



## Life Style

### Rachel Cusk and the Critique of Minimalism

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#### After Maximalism

By many accounts, the twenty-first century in British literary fiction began on 27 January 2000: ‘Early in the morning, late in the century, Cricklewood Broadway. At 06.27 hours on January 1, 1975, Alfred Archibald Jones was dressed in corduroy and sat in a fume-filled Cavalier Musketeer Estate face down on the steering wheel, hoping judgement would not be too heavy upon him’ (Smith 2000: 3).<sup>1</sup> The opening sentence of Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* exemplifies the zany and overly informative narrative mode through which millennial literary fiction reconciled the exigencies of postmodern self-reflexiveness and the demands of readerly connection. Nor was this mode restricted to Britain. Nine months later, arguably the most celebrated American novel of the year began as follows: ‘In later years, holding forth to an interviewer or to an audience of aging fans at a comic book convention, Sam Clay liked to declare, apropos of his and Joe Kavalier’s greatest creation, that back when he was a boy, sealed and hog-tied inside the airtight vessel known as Brooklyn, New York, he had been haunted by dreams of Harry Houdini’ (Chabon 2000: 1). Michael Chabon’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, like *White Teeth*, indulges

<sup>1</sup> It is almost a commonplace to position *White Teeth* (published on 27 January 2000) as the endpoint of 1990s British literature and the start of its next phase. See Bentley 2015; Vermeulen 2018. Tew claims that *White Teeth* made Smith ‘the first quintessentially British twenty-first-century writer’ for her capacity to capture ‘a millennial zeitgeist’ (2010: 21). Because of its fortuitous publication date in early 2000, *White Teeth* is often the earliest work to be included in courses on twenty-first-century literature or scholarly surveys of the period.



narrative detail, complexity and storyworld excess in a way that can, without too much controversy, be termed *maximalist*.<sup>2</sup>

The more familiar signifier for this mode of writing, however, is a different one. In a sprawling review of Smith's novel, critic James Wood infamously (and deaf to the gendered history of ascriptions of hysteria) diagnosed her 'big, ambitious novel' as a form of what he termed 'hysterical realism'. This realism is 'lively and varied and brightly marked'; it is 'a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity'. At the beginning of the millennium, novel-writing, for Wood, had become information management rather than character elaboration: 'Information has become the new character,' and this means that one can read these loud novels without encountering 'anything really affecting, sublime, or beautiful' (2000: n.p.).

Two decades later, this is no longer the most valorized mode of writing (not even Chabon or Smith write like that anymore). Indeed, the critical labels that joined hysterical realism in the attempt to capture the contemporary novel's propensity for relatedness and profusion after postmodernism (New Sincerity, metamodernism, post-irony) have in their turn been superseded. In retrospect, 2000 was the end rather than the beginning of something new (Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, perhaps the last major work to fit the hysterical and maximalist moulds, was published exactly ten days before 9/11, a key signifier for the irrevocable end of the end of history).<sup>3</sup> Today, literary sophistication is measured by the leaner and sparser conventions of autofictional writing (Wasserman 2022: 561–4), which shares the literary spotlight with the widely discussed turn to genre (McGurl 2015); to the extent that narrative excess and hyperattention to detail are indulged in autofiction, they are kept in check by the referential pull of authorial identity and realist setting – a marked difference

<sup>2</sup> The notion of literary maximalism is less extensively studied than that of minimalism, arguably because it lacks the latter's overlap with dominant pedagogical creative writing practices that emphasize craft and constraint (McGurl 2011: 294). Ercolino defines the maximalist novel as a distinctive genre of postwar literature with ten specific characteristics (2014: xiii–iv); for Levey, maximalism applies to 'writing that values the pursuit of detail, specificity, and comprehensiveness' over other literary purposes (2017: 2). My use of the label 'maximalist' here straddles Levey's and Ercolino's more sustained accounts. McGurl identifies maximalism with the impulse 'to say all there is to say,' which results in 'crowdedness of characterization, complexity of plot, and relatively long length' (2021: 202–3).

<sup>3</sup> The idea that 9/11 spelled the end of 1990s fantasies of the triumph of capitalism and the end of conflict (the features that Francis Fukuyama infamously saw as inaugurating the end of history) is a commonplace: the association with 'the end of the end of history' was already codified in a *Newsweek* article with that title that appeared on 23 September 2001. See Wegner 2009 for the most elaborate literary critical case for the impact of (the end of) the end of history.

from hysterical realism's 'excess of storytelling' (Wood 2000: n.p.).<sup>4</sup> In literary studies, this shift from hysterical realism to autofiction has coincided with a shift from postmodernism to neoliberalism as the dominant periodizing category, to the extent that autofiction's literary winnowing is often cast as an effect of the neoliberal colonization of literature and of the lived experiences on which it draws (De Boever 2019; Lorentzen 2021). In recent years, autofiction has emerged as the literary mode of compulsory authorial self-branding and of the growing indistinction between life and work under neoliberalism (Konstantinou 2021); autofictional leanness, then, is a reflex of the stark realities of over a decade of enforced austerity and shrinking economic and existential prospects.<sup>5</sup>

Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy effortlessly fits this description of the new literary austerity. The three novels are narrated by a rigorously self-effacing writer, whose job to a large extent determines the coordinates of her life – as a creative writing teacher (an assignment that brings her to Greece, the icon of twenty-first-century austerity, in *Outline*), as a reluctant speaker at literary festivals (where she is talked over and groped by toxic men in *Transit*), or as an interviewee after the publication of her book (which brings her back to the European mainland in *Kudos*). Especially in the first volume, Cusk's narrative set-up positions Faye (her name occurs exactly once in each of the volumes) in the background and gives centre stage to the voices of her mansplaining and oversharing interlocutors, whose words are conveyed without overt judgement.

<sup>4</sup> Because of the unique combination of individual scope, monumental length, and excessive focus on detail, Knausgaard's *My Struggle* series, which in the early 2010s announced the shift to autofiction as a new dominant, takes a peculiar position in this shift to minimalism. As the fifth book of the series describes Knausgaard's project: 'What my aim was, well, it was to escape from the minimalistic, into the maximalistic, something bold and striking, baroque, Moby Dick, but not in an epic way, what I had tried to do was take the little novel, about one person, where there is not much external action, and extend it into an epic format' (quoted in Van De Ven 2019: 91). It is safe to say that the restriction to 'one person' (its minimalist dimension) has had a more enduring afterlife in contemporary autofiction than the monumental size (the maximalism) of Knausgaard's work.

<sup>5</sup> While I ground the shift from a maximalist to a minimalist dominant in altered political economic circumstances, it is also possible to gloss this shift as a dynamic intrinsic to literary history. Nor do I want to oversell the link between economic and literary developments, which risks flattening out the distinctions between very different writers who adopt autofictional lean forms – think of Ben Lerner, Claire-Louise Bennett, Sheila Heti, Tao Lin, Teju Cole and others. Still, all these writers explicitly reflect on the neoliberal contexts in which they live, and all of them directly reflect on its impact on their formal choices (this self-reflexivity is, of course, intrinsic to the genre). See Ercolino 2014: 65–70 for a consideration of the 'cyclical corrections of excess' that have always marked literary and art history and the conclusion that maximalism and minimalism are forever 'dialectically coexistent'. In the US context, minimalism gained prominence in critical discourse in the 1980s, where it began to refer to a more restricted set of 'dirty realist' or 'populist minimalist' works rather than to the more encompassing and less exclusively US-based 'aesthetic of omission, reduction, or simplicity' (Doherty 2014: 88) I am interested in, if only because it is that latter aesthetic that informs Cusk's practice. See Doherty 2014: 79–82 and 87–9, Hoberek 2010: 102–8 and Jones 2020: 301–6 for the critical career of minimalism in the US in the 1980s.

To the extent that there is exuberance and expression, then, its legibility is muffled by the self-effacing and nonobtrusive mediations of the narrator. The *Outline* trilogy, in other words, performs a *deliberate* curtailment of hysteria and excess; its tenor and aesthetic are not just *different* from the zany exuberance of hysterical realism – it is a determinate, even programmatic negation of it. Cusk's trilogy still operates on the terms Wood established: the books are emphatically works of information management, in which the narrator carefully filters her interlocutors' verbal excretions; arguably, nothing 'affecting, sublime, or beautiful' transpires in them, as the novels instead make visible how carefully they have excised such excessive emotion. This investment in affective curtailment, verbal condensation and information sparsity, together with the trilogy's diegetic focus on the mundane life of only one character, undeniably qualifies it as a *minimalist* work.

Minimalism is not just the name of a literary style: it names a twentieth-century aesthetic mode that also ranged over sculpture, architecture, design and the visual arts, and that has, on many accounts, morphed into a globally commodified and eminently Instagrammable lifestyle in the twenty-first century (and to be clear, this commodified minimalism is not customarily linked to autofiction; the link, I argue, is established in Cusk's trilogy). As Kyle Chayka notes, while minimalist lifestyles initially became ubiquitous in the wake of the 2008 financial crash as an 'aesthetic of necessity' in the 'faux-blue-collar hipsterism' that spread through social media, it has since been transformed into a kind of 'high-gloss consumer minimalism' – an aesthetic of white walls, Apple products, and isolated pieces of (faux-)design furniture in open spaces (2020: 13). This lifestyle minimalism is morally and politically problematic. As Chayka argues, its visual austerity typically goes together with an ascetic morality informed by a sense that 'the surrounding civilization is excessive [...] and has thus lost some kind of original authenticity that must be regained' (14). At the same time, this commodified minimalism is marked by an unacknowledged class privilege; in Michael Dango's analysis, minimalism's emphasis on control and curtailment feeds a fantasy of 'detoxification', in which style constitutes a gesture for 'expung[ing] environmental otherness' and the 'radical and globally dispersed interdependence' marking contemporary life (2019: 657–8). Twenty-first-century minimalist style, that is, naturalizes a hygienic divorce between a privileged constituency and the rest of the human and nonhuman world.

In this chapter, I argue that this broader artistic heritage and these moral and political challenges are crucial for understanding Cusk's trilogy's peculiar

deployment of minimalist style. Far from uncritically adopting such a posture of self-curtailment, the trilogy, I argue, gradually sheds its own drive for detoxification and purity, which Cusk's work after the trilogy will transform into a minimalism-inspired deployment of literary form to reconnect to (rather than divorce from) the world. Through a reading of *Transit*, the instalment of the trilogy that most emphatically links Cusk's signature minimalist *literary* style with minimalist *lifestyle* through the subplot of a home renovation, I show how Cusk's project in the trilogy can productively be read as dramatizing the attractions and pitfalls of minimalism. This critique mobilizes literary minimalism to connect to what Chayka identifies as a countertradition of minimalism that is less interested in reduction and control than in 'seeking unmediated experiences, giving up control instead of imposing it, paying attention [...] accepting ambiguity' (2020: 221). It is Cusk's first work of fiction after the trilogy, *Second Place*, that most ambitiously activates this countertradition, even if it adopts a stylistic register that is, in many ways, the obverse of that in the trilogy. While stylistically, *Second Place* no longer qualifies as a minimalist work, it instantiates a way of mobilizing a less obsessive minimalist ethos for literary fiction that is less interested in anxious or hysterical information management than in encountering the real world.

### Aspirational Austerity

*Transit's* opening sentence immediately announces its aesthetic of reticence and privacy: 'An astrologer emailed me to say she had important news for me concerning events in my immediate future' (Cusk 2018: 1). The news, it turns out, is only available '[f]or a small fee'; nor is it quite human: the message as well as the astrologer herself sound as if they had been generated by an algorithm. It seems, the narrator notes, as if 'the faux-human was growing more substantial and more relational than the original' (3). Cusk's opening recalls Georg Lukács' classic *Theory of the Novel*, which famously begins by celebrating 'those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths – ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars' (1974: 29). The modern age, of course, is no such happy age, as the 'old parallelism' between 'the form-giving subject and the world of created forms' has been destroyed (40–1). For Lukács, the novel is the genre that addresses the 'fundamental dissonance of existence' that follows from this destruction (62) – what he calls a condition of 'transcendental homelessness' (41). As a way of signalling its serious engagement with the affordances of the

novel today, *Transit* takes the metaphor of homelessness literally as it develops a sustained reflection on the place of home-making and house-ownership in the novel genre's negotiation of the relation between life and form.

Early in the novel, Faye encounters Gerard, a former lover with whom she once shared a flat. The flat had been 'a big, rambling network of rooms on the upper storeys of an Edwardian villa' (Cusk 2018: 12). But not any longer: after they broke up, Gerard decided to 'knock down all the internal walls in the flat to create one enormous space' so he would be able 'to stand at the windows at one end of his flat and see all the way through the windows at the other' (35). The aesthetic Gerard aims for is that of the 'aspirational austerity' of typical minimalist condos (Chayka 2020: 57); it implements the '[m]inimalist decorative formula' of a minimal amount of clutter in an open space (61). Architectural minimalism in *Transit* promises the transparency that, in the terms of the novel's Lukácsian opening, is no longer available in the relation between the individual and the outside world. In an analogy between psychology and architecture that runs through the novel, Gerard's renovation frenzy is transparently also a mind-clearing exercise – it is a prosthetic form of psychotherapy that (in an association that the opening reference to commodified cosmic wisdom already announced) is also inevitably a sound business investment: the renovation is 'a great opportunity' (Cusk 2018: 36). Later in *Transit*, Amanda, a student whom Faye is tutoring, describes how her parents made money by serially renovating houses in order to later sell them with a profit: 'Her childhood memories were of living in houses that were effectively building sites, houses that were always in the process of transformation' (173). Twenty-first-century 'transcendental homeless', then, is always also a matter of houses being temporary occasions for debt and investment rather than anchors of stability (McClanahan 2017: 143–83).

Much of the plot of the novel is taken up by the fairly hopeless renovation project through which Faye hopes to find her footing again in London. The apartment she buys is in a former council house; the people living in the basement flat (directly exposed to the sounds of Faye's and her children's footsteps and the noise of the renovations) are the last council tenants; as such, they are not active participants in the economy of renovation and speculation. The flat's previous inhabitant, a Ghanaese woman, was: having launched her children on profitable careers in the UK, her job contributing to the aspirations of upward mobility is done, and she decides to return to Ghana (Cusk 2018: 43). Faye's renovation project is emphatically minimalist, even if only in contrast with the clutter that surrounds her: the neighbour's part of the garden is 'full of

things that were all at different stages in the process of decay, so that the boundary between ornament and junk had been obscured' (37–8); Faye's apartment itself features 'shelves wobbl[ing] loose on their brackets' and walls 'covered in thick paper with a rash-like raised design' (40). This chaos and clutter requires the demolition of walls (176) and insulation – radical measures to insulate Faye's life against the smells and noises of the downstairs neighbours, who serve as insistent reminders of the economic inequality that powers the life that twenty-first-century minimalism serves to detoxify. Crucially, literary style and lifestyle reinforce one another, as Cusk's signature technique for establishing setting, which consists in describing a room by enumerating a few bare essentials, is conducive to such a minimalist design aesthetic. When a room is described as 'very warm, and furnished with things I didn't recognize from [a character's] former existence: modern, cuboid sofas; a vast glass-and-steel coffee table; a rug made of an animal's pelt' (213), the very sparsity and precision of the descriptive style exemplifies architect Philip Johnson's minimalist formula to 'pick very few objects and place them exactly' (quoted in Chayka 2020: 61).

Both through its sparse style and its thematic choices, *Transit* shows how the psychology, the economics and the aesthetics of minimalism are deeply connected; through the insistent presence of the neighbours – disabled, alcoholic, racist – it also signals minimalism's problematic exclusionary politics. The neighbours are less fully-fledged individuals than cyphers for the socioeconomic realities that minimalist aesthetics aim to hide behind its shiny and slick surfaces. Late in the novel, Faye refers to them as 'a force, a power of elemental negativity that seemed somehow related to the power to create' (Cusk 2018: 195). The lower-class neighbours are a disavowed part of an infrastructure of creativity – they are 'crouch[ing] malevolently in the psyche' as instances of evil, which the passage defines as 'the relinquishing of effort, the abandonment of self-discipline in the face of desire' (195–6). The ethos that the novel (self-critically) proposes against such careless indulgence is that of a deliberate self-restraint and rigorous self-control – an ethos embodied in the trilogy's trimmed style and the minimalist visual aesthetic it evokes in its spatial descriptions (as when a hair salon is described as 'a lofty, white, brilliantly lit room with white-painted floorboards and baroque, velvet-upholstered furniture' (61)). By consistently emphasizing the tension between this clean aesthetic and the disorderly lives of the neighbours, the novel qualifies its own investment in minimalism as a way of managing repression – as part of a psychological dynamic different from that of hysteria. It is no coincidence that Chayka refers to Marie Kondo, the icon of contemporary decluttering, as a Freudian who

teaches audiences to confront 'repressed feelings in the form of hidden mountains of clothes, papers, and books' (2020: 34).

Clothes, papers and books: these kinds of 'excess stuff' can be disposed of, but neighbours can't (and least of all when they are council tenants). If Cusk's novel evokes and performs the attractions of minimalism, by so emphatically including the stubborn reality of the neighbours, it at the same time scrutinizes the exclusions that this style is designed to render invisible. In Dango's analysis of minimalism's practice of detoxification, he shows how minimalism's aesthetic of constraint and reduction performs an exclusion of undesirable realities – environmental threats, but also social forces that threaten the homogeneity of a dominant identity (2019: 647); minimalism, on this account, is 'a practice of detoxification that reorients and creates a space in which multiple kinds of perceived toxicity [...] are conflated and then, fantastically, eliminated' (2019: 646). By interrupting the composure of the novel with the smells, sounds and vibes of the neighbours, *Transit* foregrounds this eliminative dimension of its own aesthetic and shows it to be deeply problematic. Its performance of minimalism is a self-critical one.

In *Transit*, the house is simultaneously an allegory of mental space and an economic investment; in that way, it is inevitably implicated in the complexities of global life that it seeks to offer a refuge from. Dango emphasizes that minimalism is unsettled by 'a continued anxiety' about global interdependence (2019: 658); Chayka notes that minimalism's slick design 'encourages us to forget everything a product relies on,' while in fact, minimalist life relies on a 'maximalist assemblage' of globally interdependent forces and infrastructures (2020: 43). In *Transit*, this assemblage materializes as the Polish contractor taking on the renovation project, on whose work and judgement Faye finds herself to be fully dependent. The contractor notes how he is often reduced to a contraption in his clients' mental ecology – he feels like 'the representative of someone else's aims and desire,' like 'an extension of [people's] own will' (Cusk 2018: 49, 53). The novel links the contractor to the clutter and confusion it associates with the lower-class neighbours when the contractor opens the door of his van and Faye sees it is 'full of empty cardboard coffee cups and discarded food packaging and scraps of paper' (58). For the contractor, as a mere cog in the wheel of global capitalism, minimalist decluttering is an unattainable aspiration: 'if it was up to me, increasingly I imagine living somewhere completely blank, somewhere where all the angles are straight and the corners squared and where there's nothing, no colours or features, maybe not even any light' (55). Here also, by showing how the attainability of the



aspiration of minimalism is dependent on class and citizenship, *Transit* checks the privilege it performs.<sup>6</sup>

### Minimalist Contraction and the Great Outdoors

*Transit* not only engages with contemporary minimalist design, it also directly refers to the twentieth-century minimalist artistic tradition. The Polish contractor's fantasy of featureless living is not even the most minimalist Polish fantasy in the novel: Pavel, one of his aides, explains how he has built a house in the woods for himself in Poland with 'enormous windows' that stretch 'from the ceiling to the floor': 'the forest was so visible that you almost felt you were living in the open air' (Cusk 2018: 180). The aide notes that his 'transparent box' is inspired by 'a house in America' that 'was made almost entirely of glass' (181–2). The reference is clearly to architect Philip Johnson's Glass House, which he constructed in Connecticut in the years following the Second World War. Customarily considered a minimalist masterpiece, the Glass House is a one-floor pavilion marked by principled transparency and ruthless economy in furnishing a liveable space – including a living room, a kitchen, a bedroom, a bathroom – that offers an uninterrupted 360-degree view of the surrounding landscape. Just like Pavel's house, the house is designed 'so that in certain places you could see all the way through it, out into the forest on the other side' (182). As Chayka notes, '[t]he Glass House turns interior and exterior into meaningless terms. The walls don't do the work of obscuring what's inside, nor do they keep anything external out' (2020: 65).

Isn't there a contradiction between minimalism's relentless expunction of 'environmental otherness' (Dango 2019: 657) and the Glass House's erosion of the borders between inside and outside? This contradiction is only apparent when we realize that the surroundings of the Glass House were nothing like 'environmental otherness' – they were simply Johnson's estate, on which he continued to build other constructions and which he carefully rendered invisible from the street and the gaze of others. The landscape, in Johnson's own words, is simply 'expensive wallpaper'. Once we appreciate the Glass House's location on a

<sup>6</sup> *Transit's* representation of the downstairs neighbours is one the main exhibits in Sally Rooney's argument that Cusk's trilogy simply acts out its 'revulsion' at lower-class life (Rooney: 2018: n.p.). My argument aims to demonstrate that a more generous reading of *Transit* reveals an entirely more conflicted politics than the self-righteous embodiment of bourgeois values that Rooney (and with her, many other readers) finds in it.

carefully controlled estate, minimalism again emerges as a gesture of exclusion and control; Johnson's minimalism is a moralized performance of living with less that aspires to be admired without surrendering control. It testifies to what Chayka calls a 'megalomaniacal possessiveness' (2020: 68).

*Transit's* encrypted reference to the Glass House continues its critique of minimalism's disavowed moralization and class politics. Pavel's Polish glass house is not situated on an estate – it is situated in the woods, exposed to passers-by, which draws his father's ridicule, as he goes about town 'telling people that if they went out to the forest, they could stand there and watch Pavel shitting' (Cusk 2018: 183). The idea that transparency without possession leads to vulnerability also inflects the real estate trajectory of Gerard, Faye's former lover. He recalls a time living in a community of artists in Toronto in a house that 'had once been a shop and the large glass shopfront had been retained, so that the inhabitants could be viewed from the outside' (26). Gerard reflects that living on this 'illuminated stage,' in these 'human tableaux,' would be unthinkable in London because '[t]here's too much irony [...] everything is already an imitation of itself' (26).<sup>7</sup> This fateful theatricality also afflicts Faye when she walks by the hair salon at night and observes how '[f]rom the darkness of the street it was almost like a theatre, with the characters moving around in the bright light of the stage' (75). *Transit's* encrypted deconstruction of the Glass House is concluded when a boy leaving the salon accidentally throws the 'big glass door' against 'the tiers of glass shelving where the haircare products stood,' which then 'collapse [...] in a tremendous shrieking cascade of breaking glass' (81).

Minimalism, for all its attractions, is untenable in a social world where ethnic and economic difference cannot simply be drowned out but need to be confronted and accommodated. I have elsewhere analysed *Outline*, the first volume of Cusk's trilogy, as a feminist gesture of rationing affect that refuses readers, in David James's words, 'the conventional gratifications of empathetic identification' (2021: 138). *Outline* is situated in Greece, the battle zone of the Eurozone's austerity dictates in the second decade of the century, and Cusk's narrator's affective and communicative austerity can be seen to repurpose imposed austerity into a strategy of refusal (Vermeulen 2021). *Transit's* narrator is less rigorously self-effacing, and this goes even more for the narrator of *Kudos*.

<sup>7</sup> Gerard's claim about London life was exposed to an empirical test it did not survive when owners of luxury flats with floor to ceiling windows near Tate Modern lost a privacy case complaining that one of the museum's popular top-floor terraces exposed them to near constant surveillance in 2019. According to the law, living in 'human tableaux' in London is possible after all.

I suggest we read this careful loosening of narrative restraint over the span of the trilogy as a gentle self-critique – as the reflex of a growing awareness of the problematic politics of the first novel's programmatic minimalism. I have been arguing that *Transit* channels that self-critique through an engagement with different dimensions of minimalist art and lifestyle. Indeed, *Transit's* narrator comes close to saying as much when she connects her changed attitude to the home renovation project – the event that activates the book's more conscious engagement with the aesthetics of minimalism. Late in the novel, the narrator remarks that she has come to appreciate the limits of a way of living 'as though living were merely an act of reading,' as though life were 'something that had already been dictated'; this way of living as if 'it was only through absolute passivity that you could learn to see what was really there' recalls nothing so much as the mode of narration that *Outline* sustains, but that *Transit* modifies because the narrator's 'decision to create a disturbance by renovating [her] house [awakes] a different reality' – a reality marked by complex negotiations of power and desire (Cusk 2018: 198). The narrator can no longer hide in her own stylistic glass house, impotent and passive, as she has realized that she is not protected by a safe estate around it but exposed to a world that does not cease to intrude. *Transit's* explicit engagement with the valances of minimalism, I argue, repositions the narrative austerities of *Outline* in a field of power and exclusion where stylistic choices, whether literary or existential, have a political import. If this 'different reality' was rigorously bracketed in *Outline*, *Transit's* more self-critical minimalism more consciously acknowledges it. It will fall to Cusk's post-trilogy work to give that desire for reality a less minimalist and more determinate shape.

### Minimalist Depth

Cusk's self-critique of minimalism still resonates in the first novel she published after the trilogy. While *Second Place* stylistically no longer counts as a work of minimalism, it promotes a position that, I argue, can still productively be linked to the minimalist tradition. From its long, sprawling, and excessively metaphorical opening sentence (which exuberantly refers to an evil 'that rose up and disgorged itself over every part of life'; Cusk 2021: 1), the novel announces its stylistic difference from the trilogy. The novel is set up as a long letter to a person named Jeffers, and this positions the narrator in the monological position (speaking without response) into which the narrative set-up of *Outline* forced Faye's

interlocutors; this device exposes her as oversharing, affected, and fairly obnoxious and self-obsessed, an assessment from which the trilogy's stylistic minimalism shielded Faye. The event that kickstarts the narrative (about the narrator and her husband inviting L, a famous but erratic painter, to stay with them 'on the marsh'; (4)), the narrator feeling 'summon[ed]' by a painting during an exhibition in Paris (11), echoes a very similar event that was attributed to Jane, one of Faye's interlocutors in *Transit* (Cusk 2018: 142). This underscores the impression that the more recent novel is narrated by someone very much like Faye's interlocutors – and this time with Jeffers as the self-effacing mediator. Clearly, this exposure of an oversharing character is not an instance of minimalist style.

Nor is the narrator's disposition a minimalist one, as the novel tells us by featuring another home renovation project (which again underscores that *Second Place* consciously revises the trilogy). The title, while also signalling the struggle for primacy and secrecy that the novels' narrative mode dramatizes, refers to a renovated cottage close to the narrator's house. The cottage is conceived as a site of creativity and art: it is to be used 'as a home for the thing which weren't already here – the higher things,' to establish 'some degree of communication [...] with the notion of art and with the people who abide by these notions' (Cusk 2021: 22–3). For the narrator's husband, who is in charge of the renovation, that assignment requires something very much like the minimalist aesthetics we discussed before: the renovated cottage features windows 'from the floor to the ceiling,' which allows the suggestion that 'the huge horizontal bar of the marsh and its drama' is 'right there in the room with you' (24). The narrator, however, objects to this minimalism: she does not want the place to feel 'all clinical and squared off in the way that some new places feel,' and this involves hanging up 'beautiful curtains made of a thick pale linen' (26). For the narrator, privacy trumps transparency – as if the tenuous balancing act between exposure and performance dramatized in *Transit* can simply be neutralized and overcome.

The narrator's impatience with minimalism resonates with the novel's more maximalist – indeed, more self-consciously hysterical – narrative mode; both complement the self-critique of minimalism that overtook the trilogy. Still, the fate of the cottage hints at something more interesting than a mere renunciation of minimalism. The curtains are not appreciated by L's young girlfriend, who, to the narrator's dismay, refers to the place as 'a cabin in the woods, straight out of a horror story' (Cusk 2021: 57); soon the narrator finds that the curtains are removed because, for L, they obstruct the traffic between inside and outside

(102–3). The narrator’s next visit to the cottage reveals that the furniture has been moved around, that L and his girlfriend are dancing around almost naked, and that they have begun to paint on the walls – a kind of ‘hellish’ Garden of Eden (160–1). The place has now truly become a site of creativity – even if this means that the walls have been repurposed as canvases, not unlike the way the windows in Johnson’s Glass House were reassigned as expensive wallpaper. Opening the curtains restores the relation between inside and outside and reconfigures the relation between life and form.

In his study of minimalism, Dango qualifies it as typically an ‘obsessive’ style for dealing with the fear of losing control. One problem with this obsession, he notes, is a ‘phobia of nature’ and a concomitant ‘need for “containment”’ (Dango 2021: 104). Dango notes how there is a countertradition of minimalism, consisting of Ernest Hemingway rather than Raymond Carver (in literature), John Cage rather than Steve Reich (in music), and van der Rohe and Corbusier rather than John Pawson (in architecture), that deployed minimalist techniques not to expunge but to open human forms up to nature; for these ‘deeper’ minimalists (the term is Chayka’s), style is ‘a practice of conservation, housing natural environments or sublimating the human or created work into natural proxies’ (Dango 2021: 105). Chayka, also, points to Cage’s 4’33” as a work that constitutes less an escape from contingency and environment than ‘a kind of conditioning for heightened awareness’ (2020: 146); he also points to Case Study House #8, the L.A. house where modernist designers Charles and Ray Eames lived for most of their lives, as a less totalitarian and obsessive and ultimately less superficial kind of minimalism than that on display in Johnson’s Glass House. In Case Study House #8, the Mondrian-inspired geometrical panels and panes of glass reflect a fundamental openness to difference and contingency; unlike the Glass House, it is not surrounded by the architect’s property, but by a meadow occupied by three other Case Study Houses; with its driftwood, colourful paintings, bird sculptures and rice-paper lanterns, the main living area is ‘crowded and haphazardly curated,’ ‘an eclectic symphony of sights and reference points’ (Chayka 2020: 45–6), rather than a display of austere limitation. In this way, Chayka notes, the house emblemizes ‘the appreciation of things for and in themselves, and the removal of barriers between the self and the world’ (46). It does not seem too far-fetched to see L in *Second Place* redesigning the cottage as a site for such a deep minimalist attunement between inner and outer realities – for the valorisation of a range of objects and experiences that the twenty-first-century shift from literary maximalism to minimalism might seem to have relegated from the remit of the novel and that *Second Place*, I argue, is allowing

back in. This is not a simple return to maximalism, but a trajectory *through* minimalism that aims to overcome its obsessiveness from within.

The novel's narrator does not simply accept L's invitation for a less obsessive and more welcoming minimalism. She feels tempted to bury the mural 'beneath layers of whitewash', but realizes that that would turn the cottage into a fake, as it would amount to 'a betrayal of the truth of memory' (Cusk 2021: 168). Near the end of the novel, when the painter has left the cottage after a turbulent stay, the mural is painted over after all, the curtains are rehung, but without totally obliterating the memory of art, as she offers the cottage to her daughter who put the painting that L gave her in there – as a kind of sublimation of the mural that overwhelmed the space. That painting, one of a series of night paintings completed while L was staying in the second place, evokes the tension between 'two half-forms', which, to the narrator's mind, might represent herself and her daughter on the night L caught them swimming (206). Or perhaps not. What is key, it seems, is the restored tension between self and thing, between inside and outside, between life and form; this restoration is achieved by abandoning obsessive self-curtailed and an almost gimmicky insistence on simplicity *without* abandoning a minimalist commitment to the importance of style as mediation of the outside world. Such a commitment to style, it seems, is the ethic and aesthetic that *Second Place* puts forward as a less compromised minimalist gesture than the one the trilogy gradually shed.

### Conclusion: Raising the Curtain on Minimalism

The development of twenty-first-century fiction so far can reductively be described as a shift from an inclusive and hysterical maximalism to an austere minimalism. This essay has argued that in the work of Cusk, that minimalism has performed a self-critique that has moved it from (what in retrospect appears to be) a potentially obsessive and exclusionary minimalism to a more worldly minimalism that restores and refines some of the connections to the outside world that an overly austere minimalism had renounced. And perhaps this looser minimalism is not confined to the work of Cusk alone. One of the oeuvres that Chayka puts forward as an example of a deeper minimalism is that of Donald Judd, whose name is customarily identified with sculptural minimalism (even if he himself, like many minimalists, renounced the label). Judd's steel boxes and polished rectangles have become almost synonymous with minimalism's refusal of intention, symbolism and emotion – with what critic

Michael Fried influentially condemned as its literalism and mere objecthood. For Fried, minimalism's theatricality – its explicit concern with 'the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work' (1998: 153) – famously disqualifies it as art ('the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theater, and theater is now the negation of art' (153)). Rather than withdrawing from the audience and folding back on its own intention, the minimalist work, for Fried, assures that '[e]verything counts – not as part of the object, but as part of the situation in which its objecthood is established and on which that objecthood at least partly depends' (155). Judd's work, for Fried, is marked by a fateful combination of concentration and worldly connectedness.

In light of Cusk's minimalist self-critique, this combination of concentration and connection appears as a strength. As Chayka notes in his book, Judd famously relocated from New York to Marfa, which he turned 'into his own artistic laboratory and a shrine to his entire career' (2020: 95). This location, which feature hangars' full of seemingly random stuff, drives home the essential worldliness of Judd's seemingly austere objects: '[t]he whole place was a machine for finding inspiration and making art – the objects [...] were challenging, shocking, and discomfiting as well, reminders of the wider world outside' (96). While Cusk's work does not explicitly engage with Judd's, the fact that her negotiation of minimalism operates through the hanging, opening, closing, removing and rehangng of curtains at least hints at the implication of a deeper minimalism with theatricality; a deeper minimalism, it seems, is one that self-consciously opens and closes its window on the world. That her trilogy as well as *Second Place* so clearly operate through forms of address (giving the floor to a series of interlocutors in the trilogy; performing an almost dramatic monologue-like letter in *Second Place*) that include the reader in a 'circuit of storytellers, narrators, readers, friends, sisters, and neighbours' (Valihora 2019: 30) qualifies her work as an oeuvre that, like Judd's work, makes the reader part of the situation in which the works is constituted. As Marc Botha notes in his *Theory of Minimalism*, '[m]inimalist narrative time is marked by a strong sense of immanence, drawing both narrator and reader onto what appears to be a common ground' (2017: 51). Cusk's programme is then also minimalist in the sense articulated by Judd and (albeit critically) Fried.

Cusk's work shares this combination of autofictional concentration and readerly address with Ben Lerner's *10:04* – a work that is increasingly being elevated in literary criticism as a key reference in the recent ascendance of autofiction. Like Cusk's work, *10:04* is limited to the perspective of one

author-character, but it uses that limitation to explore a promiscuous range of worldly connections. It also features an excursion to Marfa, where Lerner's novelistic stand-in spends a residency. His initial response is not positive: 'The work of [Judd] I'd seen – always in museums or small gallery installations – had left me cold' (Lerner 2014: 178). But seeing the work in Marfa changes everything, as the objects stop being things one might as well encounter 'by walking through a Costco or a Home Depot or IKEA' (178), and become objects that, while being 'located in the immediate, physical present,' are also 'tuned to an inhuman, geological duration' (180). The objects offer an encounter with 'all those orders of temporality – the biological, the historical, the geological' (180). Minimalism, then, emerges as a site of worldly connection. Neither 'hysterical' nor obsessive, this simultaneous refusal of both maximalism and principled austerity might open up the bandwidth within which contemporary literature might yet overcome its autofictional renunciations.

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