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► **To cite this version:**

| Paola Cantu. Outline by Rachel Cusk. *Iride*, 2023, 3, pp.639–658. <10.1414/107163>. <halshs-04384949>

HAL Id: halshs-04384949

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04384949v1>

Submitted on 14 Jan 2025

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How best to tell a story: facing stories as arguments in Rachel Cusk's trilogy¹

Paola Cantù²

The main character of Rachel Cusk's trilogy is a female writer, meeting strangers or friends, who start telling her their own stories. Faye - this is the woman's name, something the reader only learns very late on - listens almost silently to the stories, so that one has the impression that the book writes itself, without the writer ever stepping in. Yet, the linguistic homogeneity and argumentative accuracy prove to the contrary. Criticizing a pornographic view of romance, in which the writer peepholes the characters, while pretending to be their creator, Rachel Cusk reveals how and where writers find their material: in people's own tales. Not wanting to steal content from the world with a voyeuristic gaze, the writer lets each character introduce themselves, freely choosing the lines while telling their story. But the choice of the context and of the language serves a specific aim, namely that of exploring the feminine universe through an exploration of human argumentation which unmasks the idea of the universal representativeness of the individual fictional character. The psychological characters themselves are not universal, but the arguments they use are: facing Cusk's stories is like facing arguments, where anyone can demand reasons for the claims that the storyteller advances.

1. The social construction of the storyteller's self and the role of the listener

The narrative structure gives a central role to orality and listening. Orality is traditionally based on the account of those who have seen an event and therefore know what happened. Witnesses precede the story and confer authority to it. In the trilogy, the sense of hearing is privileged over the sense of sight. Stories are not the account of a witness who has seen a given fact, but a "series of events we believe ourselves to be involved in, but on which we have absolutely no influence at all", as remarked by Georgeou, a long-haired student attending the summer school course taught by Faye.³ What counts in the story is not the authenticity conferred by witnessing facts with one's own eyes, but the belief in it that the speaker tries performatively to induce in the listener. A shared belief however requires one to go beyond one's own individual point of view, be it in a story or in a marriage. As the narrator tells us:

Most marriages worked in the same way that stories are said to do, through the suspension of disbelief.⁴

The story, as well as love in a marriage, ends when the shared and imaginative vision that unifies two people is replaced by the individual point of view. And yet the individual is nothing more than a canvas which is constructed by interaction with the expectations and behaviour of others. Sometimes it is constructed through identification or empathic listening to their stories, so that one cannot trace the boundary anymore. A student of Faye's summer creative writing course, described as 'the woman sitting directly opposite to Faye' remarks:

¹ The author would like to express thanks to Andrew Haigh, who kindly helped improving the English.

² Aix-Marseille Université and CNRS, France.

³ R. Cusk, *Outline*, Faber & Faber, 2014, p. 137.

⁴ R. Cusk, *Transit: A Novel*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2016, Kindle Edition, p. 29.

*Her consciousness, at this point—she was forty-three years old—was so crammed full not just of her own memories, obligations, dreams, knowledge and the plethora of her day-to-day responsibilities, but also of other people’s—gleaned over years of listening, talking, empathising, worrying—that she was frightened most of all of the boundaries separating these numerous types of mental freight, the distinctions between them, crumbling away until she was no longer certain what had happened to her and what other people she knew, or sometimes even what was or was not real.*⁵

And sometimes the individual builds himself up through the projection of his own feelings onto the lives of others. Like Heathcliff and Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* staring through the windows of the Lintons’ drawing room, the main character watches a family on the neighbouring boat, remarking: “I was beginning to see in other people’s lives a commentary on my own.”⁶

We have thus an interweaving of stories that are not told as the result of somebody witnessing something. The stories are constructed in the interaction with a listener. Seeing, witnessing an event is no longer the guarantee of the truthfulness of one’s tale, and the personal account of an experience becomes a story only if it appears believable to the listener. There’s no objectivity without the subjectivity of the storytelling and the intersubjectivity guaranteed by the listener’s critical attitude.

A reviewer of Cusk’s trilogy remarked that we don’t know much about the main character at the beginning, as if she were absent until the very end. Yet, the woman who listens, even before we learn that her name is Faye, is endowed with an extraordinary *maieutic* ability, because her silence as well as the short questions she asks allow the narrative structure to unfold. The characters need recognition for their story to be credible, and the listener’s power is to grant this recognition. The stories told by male and female characters are not primarily self-deceiving narratives, nor ways to soothe guilt, but real narrative constructions that work only if they can induce a shared belief in the listener.

It seems to me that the listener reverses the classic evangelical figure of the mother, who ponders the stories in her heart, without reacting or commenting, as in the Virgin Mary’s silence while shepherds spread the word of Jesus’ birth arousing wonder in the hearers.⁷ Yet, it is crucial that the listener be a feminine character, because towards the end she will start speaking, exploring new terrains of femininity. And it is crucial that she is patient, because patience is needed to listen in silence to stranger’s stories, preventing one’s own emotions from bursting out before the story is finished. Professionalism is the way out of emotions: from the very first meeting on the plane, the listener reacts to stories as a professional storyteller does, discussing their objectivity, the balance of the characters’ features, the narrator’s aims, and gender imbalances:

*I remained dissatisfied by the story of his second marriage. It had lacked objectivity; it relied too heavily on extremes, and the moral properties it ascribed to those extremes were often incorrect. This was a story in which I sensed the truth was being sacrificed to the narrator’s desire to win.*⁸

But she also reacts to characters who, being in an unusual context or place, where nobody knows them, have the freedom to use conversation to seduce the listener. Unlike the usual characters of a novel, who acquire existence and recognition by the repetition of certain stylistic elements,

⁵ R. Cusk, *Outline*, cit., p. 154.

⁶ R. Cusk, *Outline*, cit., p. 75.

⁷ *The Gospel of Luke*, verses 17-19.

⁸ R. Cusk, *Outline*, cit., p. 29.

characters are granted their individuality through the social recognition of the credibility of their story, rather than by using an idiosyncratic language.

The silence of the female listener in the trilogy is even more striking if compared to the main characters of other novels by Rachel Cusk: take for example the mother's monologue in *A Life's Work* or the desperate talking of the female protagonist of *A Second Place*. But in the last volume of the trilogy the listener's individual point of view also finds expression, in a way that is perfectly compatible with the preceding passive role. Faye starts telling of her own disappointment while listening no longer to the tales of strangers, but to writers who lie about the way they create novels. Writers' tales rarely induce the suspension of disbelief that is necessary to have a shared vision of literature. Their lack of morality towards characters (and towards readers), whose stories they steal without acknowledging it, is condemned without appeal.

2. *Feminism, literature and real life*

Rachel Cusk's trilogy does not explicitly question ethical injustices or socio-economical inequalities, nor does it attack gender imbalances, yet it is a sample of feminist literature, because it seeks new ways to explore the feminine condition. Through the stories she hears, the listener observes the inequalities between partners in a couple, the feminine need to reconcile motherhood and work, the male desire to win over whoever plays the role of antagonist in a story, the feminine difficulty to distinguish one's own self from the self of the people one cares for.

For example, at the very beginning of *Outline* we learn of the narrator's surprise when the rules for the use of oxygen masks are laid down, questioning the female tendency to put the well-being of the people they care for before their own:

*no one protested, or spoke up to disagree with this commandment that one should take care of others only after taking care of oneself. Yet I wasn't sure it was altogether true.*⁹

Besides, many of the narrating characters are middle-aged men in the throes of a mid-life crisis demanding a reformulation of the narrative of the self. This reconstruction of the self takes place by telling their personal stories to a professional female writer, who questions the credibility of the narrative plot. By means of this critical evaluation emerges a feminist view, one that is based neither on the ethical condemnation of injustice nor on the idea of moral progress leading to the emancipation of women. The characters are free to express themselves and are exempt from any objectifying gaze, but at the same time they are subject to the quiet, ironic, biting, professional observations of the listener, who uses her critical tools, the rules of storytelling, to cast doubt on certain reconstructions, or to suggest their partiality.

The narrators themselves, in the pauses, seem to wonder whether the story works on the listener and ultimately on themselves, because they are the stories they tell themselves, and therefore 'exist' only as long as their stories work (are credible to themselves and to the listener). Bernard, Virginia Woolf's character in *The Waves*, asked:

But what are stories? Toys I twist, bubbles I blow, one ring passing through another. And sometimes I begin to doubt if there are stories. What is my story? What is Rhoda's? What is Neville's? [...] beyond facts all is darkness and conjecture.

In the trilogy, the limits to the story include not only internal coherence and facts, but also the consistency with individual points of view, with projections of desires and needs, with other stories

⁹ R. Cusk, *Outline*, cit., p. 5.

that one has lived and even with stories that have been heard and introjected. Storytelling is neither a liberating therapy nor a narcissistic performance (with an exception made for certain authorial egos encountered at book presentations) but a process of self-construction, both for the storyteller and for the listener, and the starting point of a process of deconstruction of social injustices.

The deep psychological insights to be found in many pages of the trilogy, do not mainly have a therapeutic value, but constitute the mechanism for criticizing their gender-biased narratives. These stories, whatever the character telling them, include arguments on the feminine condition that the reader is familiar with. Analysing the arguments advanced by the storyteller is a way to deconstruct stories that permeate the reader's everyday life.

If the repeated narration of a story from which pain has been expunged seems to open up therapeutic perspectives for certain characters, these repetitions have a profound influence on the construction of the self, especially of women who have difficulties in separating their self from the self of others. This separation appears as a conquest that is slowly accomplished, after parting from children, partners' needs and parents' desires to affirm one's own compulsion to creativity:

The parts of life that are suffocating are so often the parts that are the projection of our parents' own desires. One's existence as a wife and a mother, for example, is something often walked into without question, as though we are propelled by something outside ourselves; while a woman's creativity, the things she doubts and is always sacrificing for the sake of these other things—when she wouldn't dream, for instance, of sacrificing the interests of her husband or son—has been her own idea, her own inner compulsion.¹⁰

Deconstructing the hidden arguments in individual stories is a way of reinventing the self, leaving more freedom for individual creativity, and less space for social normativity.

The interaction of life, literature and gender was already at the centre of Rachel Cusk's novel *A Life's Work*, where she narrates her experience of motherhood, providing a harsh criticism of the idea that women are naturally inclined to be caregivers. Life and literature are intertwined in the trilogy too: characters tell autobiographical stories. Yet, the exploration of gender is different: there is no anger or sarcasm, just a quiet, detached observation. The feminine writer acts almost like an anthropologist observing the habits of a tribe, bringing to light the argumentative mechanisms underlying social injustices but leaving the reader free to make their own judgements. The parallels between art and life serve to deconstruct some commonplaces of adult life and compare them with the respective literary *topoi*. An example is the idea of progress, a virus that infects life and the novel, as remarked by Paniotis, Faye's Greek friend:

Improvement itself is perhaps a mere personal fantasy. We are all addicted to it, the story of improvement, to the extent that it has commandeered our deepest sense of reality. It has even infected the novel, though perhaps now the novel is infecting us back again, so that we expect of our lives what we've come to expect of our books; but this sense of life as a progression is something I want no more of.¹¹

The analogy between life and narrative is rooted in the tendency to build a narrative out of one's own behaviour: we all become storytellers the very moment we reflexively analyse our behaviour.

¹⁰ R. Cusk, *Transit*, cit., p. 125.

¹¹ R. Cusk, *Outline*, cit., p. 99.

Maybe that's why literature does not need to be defended, as the writer's publisher mentions during an interview with her author.¹² Literature serves to relive the past by sublimating individual pain:

*What is history other than memory without pain?*¹³

But storytelling requires interaction with other characters (partners, children, friends) and with places (a city, a home), interactions necessary for the construction of a compelling plot, so that unlike Marsden Hartley, the painter admired by a student in *Transit*, one might not lose the desire to live for that plot.

*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 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.*¹⁴

3. Stories as arguments

The characters in the trilogy are individualised not by their names or social roles, not by the dialogues they have with other characters, but by the kind of arguments they produce, by the way they argumentatively construct their stories. And indeed, Faye seems to assess how good a story is, as the hearer assesses the acceptability of the arguments produced in a speech by a speaker. Faye questions the use of certain lexical choices:

*I asked him why he had used the word 'guilt' to describe what other people might have called homesickness, and what in any case was really just the absence of his own familiar world.*¹⁵

Just as in an argument one wonders whether the claim is fake, artfully constructed to be truthful, so the narrator wonders whether the fact of living an event while imagining how to narrate it, can make it a fake. The tendency to imagine how one will tell stories at the very moment one lives them, i.e. living in front of a potential audience, makes it difficult to distinguish the real from the fake, but also highlights the mediated and social nature of each narrative. While burying his dog in the backyard, alone and without telling his wife and daughters, so that the pain of others might not take priority over his own, a man seated near to the main character on the plane observes:

*And all the time I was digging I couldn't tell whether what I was doing was manly and honourable or just fake as well, because at the same time as I was digging I was imagining telling people about it.*¹⁶

Exploring feminine suffering needs a way to deconstruct fake stories, and this can be done by paying attention to the aims of the speaker and to the rules of the game they are playing.

*If I didn't want to compete, I wanted even less to make new rules about what constituted victory.*¹⁷

¹² R. Cusk, *Kudos*, Faber & Faber, 2018, Kindle Edition, pp. 431-432.

¹³ R. Cusk, *Transit*, cit., p. 408.

¹⁴ R. Cusk, *Transit*, cit., p. 141.

¹⁵ R. Cusk, *Transit*, cit., p. 21.

¹⁶ R. Cusk, *Kudos*, cit., p. 312.

¹⁷ R. Cusk, *Transit*, cit., p. 7.

Lies are not betrayed by psychological introspection, but by an analysis of the language and the argumentative structure of the discourse. When a story has been rehearsed many times, even if originally told to cope with pain, it becomes an experience that produces a pleasure in the storyteller that has nothing to do with the truthfulness of the story anymore.

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. The skill, I saw, lay in skirting close enough to what appeared to be the truth without allowing what you actually felt about it to regain its power over you.¹⁸

To explore feminine landscapes, one cannot just tell truthful stories, basking in the literary pleasure they produce. Yet, the repetition might suggest the search for a hidden text, one that is performed rather than told, one that is experienced in the telling through the contact between bodies, one that becomes evident in the physical fatigue of the narrator who rehearses and of the writer who relentlessly attempts to forge new phrases. This fatigue differs but at the same time evokes the feminine labour more than the voyeuristic description of a character. Rachel Cusk, as Faye's students, tell us 'something that they had noticed on their way' to school: writing is not mainly about using one's own imagination, but about learning how to tell people's true experiences. Carver explained in an interview that the story *Fat* originated from a meeting that his wife had had in the place where she worked as a waitress:

it was a question of how best to tell it, whose story it was. Then I made a conscious decision how to present the story, and I decided to tell it from the point of view of the woman, the waitress, and frame the story as if she were telling it to her girlfriend.¹⁹

Rachel Cusk, like Raymond Carver, aims at making explicit the sources of her stories. Just as an argument is constructed to be told by someone and to have a certain effect on the listening audience, so a story is always someone's story, and the writer's freedom lies in choosing the language in which to tell it, the character to whom it should be attributed, and the dialogical context in which to place it. Setting stories in a context, where the focus is not on the character's idiosyncratic features, but on the structure of their arguments, Rachel Cusk invites us to face stories as arguments, testing their credibility, efficacy and social role.

¹⁸ R. Cusk, *Kudos*, cit., p. 130.

¹⁹ E. Campbell, *Raymond Carver. A Study of the short fiction*, Twayne, 1992, p. 210.