval, the floors were of red brick. Everywhere it was rather dark. I went from one room to another thinking 'now I really must explore the whole house.' I came upon a heavy door and opened it. Beyond it, I discovered a stone stairway that led down into a cellar. Descending again, I found myself in a beautifully vaulted room which looked exceedingly ancient. Examining the walls, I discovered layers of brick among the ordinary stone blocks, and chips of brick in the mortar. As soon as I saw this, I knew that the walls dated from Roman times (Jung, 1965, p. 58).

For Jung in his work *Erinnerungen, Träume, Gedanken* (1962),<sup>13</sup> the house represents both a recording of human history, our ancestors and the cultures and ideas we have inherited, and a mapping of the individual psyche. The upper stories of the house, like the living room, are a representation of our outer self, the face the world sees. The basement is where we find our unconscious, our desires, dreams and raw emotions that we cannot control.

The French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, was inspired by Freud's work on the unconscious, but he was also inspired by Jung. In his book *La Poétique de l'Espace* (1957),<sup>14</sup> he developed his theories on the house as the topography of our intimate being. According to Bachelard our perception of houses contributes to the shaping of our dreams, our memories, and our imagination (Bachelard, 1958, p. 17). He claims that the various physical places in a house (e.g., attic, cellar, etc.) represent different imaginative functions. He argues that the house becomes "the topography of our intimate being". From a psychoanalytic point of view the cellar would represent our unconscious, or rather, by using the French term: "notre inconscient [y] est logé" (Bachelard, 1957, p. 28): our unconscious lives there, it is accommodated there. I will come back

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<sup>12</sup> Freud does make use of architectural metaphors, too - most famously perhaps in his analysis of "Delusion and Dream Jensen's Gradiva".

<sup>13</sup> *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*.

<sup>14</sup> *The Poetics of Space*.

to the image of our unconscious as being accommodated or living in the basement when discussing how this becomes true for Faye's unconscious.

In the attic our fears are more rationalized as they are part of our conscious mind, whereas in the cellar, they become irrational as they are part of the unconscious. Bachelard uses Jung's example to explain the difference between the cellar and the attic, the conscious acts like a man who, upon hearing a noise in the cellar runs to the attic, since he does not dare to venture into the cellar:

Instead of facing the cellar [the unconscious], Jung's 'prudent man' seeks alibis for his courage in the attic. In the attic rats and mice can make considerable noise. But let the master of the house arrive unexpectedly and they return to the silence of their holes. The creatures moving about in the cellar are slower, less scampering, more mysterious (Bachelard, 1958, p. 19).

What neither Jung nor Bachelard address however, is what would happen to the human psyche if the home was altered, as it is during a process of renovation or changed completely by buying a new home. Surely neither Jung nor Bachelard suggest that the house is a complete embodiment of the human psyche – they simply use the image of the house as a comprehensive representation of the different levels of the human psyche or different states of consciousness. Rachel Cusk, however, does develop on the idea of the house as the embodiment of the self in her fiction. To further explore this, I will briefly consider one of her biographical texts.

While Cusk worked on *Transit*, she also wrote a column in the *New York Times* called *Making House: Notes on Domesticity*. There she explains: "I was driven to what appeared to be the brink of mental and physical collapse by embarking on the complete remodeling of our London flat" (Cusk, 2016). In the article she reflects upon her relation to the home and how closely connected they are psychologically. As Cusk continues in her column:

Entering a house, I often feel that I am entering a woman's body, and that everything I do there will be felt more intimately by her than by anyone else. But in that house it is possible to forget entirely – as the passengers on the top deck of a liner can forget the blackened, bellowing engine room below (Cusk, 2016).

If the "bellowing engine room below" for Cusk is the basement in a house and represents our unconscious, it very much resembles how Jung pictured the human psyche by building on from

Freud's idea of the libido as the driving force for the other psychological mechanisms.<sup>15</sup> Cusk then retells the story of how the remodelling of the apartment was an extremely invasive process psychologically: "I caused walls to be knocked down and floors to be ripped up and rooms to be gutted; I threw away decades' worth of clutter and keepsakes and old furniture; with what at times seemed like magic and at others sheer violence, I caused the past to be obliterated and put something new [...] in its place" (Cusk, 2016). A renovation seems, to Cusk, not to be without consequences on the self: it is a violent intrusion into the human psyche. In the same way, changing homes, leaving one home and trying to find a new one, has a similar effect. As for Faye, she even comments on this to her cousin Lawrence as he is about to leave his wife for another woman. While on the phone with him he "began talking to [Faye] about a book he was reading on Carl Jung" complaining that his whole life has been a "fake" and that leaving is about "freedom". To this Faye answers that "freedom [...] is a home you leave once and can never go back to" (Cusk, 2016, p. 210). The mentioning of Jung here in passing, reminds us of the connection between home and the psyche and how altering the home or house affects the self deeply. Faye suggests here that it may even be impossible to go back home if it was left once – perhaps as a first indicator that a homecoming is impossible.<sup>16</sup>

### **2.3 A raging homecoming: the embodiment of the unconscious**

In *Transit*, Faye's homecoming includes buying a flat, a renovation project. But it quickly becomes clear that the renovation is more than just the fixing of a flat. As we shall see, it becomes an analogy to the recreation of herself. And, if we are to believe the builder working on the apartment, it will not be an easy job: "It seems a shame to put yourself through all this. you could always stick it back on the market, let some other idiot take it on" (Cusk, 2016, p. 50). Faye ignores his suggestion and his concern for her having to "put [herself] through all this", as though it is her that is about to

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<sup>15</sup> Jung was not entirely in agreement with Freud that the libido alone was what formed the core of personality. He de-emphasized slightly the focus on sexual development. In the unconscious Jung argued that there is a collectivity, memories and ideas inherited from our ancestors throughout human history, hence the furniture and surroundings growing older the further down you go in a house (Jung, 1965, p. 52).

<sup>16</sup> As much as we must remember to separate fictional work and paratexts, real-life texts by the author, it is just as pertinent to not forget in what ways biographical text and fiction may fulfil one another – as argued by Gerard Genette (Genette, 1991, p. 261).

get a makeover and not the flat. There are many subtle comparisons like this between the house and the body and some less subtle like the one we find in a conversation with a friend, Amanda. She explains to Faye how “vulnerable” we become when “your house is being ripped apart” (ibid., p. 168). She says that it is like being on an operating table: “you’ve been opened up and now there are men working in there and you can’t move until they’ve fixed you” (Cusk, 2016, p. 168). The flat Faye has bought is in the middle a three storey house with a flat also in the basement. What becomes interesting for us to observe is how *Transit* creates the link between the renovating of Faye’s flat and her unconscious. Her unconscious, as we shall explore, takes the form of the two people living in the basement, a couple in their sixties: Paula and John. They appear to have been living there for years and they are not pleased with Faye moving in above them. Their presence is expressed physically from time to time like the day Faye introduces herself and visits them in their “cluttered, cave-like living room” (ibid., p. 45). Their presence is also un-physical, invisible, expressed through the senses: smell, voices, breathing, thumping on the walls which creates an eery effect of their presence, suggesting that they are part of Faye’s unconscious, living in the embodied basement downstairs.

Valihora also comments on the couple in the basement as “an externalization of Faye’s own psychic undertow” (Valihora, 2019, p. 31). Valihora uses this observation to explain Faye’s moral failure – how there is no rapport between her and these neighbours due to class differences: they are impoverished and illiterate whereas she is an artist (writer). Faye dehumanizes them by calling them “evil trolls” (Cusk, 2016, p. 196) and completely ignores how these people might be justifiably angry by the constant noise from the renovation. This observation is also pointed out in Sally Rooney’s review of *Kudos*:

Paula and John, the downstairs neighbors [...] were depicted not only with a lack of sympathy—John actually seemed to be suffering from cancer, which didn’t trouble Faye whatsoever—but with a profound aesthetic distaste. Faye noted in forensic detail the “sagging, yellowing ceiling” in their apartment and Paula’s “large, slack” and “obese” body, as if to conflate poverty with ugliness and ugliness with evil (Rooney, 2018).

Although Rooney’s ideological focus comes out at the end of her review (she is slightly drawn to Marxism) – she has some astute observations with regard to the trilogy as a whole. Both Rooney and Valihora argues that the relationship with the old couple in the basement in *Transit* exemplifies

Faye's moral failure. I, however, am going back to this relationship as a representation of Faye's unconscious.

In the beginning when Faye first moved in, what she first noticed was the “overpowering smell” from the basement which grows stronger the longer she stays. At one point it becomes so bad that it fills her entire living room described as a “powerful rancid smell emanating from the basement flat” (Cusk, 2016, p. 38), and she has to open all the windows to ventilate. Apparently, the smell comes from the kitchen in the basement and every time her downstairs neighbours cook “a foul meaty smell” fills Faye's flat (ibid., p. 44). Even more noticeable are the movements and noises from below, that seem to respond to Faye's movements above. The problem appears to be the poor soundproofing of the floor: “The floor between the two flats was very thin, and the voices of the people below were clearly audible. Beneath the kitchen in particular the sound of their sudden shouts could be startling” (ibid., p. 39). At the faintest “tapping” on the floor her downstairs neighbours respond with “muffled shouts”, “squawking sounds”, and “sharp thumping sounds” against the floor, somehow mirroring Faye's silent, repressed movements with violent outbreaks (ibid., p. 44). It gives the impression that there is something down there attempting to break out, and that the thinning old floor between the basement and the kitchen will not hold for much longer.

During an inspection of the flat together with her builder (Pavel) we are reminded of this thinning membrane between Faye and her repressed unconscious in the basement. In this passage we also find Bachelard's idea of the fear of facing the cellar, the unconscious, wondering what could be down there: “He [the builder] tapped his foot on the floor, which dipped badly in the middle and was covered with plastic tiles laminated to look like wood. ‘I dread to think,’ he said, ‘what's under these.’ A stirring and murmuring of voices rose from downstairs” (ibid., p. 41). As we remember, according to Bachelard: “[t]he creatures moving about in the cellar are slower, less scampering, more mysterious” (Bachelard, 1958, p. 19). Pavel once goes down to reason with the neighbours below as Paula is yelling at Faye outside, thumping on her door screaming and menacing to spit in her face. “He put down his drill and went out of the front door, leaving it open behind him. [...]. After a while I heard the sound of voices. The tone and cadences of Paula's voice seemed almost to be coming from inside me” (Cusk, 2016, p. 178). This passage shows the blurring between the voices below and Faye's own voice.

As the work progresses in the flat the neighbours below become bolder in their complaints, and their rage, especially Paula's, becomes more violent and more specifically directed towards Faye. Her husband is less and less present in the conflict, suggesting also that the unconscious living below is gendered, it is clearly a woman. One passage is especially important as an example of the basement as the embodiment of Faye's unconscious. She is returning home after a dinner date with a man when she notices movements outside:

I heard the sound of the basement door opening and the scuffing noise of footsteps and the heavy sound of Paula's breathing in the dark. She couldn't see me, but she knew I was there. I heard the rasping noises of her clothes and her breath as she drew close and put her face to the fence. Fucking bitch, she said (Cusk, 2016, p. 207).

In this passage Faye can only hear Paula, as her sight is blocked out. Paula cannot see Faye either but they both acknowledge one another's presence. As we remember from Bachelard and Jung, the conscious mind knows of the unconscious mind, but refrains from going there, as the unconscious is unknown, mysterious and frightening. This effect is increased by the darkness of the scene. As the sight is blocked out, all Faye hears are different noises: "scuffing sound", "footsteps", "heavy breathing" and "rasping noises". When Paula gets close enough to the fence and calls Faye a "bitch", it is as though she is speaking, whispering even, from inside of Faye's mind. The unconscious is drawing nearer, and it appears to be filled with anger.<sup>17</sup>

Anger surrounds Faye in *Transit*, but it does not come from her. Most of it is expressed by the enraged couple in the basement, but there are other scenes. At the hairdresser a boy is so dissatisfied with his haircut that he leaves the salon in rage and opens the door so hard that it slams into the shelves: "[...] the bank of shelves disgorged a landslide of bottles and jars which fell and rolled with a great thundering sound out across the salon floor, and then itself collapsed in a tremendous shrieking cascade of breaking glass" (Cusk, *ibid.*, 80-81). Everybody stares at him in terror as he leaves the salon without a word. Faye's two boys also express anger. During the work

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault wrote an essay on Maurice Blanchot called the *Thought from the Outside* (1966). In this essay he introduces what he calls the thought from the outside as distinct from the thought from the inside. The outside is separated from the inside like the different parts in a house: doors, walls, floors. Foucault argues that the experience (of language) involves going "outside of oneself", but it is ultimately done in order to "find oneself" (Foucault, 1966, p. 24). This is another perspective that might supplement the idea of the home and the voice unconscious.

at the apartment, they live with their father and in his absence all they do is fight. Outside Faye witnesses scenes of uncontrollable anger and while at home her own repressed rage, squawks, rasps, shouts and thumps to break free. Toward the end of the novel, in a conversation with the man at the restaurant, Faye suddenly breaks her usual silence. Some of her repressed anger appears to slip out and she tries to make sense of what is in her basement:

[t]here was something in the basement, something that took the form of two people [...]. Their hatred of me was so pure, I said, that it almost passed back again into love [...]. For a long time, I said, I believed that it was only through absolute passivity that you could learn to see what was really there. But my decision to create a disturbance by renovating my house had awoken a different reality, as though I had disturbed a beast sleeping in its lair. I had started to become, in effect, angry (ibid., pp. 195-198).

As this passage shows, Faye's self-treatment through stoic philosophy appears to fall apart. She can no longer repress her emotions. Her attempted homecoming and with it a reincarnation of the self by buying and renovating a new home, creates a disturbance that uncovers her unconscious. As Faye herself tells her cousin Lawrence as he is about to leave his wife "freedom is a home you leave once and can never go back to" (ibid., p. 210): in other words, try as you may, the pain for the home, nostalgia and the attempt of a homecoming is impossible.

In this chapter we have looked at the transition from *Outline* to *Transit*. Faye is trying to find a new way in life by adopting a stoic philosophy of life. Stoicism is presented as a form of self-treatment used to respond to her traumatic past – as a way of controlling or erasing human emotion. However, as we move from *Outline* to *Transit* Faye attempts a homecoming, she buys a new flat in need of extreme renovation. The emotions she has repressed in *Outline* are starting to break free during the renovation work. This is seen through her unconscious that is reacting to the work. Her new home is representing the embodiment of her unconscious self quite according to the ideas of Jung – her unconscious lurks in the basement, threatening to break free destroying Faye's "new way of living". Her emotions cannot be repressed any longer and whatever homecoming she sought is surrounded by anger. If home really is a place you may never go back to once you left it, where does that leave our narrator? According to Maurice Bachelard, without the home man would be a "dispersed being" (Bachelard, 1958, p. 35). Is that what Faye is – and if so, can she find herself again? This brings us to the topic of our next chapter – the modern subject.



### 3.0 The modern subject as dislocated self: “I am rooted but I flow”<sup>18</sup>

“In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul” (Bachelard, 1958, p. 35). Having failed a homecoming in *Transit*, without a home, is Faye after all, as Bachelard describes, “a dispersed being”? And if it is the case that the home is gone, is she lost forever? Can she never work through her trauma?

In this chapter we will stay with *Transit*, and take a closer look at the place of the narrator to better understand her effacement from the narrative. A reinvention or conversion of the self seems difficult if the self has left no traces, if it insists upon untraceability. As we have seen earlier, Faye does indeed seem to keep herself out of the narrative by letting other people talk. Moreover, she is physically also absent from the narrative: She is not described with any physical traits, face, body, age, nor are any of her interests described except for the fact that she is a writer. To further develop on the place of the narrator in *Transit* we shall have a look at the work of Edward Casey and his claim that the modern subject is a placeless subject. We are especially interested in what, if our main character is indeed placeless, this would mean. Understanding the narrator’s place is important in the larger discussion about the possibility for reinvention of the self.

In the discussion that follows we will place Cusk’s fiction in dialogue with Virginia Woolf and her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, especially when it comes to the subject’s identity in relation to the loss of place and how the subject could be seen as something fluid. Woolf will also be important in the discussion on form in Cusk’s novel as we look at how the subject is expressed by both authors.

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<sup>18</sup> Virginia Woolf (1977), *The Waves*, p. 80. London: Grafton Books.

### 3.1 Is the modern subject a placeless subject?

“To raise the question of place today is to return to the issue of modernity”, claims Thomas Brockleman in an essay on Edward Casey’s work (Brockleman, 2003, p. 36). According to Brockleman, in the past two centuries, to embrace place “has meant to resist the ‘abstract’ character of modern life” (ibid., p. 36). In his essay Brockleman picks up on Edward Casey’s discussion on space and place and the modern subject. But before looking into Casey’s discussion on the modern subject we need to establish exactly what we mean when talking about such large and widely defined terms as space and place.

Space, as perhaps the more general term of the two, is considered to be three-dimensional so that objects within that space exist in relation to one another. Only with three dimensions can we begin to understand the structure and sense of space and only then can the subject be “surrounded by something sufficiently roomy in which to live and move” (Casey, 1997, p. 267). This way of understanding space, as three-dimensional, reflects quite well our bodily state, a bilateral symmetry where we are divided into “up” and “down”, “front” and “back” and “right” and “left”. Within space we can therefore also locate objects and it is within space, which can be indefinitely large, that we find *place*, which has the potential of being indefinitely many. According to Casey, the distinction between space and place is found in how we understand its composition: space is composed by itself (whatever that is) *and* place. This definition is different from how we understand time which insists on its “oneness”, past, present and future are after all aspects of “one temporal sweep, one continuous display of time”, whereas space is binary (ibid., p. 169-271).

Having defined space and place in relation to one another, Casey argues that in modern philosophy (mostly by influence of Immanuel Kant’s work) the distinction between space and place came to be questioned and then discredited. According to Kant, although the idea was already nascent in Descartes, the only “effective unity of [the] self is the unity of consciousness”, meaning the “I think”. Having considered this conception by Kant, that there is no room for place in the human subject, Casey concludes with the argument that “the modern subject is a placeless subject” (Casey, 1997, p. 292). The modern subject is radically “dislocated” according to Casey, suggesting a certain global “nomadism”, which we shall come back to later in this chapter. In Brockleman’s essay on Casey he claims that:

[...] under the banner of topos [Greek for ‘place’], a battle is fought, the battle against the levelling and universalizing tendencies of modern life [...] to be modern is to give up the ‘sense of place’ associated with the late medieval hierarchical world [...]. Defending the concrete and particular as opposed to the abstract and general of this Newtonian universe, the place thinker becomes a foot soldier in the army of the anti-modern (Brockleman, 2003 pp. 36-37).

Thinking place is anti-modern according to Casey because it contests the “universalizing tendencies of modern life”. He argues that “[i]n the past three centuries in the West – the period of ‘modernity’ – place has come to be not only neglected but actively suppressed” (Casey, 1993, p. 14). In an increasingly globalised world, the identity of the self has become less based on a fixed place and more linked to an idea of nomadism, primarily because of how easy and accessible travel has become. However, Casey quickly contests this idea, claiming that “to be able to go anywhere is to be located nowhere” (Casey, 1997, 294). He does not believe in this form of global nomadism because to be placeless is, in a sense, a threat to existence itself, much as Heidegger claimed that without location, the human disappears.

In *Transit* we find this idea expressed (a bit differently) by Jane, a woman who seeks to become a writer and who meets with Faye for advice.

[...] the story of loneliness is much longer than the story of life. In the sense of what most people mean by living, she said. Without children or partner, without meaningful family or a home, a day can last an eternity: a life without those things is a life without a story, a life in which there is nothing – no narrative flights, no plot developments, no immersive human dramas – to alleviate the cruelly meticulous passing of time (Cusk, 2016, p. 141).

Jane posits the idea that without a home (much as Bachelard argues), which would encapsule all the other things she mentions such as family, children, and a partner, then there is no narrative left. In this passage Jane is talking about an artist she admired who passed away after a life in solitude, but this description could to some extent describe Faye’s life. She has left her home and her husband, and although she still has her children, she rarely sees them. If Faye has no narrative left because she is placeless (or homeless), then this also means that her existence somehow is threatened according to Casey. And to avoid disappearance would mean having to recreate the self, which brings us back to Anthony Giddens.

We remember how Giddens argues for the need for the individual to establish a “new sense of self”. He too writes about place and the self in modernity in claiming that our societies have become increasingly mobile and unsettled and that modernity is characterized by a post-traditional order and more globalized tendencies in our modern institutions. As a consequence, the individual’s place in the world has changed (Giddens, 1991, p. 12). Personal relationships may, as he suggests, offer new opportunities of self-expression and intimacy that were lacking in more traditional times, but they have become riskier, “unsettled” and “mobile”, which recalls Casey’s notion of the modern subject as “dislocated” or placeless. But what would that mean for our narrator? Is she placeless and if so, is this an existential threat, as Casey presumably would argue?

Before we look into these questions, I wish to briefly dwell more on the idea of placelessness and the concept of “being in transit”. In Marc Augé’s concept of “supermodernity”, he introduces what he calls non-place. Augé understands places as somewhere associated with a sense of history, home, and dwelling, they are occupied by people, familiar and partially rooted. He then stresses that the world and places are being invaded by what he calls “non-lieu”, non-places, in our day to day lives. He lists different examples of these places such as airports and hotels, supermarkets, motorways, subways but also increased screen-time spent on TV, computers and cell phones. These non-places are places of consumption, travel, and exchange and while in these places we experience a profound alteration of awareness. Perception becomes partial and incoherent. Augé touches upon the acceleration of history and time which has led to an end of the “grand narratives” and thus also modernity to make place for this new supermodernity (Augé, 2009). Like Giddens, he sees the collective in traditional times as now being shattered (reflecting what Giddens calls a “post-tradition” society) and more and more of our time is coordinated by our ego and not the collective (family) as the vacuum must somehow be filled. The individual spends much more time in solitude, in front of computer screens, commuting to work, etc.

As the title of Cusk’s second book suggests, *Transit* describes a condition of being in between places. More specifically, it addresses how our narrator finds herself in transit. As was shown in the previous chapter, when she moves back to London in *Transit*, having bought a new apartment, she is unable to actually live there or at least live there peacefully. There is constant work on the apartment and, as we have seen, some rather unpleasant downstairs neighbours. On

her way to meet a friend, Amanda, Faye walks towards the Tube station and reflects upon the idea of being in transit:

The Tube Station stood at a junction where five roads converged like the spokes of a wheel. The traffic sat at the lights, each lane waiting for its turn. Sometimes it seemed that the junction was a place of confluence; at other times, when the traffic thundered constantly over the intersection in a chaotic river of buses and bicycles and cars, it felt like a mere passageway, a place of transit. There was a café there, and I went inside to wait for my friend Amanda [...]. I had to wait nearly an hour before she arrived (Cusk, 2016, p. 161).

Faye's description of this place of transit is almost technical and impersonal not exactly a place where you would wish to meet with a friend. And yet, she goes to sit at the café in the middle of this "mere passageway". Not only are they meeting in transit, but Faye has to wait alone for almost an hour before Amanda arrives. While she waits her younger son calls from school, but their conversation lasts only for two sentences. Considering the fact that Faye no longer is in possession of a home or a place of dwelling, she appears to be in a certain kind of "non-lieu" as described by Augé in the passage above. However, if we are to understand Augé correctly, these non-places are contemporary: one does not tend to stay in places of transit, as they are only passageways to the next destination. Moreover, our narrator is not exactly spending time in supermarkets, on motorways or on her cell phone, but she is alone much of the time after the divorce from her husband – her life is no longer coordinated by a collective, a family, and she is outside of a "place of dwelling" almost wandering from conversation to conversation like a nomad.

### **3.2 The Nomadic subject: literary form and Virginia Woolf**

If our narrator is indeed a "dispersed being" (without a home) as suggested by Bachelard, and if she is a modern dislocated subject without a place of dwelling living more or less in a constant state of transit, what now? Is she lost forever and traumatized? Is there no possibility of working through the trauma and reconstructing the self? Is she trapped in a compulsion to repeat the past? One possible answer is to consider a more positive take on the fragmented modern subject, a theory of the modern subject as a nomad.

In feminist theory, primarily linked to the studies by Rosi Braidotti, there is a term called the “nomadic subject”. Braidotti, referencing the work by Deleuze and Guattari, denies traditional essentialist understandings of subjectivity, i.e., the idea that the self is a fixed, singular entity. She proposes a subject in process, understood as fluid, changing and multiple as opposed to fixed, singular and defined. It is a view of the modern subject that embraces its placeless nature and ability of change rather than seeing it as a threat to existence, as Casey would argue. Braidotti argues that we should rather redesign subjectivity as “a process of becoming nomad” (Braidotti, 2011, p. 5). But what does becoming nomad mean for Braidotti? Her theory embraces the idea of the subject *becoming* as opposed to *being* and she often uses Virginia Woolf’s form of writing as a way of explaining what she means: “[b]ecoming has to do with emptying out the self, opening it out to possible encounters with the ‘outside’. Virginia Woolf’s intensive genre is exemplary here, in that the artist’s ‘eye’ captures the outside world by making itself receptive to the totality of perception” (Braidotti, 2014, p. 171). Braidotti argues that Woolf is able to present her life (and the life of the characters) as the action of “passing through”, similar to a state of being in transit:

Woolf captures the concrete multiplicity – as well as the shimmering intensity – of becoming. She is the writer of multiple and intransitive becomings, in-between ages, sexes, elements, characters. Woolf’s texts enact a flow of positions, a crossing of boundaries, and an overflowing into a plenitude of affects where life is asserted to its highest degree (Braidotti, 2014, pp. 174-175).

It is especially Woolf’s language that interests Braidotti when it comes to the capturing of “becoming”. The concept of the nomadic subject can therefore also be represented in the writing techniques used in a novel and not exclusively by looking at the place (placelessness) of the narrator. So far, we have established Faye’s lack of place and rootedness through her physical sense of being in the world: loss of a home (place of dwelling) and stuck in transit, in non-place. Let us now have a look at how this is represented in the style of writing.

According to Braidotti, Woolf’s writing represents the nomadic self and the self as “becoming” better than anyone. We find examples of this in many of her novels but in this brief discussion, we will focus on her novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Take this passage describing the novel’s protagonist, Clarissa:

She began to go slowly upstairs, with her hand on the bannisters, as if she had left a party, where now this friend now that had flashed back her face, her voice; had shut the door and gone out and

stood alone, a single figure against the appalling night, or rather, to be accurate, against the stare of this matter-of-fact June morning; soft with the glow of rose petals for some, she knew, and felt it, as she paused by the open staircase window which let in blinds flapping, dogs barking, let in, she thought, feeling herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain which now failed [...] (Woolf, 2000, p. 22).

The passage is a good example of Woolf's stream of consciousness technique. The entire passage is written as one long thought, words flowing without much pause and representing Clarissa's (Mrs Clarissa Dalloway) consciousness as she walks upstairs. Notice here the "crossing of boundaries" that Braidotti mentions: "shrivelled, aged, breastless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain which now failed". There is a certain disembodiment felt by Clarissa in the passage, as though she is wrinkling up like a plant in the heat of the sun, feeling complete detachment from her body and brain. All at the same time she crosses boundaries of age and also gender, feeling suddenly both "aged" and "breastless".

Furthermore, Woolf's use of free indirect discourse also allows for the "crossing of boundaries", especially in between characters. According to literary theorist Dorrit Cohn, free indirect discourse (referred to as "narrated monologue" by Cohn) allows a narrator to "weave in and out of several characters' minds", and Virginia Woolf is "the master weaver" of such multi-figural novels (Cohn, 1984, p. 118). The narrated monologues pass from Clarissa to Peter, from Septimus to Rezia and so on often without intervening narrative sentences. Let us consider the following passage with Septimus and his wife, Rezia, in *Mrs Dalloway*:

There was his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings! "What are you saying?" said Rezia suddenly, sitting down by him. Interrupted again! She was always interrupting [...]. "Look," she implored him, pointing at a little troop of boys carrying cricket stumps, and one shuffled, spun round on his heel and shuffled, as if he were acting a clown at the music hall. "Look," she implored him, for Dr. Holmes had told her to make him notice real things, go to a music hall, play cricket—that was the very game, Dr. Holmes said, a nice out-of-door game, the very game for her husband (Woolf, 2000, p. 18).

Here we clearly see Woolf's "master weaving" of narrated monologues between characters. We have access to both characters' monologues interchangeably and quite often without an intervening

narrative sentence. It creates the effect of being able to step in and out of different consciousnesses and I would argue that this particular trait in Woolf's writing is a technique that captures what Braidotti would call the becoming of a subject. Let us now turn back to Rachel Cusk and *Transit* to see if this "nomadic subject" is something we also find there.

Cusk's *Outline* trilogy has many similarities to Woolf's form. In the following passage Faye is visiting the new house of her (recently divorced) cousin, Lawrence, and his wife Eloise and some other friends of theirs. In this passage, she is talking to one of Lawrence's friends, who tells her about herself.

Also, at other times, she remembered things as if they'd happened to her personally when in fact they were only things she'd read. She could swear on her life that this or that scene existed in her own memory, and actually it was nothing to do with her at all. 'Does that ever happen to you?' she said. The worst thing was the arguments it caused between her and her husband. She would be absolutely certain that they had been somewhere or done something, and he would simply deny it point blank (Cusk, 2016, p. 245).

Faye is our first-person narrator, but very often we forget that this is the case as the vast majority of conversations she has in the novels are people talking through her (like in the above passage), using her as medium for their stories, as she recites them word for word. Every once in a while, we are reminded of Faye's presence by a question or a short comment as in the above passage ("[d]oes that ever happen to you?"), often without Faye being allowed an answer. This all contributes to her invisibility in the narrative, her "untraceability". Although Faye does not have access to the other character's inner thoughts, most of the time the conversations read as though she does.

In many ways Cusk reads quite close to Woolf and the stream of consciousness novel, but is a bit more structured language-wise. This is also pointed out by Alexandra Schwarts in her review of *Outline*. Schwarts observes that the more we read the more we start to realize that everybody in the novel sounds like Faye. Even the Greek students in her writing course, speaking English as a second language, use sophisticated English sentences and vocabulary and employ the same "detached tone, same precise and glassy diction, same sentence rhythms, same tics of phrasing" (Schwartz, 2015, p. 38). In other words, Faye is expressing herself all the time by speaking through everyone else, taking on different forms: men and women of all ages. This is

perhaps the ultimate nomadic subject – which means that Faye continually moves in and out of all kinds of people, inhabiting a multitude of consciousnesses. However, one could also argue that since everybody sounds the same, we are in reality only given access to one consciousness, Faye’s, and all the others are simply a representation of hers. After all, her outline is submerged in their stories – as we have previously argued. This would mean that the subject as becoming is less prevalent in Cusk than in Woolf when it comes to narrative form.

Another important point to address is that the idea of the modern subject as placeless, or Braidotti’s nomadic subject, does not seem to be explicitly affirmed or celebrated in Cusk. That is to say, being without a home or a place of dwelling and a family, is not presented as something particularly positive for the subject. On the contrary, according to Jane in our passage above, this subject is without a story and filled with nothing but loneliness (Cusk, 2016, p. 141). Faye’s children are not spared from the state of transit either. They constantly appear to suffer from the lack of a home and instability this brings. Consider this passage from *Transit*, depicting a phone conversation between Faye and her oldest son:

The phone rang in the next-door room [...]. It was my older son [...]. When are we coming back? he said. I said I wasn’t sure: the builder thought it might be possible in a couple of weeks. There’s nobody here, he said. It feels weird. I’m sorry, I said. Why can’t we just be normal? he said. Why does everything have to be so weird? I said I didn’t know why. I was doing my best, I said (Cusk, 2016, pp. 132-133).

Her older son is calling from his father’s place, which is where he and his brother both stay during the work on the apartment. In this passage Faye’s son is clearly struggling to adapt to this new, dislocated life or nomadic subjectivity where there is no actual home anymore. There is a feeling of estrangement from his surroundings – there is nobody at home, in comparison most likely to how it used to be before his parent’s divorce. He also utters a need to go back to normalcy, to how things used to be when he felt more rooted to a place and to a home.

Why is it that the nomadic subject seems, to some extent, to be rejected in Cusk’s trilogy? The theories of Julia Kristeva may help us to better understand why Braidotti’s nomadic subject is not celebrated in Cusk as it appears to be in Woolf. Kristeva writes about what she calls “the subject in process” or “le sujet-en-procès”, which is a subject in pain due to its dissolution. She bases her theories on the psychoanalytic work by Freud and French poststructuralist Jacques

Lacan. Though we will not delve too far into these theories, some background must be covered to understand how Kristeva supports her theory of “le sujet-en-procès”. According to Lacan, infants between six and eighteen months enter what he calls the “mirror stage”, which is when they, for the first time, are able to recognize themselves in the mirror and not through the eyes of someone else (primarily the mother). This stage is crucial because this means leaving the maternal stage in which they are one with the mother and entering the paternal stage where they must seek out their identities other than that which is with their mother. The unity with the mother is then broken. Once they enter the paternal stage (words, syntax and rules) they can no longer return to the pre-mirror stage, the stage before language (quoted in Tyson, 2015, pp. 25-28).

Kristeva uses Lacan’s terms a bit differently by naming the maternal order semiotic (pre-language, sensual, unity with mother) and the paternal order symbolic (language, rules, syntax). She claims that when passing between the stages, the symbolic order suppresses the semiotic, often because the subject desires the unity found in the symbolic. The subject can thus be trapped by the symbolic and experience dissolution. The French term she uses, “le sujet-en-procès”, has two meanings: both the subject in process as the English translation but also as “the subject on trial” suggesting a dislocated subject in pain that challenges the laws and boundaries it meets in the symbolic stage (Kristeva, 1984, p. 101). This idea makes it possible to understand the subject (Faye in particular) in *Transit* with regard to Braidotti’s nomadic subject. I would argue that contrary to Braidotti’s theory of seeing the placeless subject as something positive, in *Transit*, this nomadism is resisted and contested like a subject on trial. This underlines why Giddens’ theory of the need to recreate the self is so pertinent to this thesis, as we see a constant wish expressed by the characters to put down their roots.

So far, we have made the argument that Braidotti’s concept of the nomadic subject is to find in Woolf as well as in Cusk, though celebrated in different ways. The nomadic subject is related to a strong sense of freedom and in the discussion that follows, I wish to question the supposed freedom of this subject by looking at the aspect of the female artist. Because although Braidotti praises Woolf’s “exemplary writing” of the subject as becoming, we must address the fact that Woolf also represented her subject as constricted (as a female artist writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century). The freedom implied by Braidotti’s nomadic subject is something women and the female artist especially must struggle for: most of the time the woman and the female artist do not

have this freedom. It is certainly true that Woolf herself, in her own time, was not an ideal free and nomadic subject – the period she lived in was filled with all kinds of constrictions on female creativity and the room to express this creativity. To address this, Woolf wrote the essay *A Room of One's Own* which we shall have a closer look at, as well as Maurice Beebe's artist-hero novel, in the following discussion on the female artist.

### **3.3. A shed of one's own – the room of the female artist**

The topic of the artist is much discussed in the *Outline* trilogy. Its main character, Faye, is a female writer as she teaches writing classes and travels around presenting her work. However, we rarely get to know about her own writing as she never talks about it. In *Transit* and *Kudos* we do get glimpses of her writing, not from Faye, but from people who have read her work: “He had noticed for instance, that my characters were often provoked into feats of self-revelation by means of a simple question [...]” (Cusk, 2018, p. 144). With this information about Faye's novels, we understand that the type of literature she writes is something like the *Outline* trilogy itself. For Faye indeed usually asks a very simple question to the people she meets, triggering long self-revelations from them.

In many ways, the *Outline* trilogy follows the overall pattern of Maurice Beebe's theory of the artist-hero novel. In the artist-hero novel, according to Beebe, the quest for self is the dominant theme. The self is “always in conflict with society” as he argues. “A closely related theme is the opposition of art to life” and therefore the artist as hero is usually the “artist-as-exile” who must go through the trials and tests of “love and life, of God, home, and country until nothing is left but his true self and his consecration as artist” (Beebe, 1964, p. 6). Beebe argues that the archetype of the artist-novel is the combination of three interlocking themes: “the Divided Self, the Ivory Tower, and the Sacred Fount” (ibid., p. 6). The Divided self is the artist-hero as a divided being, as both *man* and *artist* struggling to balance between these two identities: one identity being that of a normal man with desires like others whilst the other, the artist, looks down upon man from a distance as a free detached spirit. As has been implicit in the account given so far, Beebe's study is inherently gender-biased in that it specifically focuses on the male artist. This is something we will come back to shortly when bringing in the representation of the female artist in Cusk.

According to Beebe, what he describes as the artist-hero is usually someone “self-centered”, “passive”, “absentminded” and “introverted” – especially in the autobiographical novel, as this subgenre by definition is an act of introspection (Beebe, 1964, p. 5). These characteristics can all be relate to Faye and we often observe this ability to step outside of the self with Faye. Let us for instance consider this passage from *Outline*:

I moved along the corridor and through the glass front doors at the entrance to the building and out into the ferocious heat of the street. I stood there in the glare while the cars and people passed, as though I was expecting something to happen or for some alternative to present itself [...]. I returned inside and went back to the classroom and sat down. Georgiou asked me if everything was all right. He had noticed, he said, that I had closed the door, and wondered if that meant I now wanted the windows to be opened (Cusk, 2014, pp. 211-212).

In this passage Faye talks about herself in an “as though” manner: “I stood there [...] as though I was waiting for something to happen”. This way of detaching the self is relevant to the artist-hero motif: Faye both is and is not herself, a self is situated behind herself observing and analysing the *woman* as detached from the *artist*. She appears absentminded to the point that one of her students asks her if everything was alright. The passage also includes many references to windows and glass, “the glass front doors” and “opening the windows”, which signals an allusion to transparency, looking in and out from places, for example the idea of an inner self looking out at the other self. As Beebe argues:

The artist’s double [...] comes from the artist’s subconsciousness, yet seems to look down dispassionately on the artist himself. Coleridge must have had something like this in mind when he wrote, ‘The eye hath a two-fold power’. It is, verily, a window through which you not only look out of the house, but can look into it too” (Beebe, 1964, p. 8).

The divided nature of the artist pulls on the self in two very different directions. The self seeks personal fulfilment, whereas the artist-self seeks freedom from it, from the “demands of life”. We remember how Faye explains the pull towards the sea in *Outline*: “I felt that I could swim for miles, out into the ocean: a desire for freedom, an impulse to move, tugged at me as though it were a thread fastened to my chest” (Cusk, 2014, p. 73). We have come across the concept of freedom earlier in this study. Freedom is a theme Faye often comes back to in the trilogy, although she never quite manages to describe what freedom really means, except as “simply a desire to escape

from what I had” or a “home you may never go back to”. The Divided Self rests upon two conflicting traditions of art, the Ivory Tower, and the Sacred Fount. The latter equates art with fulfilment of life, whilst the Ivory Tower tradition exalts art above life, comparing the artist to God.

The Ivory Tower is a metaphor for the artist’s private retreat into his tower above everybody else, observing them from afar. Beebe evokes Albert Camus’ short story *Jonas ou l’artiste au travail*, from the collection *L’exile et le royaume* (1957), to explain the conflict of the two traditions. Here the painter, Gilbert Jonas, confines himself in a loft only to create a completely blank canvas with a small word in the middle “mais dont on ne savait s’il fallait y lire *solitaire* ou *solidaire*” (Camus, 1957, p. 139). The word on the canvas is either solitary or solidary: these two are opposites, but it is impossible to decide with certainty which one it is. This distinction is also pointed out at the very end of *Outline*, when Faye talks with her plane neighbour over the phone, telling him she will not be able to meet again before she goes home to London: “In that case, he said, I will spend the day in solicitude. You mean solitude, I said. I do beg your pardon, he said. Of course, I mean solitude” (Cusk, 2014, p. 249). Whilst Camus, in his short story, appears to react against the tradition of the Ivory Tower, showing how an artist who denies his humanity eventually loses his ability to produce, Faye seems to insist upon the word *solitude* instead of *solicitude*. However, it is not certain whether she is referring to herself or her neighbour on the plane.

Moreover, whether it is intended is uncertain, but the passage also carries a Heideggerian echo. The use of the word *solicitude* here instead of *solitary*, as by Camus, may refer to Heidegger’s use of *Fürsorge* in *Being and Time*. Heidegger explains that “we understand the expression ‘solicitude’ in a way which corresponds to our use of ‘concern’ [...] for example ‘welfare work’ [“Fürsorge”], as a factual social arrangement, is grounded in Dasein’s state of Being as Being-with” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 158). “Dasein” or in German, da-sein, translates to being there (*da* there, *sein* to be), but may also translate into “presence” or “existence”. To Heidegger “Dasein” is the experience of being that is peculiar to human beings, the knowledge of mortality, personhood, and solitude that ultimately only humans can confront. Solicitude, according to Heidegger, is a way for one Dasein to relate to others and there are two ways he sees this happening, inauthentically and authentically. He explains that the first form of solicitude “can, as it were, take away ‘care’ from the Other and put itself in his position in concern” (ibid., p.158).

This is the inauthentic way of relating to the other, by leaping into the other's position and relieving them of pain. Ultimately this is a way of dominating them and taking away care. The other way is the authentic way where the one does not "leap in for the Other [but] leap ahead of him" (ibid., p. 158), in other words, authentic solicitude does not reduce other Dasein to dependency of your care but allows them to open up their possibilities instead of imposing your own unto them. In this case, what we see Faye doing is perhaps an example of authentic solicitude, by leaping ahead of her neighbour she does not allow him to continue his repetitive pain in becoming, let us say, his next love interest. As we know her neighbour has repeated this pattern for many years since his first marriage: falling in love, marrying, and divorcing again. Rather she appears to be leaping ahead of him and breaking this circle forcing him to do differently.

I wish to come back to the discussion on the hero artist by considering a passage in *Mrs Dalloway* to further develop on the artist's choice between solitude or solicitude. Towards the end of *Mrs. Dalloway* the character called Septimus commits suicide. Septimus is a war veteran and survivor of World War I. He suffers from serious trauma and shellshock and has retreated into his own mind. On the recommendation of his doctor, his wife, Lucrezia, is trying to bring him back by making him reconnect with the world, working on noticing life and things outside himself again. However, she fails at this task and Septimus has created an internal world where he has conversations with a deceased friend of his, Evans. In the novel Septimus is described as "alone", "condemned" and "deserted". Although different in many respects, Clarissa (Mrs. Dalloway) and Septimus can also in many ways be seen as doubles: they share many of the same characteristics, especially with regard to how they think and see the world. Septimus however, decides to escape the world by committing suicide while Clarissa remains, accepting the life she has although she struggles with having chosen Richard Dalloway (who is upper-class and wealthy) instead of Peter Walsh (who is middle-class and passionate). Although Septimus harbours clear elements of insanity, especially in speaking to the dead, in the scene of the suicide itself he is depicted as a sane man escaping Holmes and Bradshaw. The latter are described as villains trying to stop him from freeing himself, from having the right to control his own life:

Holmes would get him. But no; not Holmes; not Bradshaw. Getting up rather unsteadily, hopping indeed from foot to foot, he considered Mrs. Filmer's nice clean bread knife with "Bread" carved on the handle. Ah, but one mustn't spoil that. The gas fire? But it was too late now. Holmes was coming. Razors he might have got, but Rezia, who always did that sort of thing, had packed them.

There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury-lodging house window, the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. [...] He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings—what did they want? [...] Holmes was at the door. "I'll give it you!" he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings (Woolf, 2000, p. 149).

In Clarissa's mind Septimus' choice becomes almost a noble one as she explains in this next passage: "Besides, now that he [Septimus] was quite alone, condemned, deserted, as those who are about to die are alone, there was a luxury in it, an isolation full of sublimity; a freedom which the attached can never know" (Woolf, 2000, p. 92). Though not willing to commit suicide herself, Clarissa does not see Septimus' death as a sad ending: rather, she salutes him for his choice, because in a sense his choice is partly also hers. His isolation is her isolation and in committing suicide he is also setting Clarissa free, she partakes in his freedom, it lives on in her somehow, which yet again creates this dichotomy between solitude and solitude, or *solitaire* and *solidaire* as Camus put it. And if Septimus' freedom, lives on, so to speak, in Clarissa, it may in some way straddle the divide between solitude and solidarity.

There is no suicide in *Outline*, but the dichotomy remains between Faye and her neighbour from the plane when she does not go with him on a last boat trip saying that "I had an engagement with someone, to do some sightseeing" (Cusk, 2014, p. 248). The neighbour is also Faye's double, as Septimus and Clarissa were to each other. The same can be said of many of the characters in the trilogy: they are meant to represent, at least partially, a reflection of Faye's outline, of her life. This doubling between characters is something Katharina Stava Teigen discusses extensively in her master thesis, who I mentioned in the introduction. She argues that Faye and her neighbour are, by and large, talking the same language and using the same voice which creates a "reflective monologue" (Teigen, 2020, p. 41). For instance, Faye tells her neighbour that the reason for her divorce was that "marriage is a system of belief, a story [...]" (Cusk, 2014, p. 12), ultimately a fiction, that you can stop believing in as real. A few pages later her neighbour describes his own divorce in a very similar manner. He explains that it was "hard to piece this chain of events" (i.e., the reason for the divorce) and that it seemed as though he had lived his marriage "almost unconsciously, that he had been lost in it, absorbed in it as you can be absorbed in a book, believing in its events and living entirely through and with its characters" (Cusk, 2014, p. 16). They both describe marriage and divorce with the same language, as a system of belief – as a fiction that at

one point you can stop believing in. Teigen argues that this type of reflective monologue is what creates the doubling of characters in *Outline*.

Faye indeed fits the description of Beebe's hero-artist, as we have seen. Although he analyses the artist as hero and the two artistic traditions, there is no doubt that his main interest is in the male author, the male artist, the male writer. This poses an additional problem for the woman artist or woman as writer, which is a recurring topic in the *Outline* trilogy. It might be a correct observation to say that what Beebe calls the artist in the Ivory Tower (isolated aestheticism) is a dominating narrative in novel's written by men (Proust, Joyce, Camus), whereas in women's artist novels the central question seems to be whether women should be artists at all (as in the work of for instance Woolf and Elizabeth Barrett Browning). In Cusk's second novel, *Transit*, Faye is speaking with another writer named Julian. He mentions after a while that he considered naming his novel "A Shed of One's Own" (Cusk, 2016, p. 97) which is an allusion to Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*. The word "solitude" that Faye reminds her neighbour of in *Outline* may, as well as being linked to the Ivory Tower tradition, also reflect upon the fact that the woman artist is deprived of a room of her own to be as successful as her male counterpart. According to Woolf, the female artist faces challenges the male artist never would, and perhaps precisely for this reason we cannot read Beebe's essay the same way for the artist-hero as for the artist-heroine.

The narrator in Woolf's essay argues that "intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time [...]" (Woolf, 2021, p. 53). In *Outline* we learn that Faye's application for an increased loan is rejected while she is staying in Greece (Cusk, 2014, p. 211). In *Transit* her budget is so low that the only apartment she can afford is the one in need of renovation situated above the unpleasant couple. In other words, because she does not have enough money, Faye is consequently denied a room of her own seeing as the apartment is full of interruptions from her neighbours. Woolf's narrator continues to argue that without money, women will remain in "second place" to men as artists.<sup>19</sup> Without a room of their own, free of these interruptions, women cannot hope to achieve the success that their male counterparts are

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<sup>19</sup> *Second Place* (2021) is the title of Cusk's last novel which in large parts treats the topic of female fate and male privilege.

enjoying. The room is put forward as a symbol of the many inequalities between men and women with regard to privacy, leisure time, financial independence, etc.

Rachel Cusk herself also addresses this in her unpublished essay on Iris Murdoch intended for *The Irish Murdoch review* (2015). Here she argues that the woman writer fears, in life and in art, the female ordinary as a place (a room) of entrapment and mediocrity and tries to transcend it by indulging in worlds of information, history and intellect. However, these worlds were created by men and when she enters them by writing, she loses her womanhood and hence her connection to personal truth (Cusk, 2015). In the essay Cusk quotes Iris Murdoch expert Jill Paton Walsh. Walsh describes these worlds of information as the placing of “stuff” in novels. Apologizing for the inelegance of the word “stuff”, she explains that “the placing of “stuff” in the novel”, stuff being history, philosophy, topography, etc., is inherently male information used to give the novel the look of reality. When women use it, it becomes an aggression against themselves (Walsh, 2011, p. 21). In other words, even with a room to write, a room of one’s own so to speak, the female artist is in danger of betraying herself, as the words she must use are all part of this inherently male domain of information.

We can observe this inequality between men and women at the beginning of *Transit*. Faye discusses her possibilities under the current market conditions with an estate agent. He explains to her how he has come to believe that creative people “only want what they can’t have”. And that such people “while being afraid of being original, were also obsessed with originality”: willing to pay over-inflated prices for a house or flat in the city when there were “bargains to be had in up-and-coming areas” (Cusk, 2016, pp. 6-7). After having listened for a long time, Faye replies:

[...] I didn’t have the money to engage in bidding wars. I understood that in the market conditions he had described, I was therefore unlikely to find anywhere to live. But at the same time, I rebelled against the idea that creative people, as he had called them, should allow themselves to be marginalised by what he had politely described as their superior values. He had used, I believed, the word ‘imagination’: the worst possible thing for such a person was to quit the centre as an act of self-protection and take shelter in an aesthetic reality by which the outside world remained untransfigured. If I didn’t want to compete, I wanted even less to make new rules about what constituted victory. I would want what everyone else wanted, even if I couldn’t attain it (ibid., p. 7).

What they are describing as “creative people” in this passage can refer to “the artist”: more precisely, the female artist. We see how Faye, this time, takes a stance against the Ivory Tower tradition as she explains that the worst thing to do would be to “take shelter in an aesthetic reality”. Perhaps the worst thing to do for the woman artist would be to take part in the (predominantly male) ivory tower tradition and to isolate herself. She does not have the money to compete against the male artist, but she would still aspire to obtain what he has even if it means obtaining less than the male artist (less as in a smaller flat, a smaller room of her own). This is also why she ends up buying the only flat she can afford in the centre which the estate agent describes as being “in pretty poor condition” or in fact “virtually uninhabitable” (ibid., p. 8).

In this chapter we have looked at the place of the subject in *Transit*, or more specifically, the place of the narrator, Faye, in relation to Edward Casey’s understanding of place and space. We have established that as a modern subject (and also a traumatized subject) Faye has lost her place in the world. She no longer has a home and is, as a consequence, a dispersed being. In discussing the narrator’s place in *Transit*, we also considered the importance of the novel’s title to Marc Augé’s concept of “supermodernity” and non-place. Being placeless can be compared to an existence in non-place or to a state of being in transit.

As a possible solution we considered a more positive take on the placeless subject by using Rosi Braidotti’s theory on the nomadic subject. Braidotti suggests a certain fluidity of the subject and claims that this is something to embrace rather than fear. Woolf’s novels are, for Braidotti, examples of this fluid and placeless subject as she uses different narrative techniques, primarily free indirect discourse and various stream of consciousness techniques, to go in and out of multiple consciousnesses. Braidotti’s nomadic subject is represented as a positive alternative to the dispersed and disappearing modern subject, but it appears after all to be less celebrated in Cusk than in Woolf. The placeless and fluid subject in Cusk, seems to be in pain from this state of nomadism, longing for a way out.

Finally, we looked at the idea of freedom that lies in the concept of the nomadic subject and how this might be different for the woman artist as represented by Woolf. We introduced the representation of the hero-artist in Cusk, as it is understood by Beebe. Faye shows signs of many characteristics of Beebe’s hero-artist – but ultimately there is a distinction to be made between

male and female artist when it comes to the level of freedom. The next chapter will focus on *Kudos* and the value of suffering in the possibility for conversion of the self or the impossibility of it.

#### **4.0 *Kudos*. A resolution or “a detour and its failed purpose”?**

Suffering had always appeared to me as an opportunity, I said, I wasn't sure I would ever discover whether this was true and if so, why it was, because so far I had failed to understand what it might be an opportunity for – Cusk, 2018, p. 64

This passage is taken from *Kudos* during a conversation Faye has with another writer. What does Faye mean by seeing opportunity in suffering? Is there value in pain? Does suffering have a pedagogy somehow and can we learn something from trauma? So far in this thesis Faye's trauma has been seen as something that only inflicts distress that she should be rid of and that she should move beyond. In the discussion so far, we have established that Faye is placeless, homeless, deracinated and effaced as a subject due to her experience of trauma. She has lost her home and her place in this world, existing only as a nomadic subject, a state of being she appears to suffer from.

In this chapter we shall see how difficult *Kudos* is in terms of looking for a resolution to the trilogy and to our investigation of the self. Contrary to *Outline* and *Transit*, *Kudos* seems to not offer any clear message on its own. In *Outline*, we discussed passages uncovering the belated reaction to trauma by Faye – overall this appears to be an important part of the first novel. Our discussion in *Transit* revealed how a deracination from the home affects the self. In *Kudos* however, any thread leading to some form of resolution seems to be well hidden, especially since we find ourselves, at the beginning of the novel, back on a plane: exactly where we started in *Outline*. *Kudos* seems to circle around the same topics as its predecessors, but contrary to *Outline* and *Transit* it seemingly has a less clear focus of its own.

In the first part of this chapter, we will pick up on the topic of the value of suffering. This topic introduces the idea of religious conversion as a process of reinventing the self. I will look at one of the most important scenes in the novel, in my estimation, that suggests some kind of resolution to the trilogy. Here, I will also bring in a brief comparative reading of this scene with the novel, *Submission*, by Michel Houellebecq. Further on in the discussion, we will revisit Valihora and her understanding of the representation of pain in the novel. We will also come back to her reading of *Kudos* as an exit: a successful conversion and moving on from the past (and the

trauma). What may suggest otherwise are the presence of many passages of *déjà vu* from the two other novels which insinuate that Faye is still revisiting past events.

#### 4.1 The value of suffering

*Kudos* raises many questions concerning suffering, the recreation of the self and religion. What if suffering is the way to the recreation and rebirth of the self and not something to avoid or erase? According to Joanna Bourke, a central religious dogma in Catholic and Protestant versions of Christianity, is the belief that bodily pain serves a higher purpose: the purpose of cleansing of the originally sinful body. She argues that “[i]n Anglo-American societies, religious dogma and practices have provided the most robust materials from which the meaning of bodily pain has been constructed [...] their engagement with bodily pain has relentlessly insisted that pain has a divine purpose” (Bourke, 2014, p. 91). Christianity’s most important symbol of this is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Bourke continues to argue that “[w]hether sin was intrinsic to what it meant to be descendants of Adam or a punishment for personal misbehaviour, Christians could be cleansed of its stain through the experience of pain in this world” (ibid., p. 95). Moreover, suffering had a character-enhancing impact. It had a “role of promoting personal as well as spiritual rebirth” as it helped build a “noble character” changing your old ways either they were sinful or simply not pious enough. Suffering and pain were, as Bourke continues, the “soil of virtue; of patience, submission, fortitude, courage, faith in our power of transformation” (ibid., pp. 100-102). In a religious context, historically, suffering and pain have been seen as providing a necessary path to form, change and recreate the individual. Bourke writes extensively about the story of pain and how to cope with it since the 18<sup>th</sup> century until today.<sup>20</sup> This story has been a journey, she claims, “from prayer to painkillers”, as stated in the title of her book: It has gone from seeing a sense of value in pain to the complete negation of it.

The idea of avoiding pain is mentioned multiple times in *Kudos* and it is generally represented as negative for the development of the self. Faye’s first conversation in the novel is with yet another articulate seatmate on a plane who, the night before, had watched his beloved dog

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<sup>20</sup> Bourke’s focus when describing the story of pain is primarily bodily (physical) pain. However, as we have established before, the topic of trauma and pain has changed considerably over the years as trauma has gone from meaning a physical injury to be largely considered a psychological injury.

die and then buried it in his back yard without telling his wife. He takes Faye through multiple stories about his family: his daughter and his relationship with his wife. As she listens to his story, Faye describes her *raconteur*: “I had the impression that these were stories he had told before and liked to tell, as though he had discovered the power and pleasure of reliving events with their sting removed” (ibid., p. 10). Her neighbour immediately reminds us of Faye’s seatmate in *Outline* – they are both trapped in a series of repetitive actions. According to Valihora, this way of talking about the pain of the past (i.e., trauma) without expressing the actual pain, reveals the sheer difficulty of pain: “[p]utting unseen, invisible things into words, such as the carious kinds of freedom people might seek – or the sense of loss and displacement that follows in its wake – is shown to demand a process of translation, [...], the sheer difficulty or pain of which seems sometimes insurmountable” (Valihora, 2019, pp. 33-34). Valihora suggests that by dispensing with the pain in these stories, one also skirts the truth. She goes on to question the quality of these shared and recounted stories in Cusk’s trilogy: do they offer a real “source of connection to other people?” (ibid., p. 34).

Another character who talks about evading pain is Gerta. She explains to Faye how she and her husband decided to stay together because of the children although their marriage had become loveless, and they initially wanted to divorce. Their sacrifice, she explains, has ultimately been a mistake as their children will never know pain and the value of it:

[...] without history there is no identity, and so she couldn’t ultimately understand her children’s lack of interest in their past, nor their devotion to the cult of happiness. There is a world without war, she said, but it is also a world without memory [...]. They are kind to their own children, she said, kinder than our generation ever was, yet their lives seem to me to be without beauty [...]. And I wonder, she said, whether we haven’t done them a great disservice in sparing them this pain, which might somehow have brought them to life [...]. I am one of those who believes that without suffering there can be no art [...] (ibid., pp. 108-109).

By shielding their children from all kinds of pain and suffering by not divorcing, their children’s lives are without interest for history, identity, or beauty, Gerta claims. She even says that pain might have been what could have brought her children to life, as if somehow, they are not living properly. Similarly, to Faye, as we saw in the quote in the beginning of this chapter, suffering appears to have a utility of some form, though what that means for Faye is hard to say exactly. However, what Gerta says about the forming of identity through pain is something British poet

John Keats addresses. He has perhaps the most celebrated, affirmative account of the value of suffering. It also gives us another angle on the question than that of religious salvation, described earlier.

Keats regarded suffering in life as an educational opportunity, to form the individual's identity. But he very firmly dismissed the idea of a religious salvation as something that devalues the meaning of suffering in life and only focuses on the afterlife and whatever rewards one may receive there. He proposed a "grander system of salvation than the Christian religion", a system of spirit creation that he called "soul creation". In a letter to his brother written in 1819, Keats writes about the reason for suffering in the world and explains that his "Vale of Soul-making" is the way to finally be able to embrace suffering and melancholy:

The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is 'a vale of tears' from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven- What a little circumscribed straightened notion! Call the world if you please "The Vale of Soul-making" [...]. There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions – but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. I will call the world a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read – I will call the human heart the horn Book used in that School – and I will call the Child able to – read, the Soul made from that School and its hornbook. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! (Keats, 2002, p. 233).

What is clear from the beginning of this passage is Keats' refusal of any religious salvation based on pain. Suffering has a creative and educational purpose, the process of his "soul creation" is presented as a lifelong project. The human heart must temper intelligence into wisdom. Suffering allows us to be aware of the suffering of others increasing the feeling of compassion so that we try and help others in their pain. The individual, according to Keats, cannot grow without suffering: it cannot reach the soul's potential until it "acquire[s] identities". Identity, we might recall, is exactly what Gerta deems her children to be lacking. As they have not suffered, in other words, they cannot grow and take part in Keats' soul creation. Similarly, the seatmate on the plane constantly dispenses with the pain in his stories, as Faye observes, which keeps him from understanding that suffering has an educational purpose. The "soul creation" Keats describes therefore becomes

impossible for him. Let us now move on to a scene in *Kudos* that, in my estimation treats the conversion narrative a bit more directly.

#### **4.2 The road to salvation or the impossibility of conversion**

Toward the end of *Kudos*, we find one of the more important scenes in the novel to our discussion. In this scene, Faye goes for a long walk with another writer at the literary event, Paola. They have a dinner scheduled later that evening with another friend and decide to walk along the busy streets to visit a fire-damaged church Paola discovered a few years back. The walk ends up becoming a rather long escapade in the unusually warm weather. As they get closer Paola describes this building:

Inside it is completely black, she said, and the walls and ceiling are warped like the inside of a cave where the layers of stone have expanded, and the fire, even while it devoured whatever paintings and statues had been there, left everywhere a patina of its own in which one believes one can glimpse ghostly images. Everywhere there are these strange half-shapes like melted wax and then in other places sheared areas where the stonework was split into two by the heat, and empty plinths and alcoves where things are missing, and the texture of the whole thing is so densely affected that it is almost no longer manmade, as if the trauma of the fire had turned it into a natural form. I don't know why, she said, but I find the sight of it extremely moving (Cusk, 2018, p. 212).

The fire has completely changed the inside of the church. The façade, however, remains which is partly why the church has been left open and only some restorations have been done to fix the damages. Paola's explanation of the incident is as a description of an impact of trauma that has turned its insides into a "natural form". The way she describes this trauma is psychological: the outside remains unfaced while the inside is warped and damaged. The damaged church becomes a metaphor for a traumatised human mind, which for us represents Faye. We remember this metaphor also from our discussion on Jung and the house (here replaced by the church) as a mental realm that can represent the unconscious and trauma.

Although this is not stated in the novel (Faye never tells us where she is in *Kudos*), the church is most likely Igreja de São Domingos in Lisbon. The construction of this church began around 1050 and in 1531 and 1755 it was almost completely destroyed by earthquakes. In 1959 a

fire broke out destroying nearly everything inside. It took six hours to extinguish the fire and in the process two firefighters lost their lives, as Paola also points out when she describes it. The restoration of the church left many scars of the fire in place, such as the black and warped walls. Trauma has changed this church completely and yet during the restoration they preferred keeping these changes rather than to cover them which creates this “natural form” Paola describes.

On their way to the church Paola walks fast while talking about the church they are about to visit. Faye barely manages to keep up while struggling in the heat and the noise from the traffic around them. The church is on the other side of the road when Faye takes notice of a paradise-like area not far off, beyond the traffic and the heat:

We had paused at a traffic light on a busy intersection and were waiting to cross the road. There was no shade, and the air shimmered over the throbbing traffic while the sun pounded unrelentingly on our heads amid the noise. On the other side of the road stood an avenue of great trees like purple clouds in whose grove-like dimness human figures were discernible. People strolled or sat on benches amid the dark trunks and beneath the densely patterned foliage, whose depths of light and shade grew more intricate the more I looked [...]. The separation between that silent glade-like place and the thundering pavement where we stood seemed for a moment so absolute that it was almost unbearable, as though it represented a disorder so fundamental and insurmountable that any attempt to right it would be ultimately shown to be futile (Cusk, 2018, pp. 213-214).

Faye describes this dream-like place in picturesque terms with people sitting on benches or strolling in the park in the midst of the thundering traffic. It is situated just across the road but described as far away from the noise and the traffic, a place where the green trees become like purple clouds and the human figures living there are dim and barely discernible. This avenue becomes a clearing in a forest, a “glade”, silent and “grove-like” with dense foliage suggesting water and humidity like you would expect at an oasis. The images create a picture of the Garden of Eden, a hidden enclosure of calm, contentment, and prosperity. It is described as out of reach from where she stands in the burning heat surrounded by the thundering pavement of cars and people.

Shortly after Faye’s observation of the dream-like avenue across the road, they finally reach the church Paola is looking for. Despite the long way to get there, especially for Faye who the

entire time has been fighting against the terrible heat (which does not seem to bother Paola), it turns out it was all for nothing:

Sweat was coursing down my back and a pounding had begun in my chest that felt like the extension of the pounding of the sun, as if it had incorporated me into itself. When we got to the church Paola had described, it was shut. She paced back and forth in front of the locked door as though expecting another way in to present itself. ‘It is a shame,’ she said. ‘I wanted you to see it. I had pictured it,’ she said, crestfallen [...]. I leaned against a wall and closed my eyes. ‘Are you all right?’ I heard Paola say” (ibid., p. 214).

The walk to the church is almost described as the road through purgatory with its burning heat, “pounding of the sun” and thundering pavement. But when they finally arrive at their destination the church is closed. It might be that this scene demonstrates Faye’s inability to convert, or reinvent the self as religious conversion represents the absolute idea of change of the self. Moreover, the scene draws on a similar image of a passage from Houellebecq’s novel *Submission*, where the main character François, a Huysmans academic, fails to change his ways and be free of pain. Lost in a decadent lifestyle of alcohol, loveless sex, and his passion for Huysmans, François is suffering tremendously and searching for meaning and love. Like Huysmans, the novel describes François’ attempt to convert to Catholicism, however, contrary to his decadent hero, his conversion ends in failure:

I went back to the Chapel of Our Lady, which now was deserted. The Virgin waited in the shadows, calm and timeless. She had sovereignty, she had power, but little by little I felt myself losing touch, I felt her moving away from me in space and across the centuries while I sat there in my pew, shrivelled and puny. After half an hour, I got up, fully deserted by the Spirit, reduced to my damaged, perishable body, and I sadly descended the stairs that led to the car park (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 137).

The passage shows a clear divide between the corporeal and the spiritual, the latter being seemingly impossible for François to reach. The scene is read as a catastrophic disappointment when François, although there is nothing he wants more, is not capable of converting like Durtal does in Huysman’s novel, *En Route* (1895). This novel is the focus of François’ thesis (fictional) at the University of Sorbonne in Paris: *La sortie du Tunnel*, as it describes Huysman’s own journey to convert to Catholicism (through the character Durtal).

Contrary to François Faye is not even able to enter the church. In *Submission* François described The Virgin as calm, timeless and powerful, but as “moving away from [him] in space” leaving him there in his perishable body. He must then descend “the stairs that led to the car park”, going from that powerful, holy place back to the banality of life, the car park, back to his mortal body and back to his state where change is impossible. Faye’s reaction appears to also be that of disappointment. She is left standing on the pavement leaning against a wall, in her perishable body, exhausted from the heat and the noise from the traffic. Later, she describes what happened as a “detour and its failed purpose” (Cusk, 2018, p. 215), where there is ambiguity to the word *purpose* – which either depicts simply the walk to the church, or indeed the failed conversion.

Compared *Submission* the topic of religion and religious conversion is not a central part of Cusk’s trilogy. However, our comparative reading of Houellebecq and Cusk reveals a similar narrative: a narrative of the impossibility of changing your ways – the impossibility of conversion. Like François, Faye appears to remain incapable of reinvention of the self through a religious conversion, or any other conversion for that matter. She cannot therefore move on from her trauma and remains lost – deracinated, suffering and nomadic. Ironically, Faye expresses her belief in the individual’s capacity to change by denying the idea of fate or that life is preordained. While talking to a man called Hermann who claims that we all “become what [we] are” (Cusk, 2018, p. 101), Faye explains that: “I didn’t [...] accept the primacy of preordination: to return to his remarks about plants, what that analogy left out was the human possibility for self-creation” (ibid., p. 101). Something that is preordained is usually a belief that things happen in the way that has been decided by a power such as God or fate. She also continues to say that the children of artists were very susceptible to parental influence which demonstrated a “special kind of egotism [by the parents] that sought to eliminate the risks of creativity by enslaving others to their point of view” (ibid., p. 101). Faye’s disagreement with Hermann clearly shows that she does not believe that destiny or God plays a part in the creation of the self.

### 4.3 A non-resolution or escaping narrative convention?

Is there resolution in *Kudos*? From the title one could certainly get that impression. *Kudos* is Greek for “praise” (κῦδος), as in praise received for an achievement. With this latest reading of the church-scene and the comparison between *Kudos* and *Submission*, the resolution in *Kudos* and to the project of conversion seems to suggest that Faye has failed to reinvent the self. Is she then lost?

As we remember, Karen Valihora argued that Cusk, through Faye, is trying to write herself out of narrative convention or any conventions for that matter (marriage or other): that *Kudos* is the celebration of an exit (Valihora, 2019, p. 33). Perhaps, like the neighbour on the plane in *Kudos*, all her interlocuters are unfree, bound somehow by their narrative, whereas Faye is not. In that case my reading of a failed conversion at the fire-damaged church may be the example of the opposite of a religious conversion. It may represent what Valihora suggests: the breaking of narrative convention, the unwillingness to submit to another set of norms, for example religious norms – Faye does indeed show her disagreement with Hermann, mentioned earlier, on the idea of fate or preordination. Religion is an example of preordination: the belief in the power of God and in religious norms and structures. On their way to the church Paola explains that “in certain places where statues had obviously been, new lights had been installed [...] these lights, she said, had the strange effect of making you see more in the empty space than you would have seen had it been filled with a statue” (Cusk, 2018, p. 213). In other words, religious icons, or narrative convention, have melted away giving room for new possibilities.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode argues that we inevitably are quick to look for resolutions and endings in literature as we do in our own lives. He argues that humans are deeply uncomfortable knowing that the part we play in the history of the world is so short. In order to cope with this knowledge, humans look for a coherent pattern to explain this uncomfortable fact of existence. We tend to place ourselves in the middle of a story so that there is some sense to our lives and some consonance between the beginning, the middle and the end. Kermode argues that: “Such models of the world make tolerable one’s moment between beginning and end” (Kermode, 2000, p. 4). Humans have always used these fictions (beginning, middle, ending) to impose structure on the incomprehensible idea of eternity. This is also linked to Christian apocalyptic thought: the beginning was a prosperous age whereas the middle, where humans tend to place themselves, is a time of turmoil and decadence and in need of renovation (ibid., p. 6). Living in

the middle means that the end is near and the ones capable of shaping that end are the ones from the middle-generation (Kermode, 2000). The need to find a resolution in *Kudos* and to Cusk's trilogy as a whole agrees with Kermode's description of the wish to impose structure. We resist almost by instinct the idea of a story without an ending or a resolution. Let us apply this insight to our comparative reading.

In our reading *Kudos* there is something strange going on. At the same time as we suggest that it depicts a failed conversion, there is an omnipresence of *déjà vu* while we follow Paola and Faye's trip to the church: A feeling of having read this scene before. And we have indeed read this scene before, quite a while back, in *Outline*. We remember the sun scene (murder scene) from Camus' novel *The Outsider* and how a similar scene took place during the boat trip with Faye and her plane neighbour. In the first chapter, we argued that there was similarity between the two novels and how Meursault and Faye carried the same traits: both had indifferent personalities and a feeling that life was meaningless. We connected this observation to the belated reaction to trauma. We then looked at the depiction of the sun and its description during the murder scene as the prime reason for Meursault's actions. The description of the sun was quite similar in *Outline*: the sun was "beat[ing] uncomfortably on [Faye's] face" and in *The Outsider* the sun beat like "cymbals" on Meursault's forehead. Now, the description of the sun in *Outline* bears a clear resemblance to the sun in *Kudos*. The sweat and heat, and the "pounding" of the sun as if "incorporated" into her. Just like in *Outline*, this description of the sun and the heat as painful and threatening, is creating a field of suspense, it builds up tension before something is about to happen. But nothing happens on the boat trip as we remember from the first chapter, just like nothing happens when they arrive at the church in *Kudos*.

What is Cusk doing here? She seems to be undercutting a resolution to the novel by taking us back to start, to *Outline*. Valihora argued that: "[w]hen Faye leaves her neighbour behind at the end of the novel, it is an achievement, earned through the recognition that she has moved beyond the circular narrative of repetition and the kind of enchantment on which it depends, the narrative in which he is trapped" (Valihora, 2019, p. 26). However, in *Kudos* we are again reminded of the compulsion to repeat and that Faye is still trapped there in the loop like her plane neighbour from the first novel. To further support this observation, we learn in *Kudos* that Faye has remarried. The journalist interviewing her mentions it only briefly: "I read that you got married again [...] I admit

that it surprised me” (Cusk, 2018, p. 84). And it is surprising as Faye is the one who so convincingly told her seatmate that she was done with love in *Outline*: “I was not interested in a relationship with any man, not now and probably not ever again” (Cusk, 2014, p. 178). Why would she remarry again, demonstrating, like her neighbour, that she is still stuck in a repetition? Why would she think that this new marriage would be any different than the first?

Moreover, the new seatmate on the plane in *Kudos* also creates a quite clear example of *déjà vu*. We are in fact back where we started: once again, Faye is on a plane and once again, she sits next to a man who will tell her his life story and how he is trapped in it (without himself realising this fact) by retelling his stories “with their sting removed” as to avoid the pain (Cusk, 2018, p. 10). Faye tells the man that “the question of whether to leave or to remain [is] one we usually [ask] ourselves in private”. “The funny thing is” her neighbour answers, “it felt as if I’d been asking myself that question for as long as I could remember” (Cusk, 2018, pp. 11-12). How long must he ask himself this question then, before he decides to leave, and how long will it take for Faye to realize that the same question applies to her? The man on the plane is indeed a long way from leaving. In addition, he demonstrates the inability to break free by being trapped in his seat on the plane. He sits as if imprisoned in his seat, too tall to actually fit into it – “his elbows jutted out over the armrests and his knees were jammed against the seat in front [...] [he] twisted trying to cross and uncross his legs, and inadvertently kicked the person to his left” (Cusk, 2018, p. 1). He even comes into an argument with the flight attendant because he keeps letting his legs block the aisle and her passage as they are too long to fit behind the seat in front. These instances of *déjà vu* throughout *Kudos* suggest that Faye is still in a state of melancholia – and these circular events are in fact part of Faye’s acting-out the trauma. Let us briefly look at the conclusion of *Kudos* to see if there are any further hints at a resolution or an exit.

The last part in *Kudos* is dedicated to a story centred upon Faye’s life in a conversation with her son. He explains to her that people are not willing to listen to his story and that people ask him things but “they don’t connect the things up”. Faye tells him that “you can’t tell your story to everybody [...] Maybe you can only tell it to one person” (Cusk, 2018, pp. 229-230). The conversation concludes as Faye tells her son she misses him. This could have provided satisfying closure to the trilogy, evoking a feeling of reconciliation between mother and son, a repairing of bonds of sorts. However, this is not the ending Cusk gives her novel. Faye keeps on walking along

the coast at night after the conversation and passes some rather unpleasant men. She goes for a swim in the ocean and one of the men walks over to the water while fixing his eyes on her:

I looked back at him from my suspended distance, rising and falling. He came to a halt just where the waves broke and he stood there in his nakedness like a deity, resplendent and grinning. Then he grasped his thick penis and began to urinate into the water [...] he looked at me with black eyes full of malevolent delight [...] the water bore me up, heaving, as if I lay on the breast of some sighing creature while the man emptied himself into its depths. I looked into his cruel, merry eyes, and I waited for him to stop (Cusk, 2018, p. 232).

This last scene has been interpreted in different ways. Patricia Lockwood suggested that it could be seen as the immortalization of Faye. Lockwood writes “immortalized here it cannot pollute her” – that the pollution in the water can no longer touch her and that Faye has had the final word (Lockwood, 2018). Jennifer Richardson on the other hand, argues for a more feminist reading: the man is urinating directly on Faye as a representation of men urinating on all women. After all, many of the men in the narratives have been rather beastly to their women: Controlling them, threatening to take custody of the children, financially ruining them etc. The breast of the sighing creature Faye is laying on could be the long-suffering female collective of men urinating on them, taking advantage of them, etc. (Richardson, 2018). Although Cusk, at the end of the scene, uses the word “stop” as her final word in the trilogy, the narrative has a rather open ending. This would mean, despite Valihora’s claims about the achievement of an exit, that there is a certain irony to the title, *Kudos*.

Virginia Woolf is one of the main advocates of this kind of subversion of plot and open endings. She mastered what Rachel Blau DuPlessis called “writing beyond the ending”, signifying a rejection of the traditional nineteenth century fiction with endings of marriage or death, which were the fate of most women at that time (DuPlessis, 1985). In Woolf’s *Comments on Chekhov’s Endings*, she argues that “[t]hese stories are inconclusive, we say, and proceed to frame a criticism based upon the assumption that stories ought to conclude in a way that we recognize” (Woolf, 1966, p. 240). Like Chekhov, Woolf believed that fictional worlds resist closure like life resists closure. They go on in our imagination just like life goes on. However, the way Faye’s life seems to go on is as a circular narrative, repeating endlessly the same schematics from *Outline* to *Kudos* and back again, revisiting the same kinds of people and similar scenes. As I argue, it represents

her inability to move on – she has not moved on from the circular narrative of repetition as Valihora suggested, she is still very much trapped in it.

In the last chapter we have explored the value of pain and how multiple characters in the novel try to evade pain (i.e. trauma in the past) – what Keats argues is the same as resisting pain’s educational purpose. In the church-scene, *Kudos* can be read as a failed attempt at religious conversion – this conversion again represents the failure of reinvention of the self. At the same time, we have seen how Faye also resists the “primacy of preordination” as she calls it, the idea that fate or God decide people’s lives. As such, the inability to convert may rather be seen as a *refusal* to convert, which resonates well with Valihora’s claim that *Kudos* celebrates an exit: from narrative conventions and other conventions: religion, marriage etc. However, through the observation of a series of *déjà vu* in *Kudos*, we are reminded of previous events in *Outline*. The fact that *Kudos* brings us back to *Outline* instead of suggesting a sense of progression in the narrative, privileges an understanding of the trilogy as circular, not as an exit – Faye has not moved on and is still acting-out the traumatic event from the past.

## Conclusion

After having explored Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy through the theoretical frameworks of trauma, and exploration of the representation of self, I will present some of my final observations arising from this analysis. Firstly, it seems evident that going through a divorce is a traumatic experience. We see this in the experience of Faye and the way she struggles to find herself and move on after the uprooting of her family. This is also evident from the stories told to her by the people she meets – in these conversations Faye's story is constantly submerged. A divorce, and with it the destruction of the family stability, creates a loss of identity because the understanding of the self has been based on the relationship with this other person. When this bond is broken, so is the self, and a process of reinvention must begin for both individuals in order to reconnect with the present and look to the future. What is also lost in a divorce is the home and the image of what constitutes a home. The impact on the subject is therefore twofold – a loss of identity and a loss of place. This double narrative is what I have tracked in this thesis: the narrative of trauma in the main character and the narrative of reinvention of the self.

As we wrap up our discussion, we are reminded of Stevie Smith's poem, "She got up and went away", which functions as the epigraph of *Kudos*. At the beginning of this thesis, I suggested that Smith's poem is playing with its own lines and space, asking questions to challenge and open up its own structure. Perhaps what Cusk is doing in her *Outline* trilogy is something similar, through Faye she travels around speaking with different people, asking them questions, opening up their stories. Valihora's reading of the trilogy is as a story of leaving or exiting, like the character from Smith's poem: *Faye gets up and goes away*. Valihora argues that Faye is reclaiming autonomy by leaving the "circular narrative of repetition" (Valihora, p. 2019, p. 26): i.e., a compulsion to repeat the past after trauma. She also argues that in so doing Faye is chasing a "new storyline" (ibid., p. 27): by exiting different conventions: narrative, marriage, religion etc. Valihora argues that the title, *Kudos*, suggests that Faye has achieved her goal and successfully moved on, strongly privileging a conversion narrative. The series of *déjà vu* in *Kudos*, however, show a certain ambiguity to the ending of Cusk's trilogy – Faye still appears to be acting-out the trauma, trapped in a circular narrative.

The word *Kudos* does not only mean praise given for an achievement but is related to the word “to hear”, as Valihora also points out, which suggests what others hear about you. What is forgotten in this analysis is that “hearing” is linked to the act of listening, something Faye does a lot of. In the first chapter, we briefly hinted at the importance of listening to others as a way to understand the self. In *Outline* Ryan tells Faye about the Greek origin of the English word ellipsis - “ellipsis, he’d been told, could literary be translated as ‘to hide behind silence’. It’s fascinating stuff, he said” (Cusk, 2014, p. 180). Throughout the trilogy *ellipsis* describes rather well how Faye must appear to her interlocutors – hiding behind her silence as she listens to their stories. Perhaps we have forgotten something crucial about the *Outline* trilogy and how we read it. Toward the end of *Transit*, Faye tells a woman that she “[has] found out more [...] by listening than [she] had ever thought possible” (Cusk, 2016, p. 243). Indeed, Faye has been listening and observing very closely her interlocutors from the start, almost similar to how the psychoanalyst listens to the patient – although we will not argue that Faye poses as the analyst, there are certainly ways to look at her relationship with her *raconteurs* that remind us of an analyst-patient situation.

Over the course of the *Outline* trilogy, Faye shows proof of excellent analytical skills as most of what she does is listen to other people’s stories. This is perhaps especially evident in her writing classes, when she asks her students to just talk, usually about something they noticed on their way to class. Her classes become somewhat like therapy sessions where they all share a unique story with the help or guidance from Faye, usually revealing something from their subconscious. She listens closely and when she intervenes, her questions are usually very brief allowing the story to continue in whatever form the speaker chooses. This near analyst-patient relationship is most visible when it is not working, because it disrupts the floating listening we become accustomed to as we follow Faye’s narration. Take this passage for instance, from one of Faye’s writing classes in *Transit* where Faye comments on what one of the students does wrong:

One of the students, I noticed, had taken the role as leader: she was asking each of the others in turn for their contribution. She was acting my part, yet there was something wrong with her execution of it: she interfered unnecessarily; instead of proceeding by instinct the students were becoming self-conscious and halting. One of the two men in the room was trying to talk about his dog. What was it about this dog, my understudy asked, that he thought was so interesting? The man looked uncertain. It’s beautiful, he said. My understudy made a gesture of frustration. You can’t just tell me it’s beautiful, she said. You have to show me that it is. The man looked quizzical. [...]. I asked

him what breed the dog was and he said it was a Saluki. They were Arabian hunting dogs, he added, greatly prized and honoured in Arab culture [...] (Cusk, 2016, p. 189).

From this passage we see how her understudy is not fulfilling the role of listener. She “interferes unnecessarily” and does not adhere to the free-floating listening that progressively would help the man “proceed by instinct” and tell his story. Instead, she makes him self-conscious which makes it more difficult to enter the sub-conscious and the actual essence of his story. As Faye returns to the group after observing their troubles, the synergy is immediately stabilized again by one very simple question concerning the dog’s breed. And after that, his story goes on for a long time almost uninterrupted, demonstrating Faye’s skill as a listener. Faye’s comment on how much she has learned from listening to others (keeping in mind that her story is constantly submerged in the stories of her speakers), hints at the importance of listening as a way to understand yourself.

Although the trilogy represents a new narrative technique for Cusk, the overall topics and conflicts remain similar to her previous work – her fiction as well as her memoirs. The stories revolve around family issues, divorce, the relationship between men and women and feelings of guilt toward the children. In these stories Cusk mixes in reflections on freedom and destiny, displacement, art and suffering. In our thesis we have focused on the individual and personal experience of trauma and self, and the deracination and personal journey of the main character, Faye. What we could examine further is the topic of the family and the family relationships mentioned above, which appear to be central in Cusk’s trilogy. It would therefore be interesting to take a more collective perspective on trauma and the family in the *Outline* trilogy and perhaps bring the topic of family in contact with the autofiction perspective to investigate whether family works as a form of self-therapy to Cusk herself. This type of focus would allow us to investigate both how the individual responds to trauma, but also perhaps how it takes on an emblematic value to the world and how the world responds to trauma. French literary critic Alexandre Gefen touches upon this in his book *Réparer le monde* (2017). He describes how 21<sup>st</sup> century literature renews the topic of “dire le monde” (explain the world) and touches the reader with an ethical worry. It becomes a therapeutic or clinical paradigm as a way of asking writing and reading to repair, renew, solve and fill the flaws of our contemporary society. Gefen argues that it demonstrates a need to reconstruct collective and personal history, to compensate for the meditations lost from social institutions and religion as they are seen as obsolete and degenerate (Giddens would call them shell

institutions) at a time when the individual is tasked with inventing itself – an observation that builds on from Giddens’ work on modernity and the self.

Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* trilogy is a significant contribution to contemporary literature. As we have seen in this thesis, her work is as much a description of the multiple traumas in modern society as a thought-experiment to how we may work through them – perhaps not to reinvent the self as much as to understand ourselves in these traumatic experiences that have become almost a normal part of many people’s lives. As Roger Luckhurst reminds us “trauma is a concept that can only emerge within modernity [...] as an effect of the rise, in the nineteenth century, of the technical and statistical society that can generate, multiply and quantify the ‘shocks’ of modern life” (Luckhurst, 2008, p.19). Cusk’s trilogy certainly generates multiple stories about the shocks of modern life and at the same time links them together through one single character, Faye, as her traumatic story is always submerged in the stories of her interlocuters.

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