Bodies at risk: Ambiguous subjectivities in *Arlington Park*. A Beauvoirean perspective

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The Beauvoirean perspective I have adopted in this paper was prompted by an article Rachel Cusk wrote for the Guardian in December 2009 entitled “Shakespeare’s Daughters” in which she markedly inscribes her own writing practice within a Beauvoirean framework. Like Beauvoir who began her founding text The Second Sex by asserting the incontrovertible fact of her being a woman,¹ Cusk too refuses to countenance the idea of “sexless” writing and instead reaffirms the notion of “women’s writing” for which another name, she suggests, might be “the book of repetition.” “Twenty-first century female culture,” writes Cusk, “barely acknowledges its debt to feminism,” and today’s woman writer is likely to be “careful not to show any special interest in today’s woman.” To choose to write the book of repetition, which concerns itself with “what is eternal and unvarying, with domesticity, and motherhood and family life,” is to cede cultural centrality, and run the risk of vilification: “The woman writer who confines herself to her female ‘reality’ is by the same token often criticised,” she writes; she appears to have squandered her Woolfian “room of her own.” The book of repetition suggests itself as a genre to Cusk when she observes the female body: “If a woman’s body signifies anything, it is that repetition is more powerful than change.” Beauvoir famously located in the female body the principal source of women’s historical oppression, even as she asserted the significant role played by the body as “a point of view towards the world” in defining subjectivity.² She too suggests that it is largely by observing women’s bodies that women’s cultural relegation to the realm of immanence and facticity, in which they come to embody the Absolute Other to the Absolute Subject of patriarchy, can be traced.³ In the “book of repetition” that is Arlington Park, Cusk, I argue, runs the “risk of the feminine,” not least by insistently foregrounding her novel as “this little drama of male force and female sensibility” (13) in ways that seem to rehearse the paradigm of sexual difference both raised and challenged by Beauvoir. I start by looking at how, in their relations to
time and to the body, the women of Arlington Park seem (to adopt the Beauvoirean terminology) mired in immanence and facticity, cut off from the transcendence that would confer subjectivity on them. Yet Cusk’s endeavour in the novel is not to offer a plaintive account of women’s cultural marginalisation, although she does explore the minutiae of suburban woman’s woeful daily round in great detail; nor is it to erect illusory alternative forms of subjectivity in the name of an elusive feminine “identity.” Instead, she probes the ambiguities of her female characters’ existences, which lead them paradoxically to choose that which oppresses them—much as the woman writer will choose to write about that which will earn her no kudos from the critics. This contradiction was already voiced by Beauvoir in what Toril Moi calls the single most important passage in The Second Sex: “Now what specifically defines the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless discovers and chooses herself in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other” (SS 29 TA; DSs 31; emphasis added). The effect, Moi writes, “is to produce women as subjects painfully torn between freedom and alienation, transcendence and immanence, subject being and object being. This fundamental contradiction is specific to women under patriarchy” (Moi 1994 175). Women are forced into “a ‘choice’ between being imprisoned in their femininity or having to disavow it altogether” (Moi 1999 205). This contradiction is the focus of Cusk’s “women’s writing,” which is less concerned with questions of “female identity” than with questions of action and choice that limit women’s freedom in ambiguous and contradictory fashions, producing an alienating split in their subjectivity.

Ambiguity is at the heart of Arlington Park, where the female characters are cast as “bodies at risk,” all seeking new ways of relating to others which will neither immure them in, nor exclude them from, prevailing representations of femininity. One of the literary tropes through which Cusk explores the ambiguously porous interface between the female self and the world is that of the dissolving boundary. Identity may, as Susan Stanford Friedman points out in Mappings, be “unthinkable without some sort of imagined or literal boundary” (Friedman 3), but as she also demonstrates, boundaries, as “interstitial sites of interaction, interconnection and exchange” (3), are fraught with ambiguity: sites of transgression and invasion, they can protect or confine, separate or connect. I look at the figure of the ambiguously dissolving boundary in Arlington Park, which maintains a separation while making possible the inevitable and necessary contact with the other. Although threatening, the other provides the self with definition, but when the boundaries between self and other are breached or become permeable, be it the boundaries of the maternal body such as Solly’s, breached by the baby “squirm[ing] powerfully” in her belly (130), or the intersecting boundaries that traverse and define the domestic territorialities that reign within the family, the specific risk run by the female body becomes apparent. As can be seen in Solly’s decision to admit strangers into the heart of the domestic sphere by letting out her spare room, the Woolfian “room of one’s own” also continues to haunt Cusk’s creative enterprise, but the independence it is designed to confer paradoxically depends upon admitting an alien “other” into the very heart of the self’s space. The “room of one’s own” is thus reconfigured in Cusk’s novel as an ambiguously shared space that embeds the “other within!” and requires exposure, openness and generosity, which are dramatized in the novel as a kind of risk that is not only physical but also ontological. It is a risk that Cusk’s novel figures as a truly creative act.
1. Risking the tropes of male and female embodiment

It would be easy to construe *Arlington Park* as merely an expression of female revolt against the facticity, immanence and “Otherness” to which Beauvoir claims the feminine has been relegated under patriarchy. What the denizens of Arlington Park see as “this little drama of male force and female sensibility” (13) is indeed staged in violently polarised terms in the novel. For schoolteacher Juliet, “all men are murderers” (18) and she rails against the “vexing ... trap of sex” (158); as for Amanda, she wages war on men with her aerosol gun of Flash, “neutralising” and “annihilating” all traces of the masculine left behind by her husband: “There were crumbs there, and a smear of butter, which James had left behind like the small, modest mark of his indelible masculinity. She put on her yellow rubber gloves and with an aerosol gun of Flash she annihilated it” (57). Reinforcing this polarised dramatization of sexual difference, Cusk’s men and women display bodily features that are strikingly reminiscent of the tropes deployed by Beauvoir in her controversial discussion of sexual embodiment in *The Second Sex*. The graphic description of Solly Kerr-Leigh’s heavily pregnant body as a sort of primeval swamp overrun by dank undergrowth draws on the same images of viscosity and uncontrollability as those used by Beauvoir to describe female sexuality: “Suddenly she saw her life as a breeding ground, a community under a rock. This baby had occurred almost by itself: it seemed to her to have arisen out of an abject mulch of flesh, out of bodies so long confined together that they spawned other bodies” (128). In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir depicts female sexuality as similarly beyond control: “mysterious even to the woman herself, concealed, mucous, and humid, ... often sullied with bodily fluids, it has a secret and perilous life of its own” (SS 406; DSb 166). One is tempted to read into Solly’s name a conscious or unconscious echo of this passage about bodily “sullying.” Elsewhere, the images of rampant foliage that Cusk enlists to describe Solly’s conventional mothering style also seem to be prefigured by Beauvoir’s text: Solly’s insatiable curiosity about her lodger Paola’s sex and family life “was a kind of unstoppable need for resolution that grew from her like ivy over the prospect of freedom and tried to strangle it ... She felt like a machine, like an animal—she was automatic, voracious, unstoppable. She would have sucked the little boy right out of the frame if she could. Oh, to have self-control!” (129, 130; emphasis added). Beauvoir too deploys, now somewhat infamously, the tropes of predation and voracity: “Feminine sex desire is the soft throbbing of a mollusc ... woman lies in wait like the carnivorous plant, the bog in which insects and children are swallowed up; she is suction, absorption, humus; she is pitch and glue, a motionless appeal, insinuating and viscous: thus, at least, she silently feels herself to be” (SS 407 TA; DSb 167). The female body, imaged as a porous fleshy mass, is mired in the cloying, sullying materiality of the everyday. Maisie feels herself to be “swarthy and burdened” in comparison to the smooth statuesque lines of her aesthetically abstract husband Dom Carrington, with his “classical” profile, “slim waist” and “transparent surfaces”: “He looked to her like a statue: he had a lot of what she thought of as finish” (176). Male bodies in *Arlington Park* are typically bounded and contained, so that Solly’s husband Martin resembles a slightly weathered “monument” with his “lean, untouched masculinity, his body that had never been plundered, the line that seemed to run unbroken from his toes to the top of his head” (121). In contrast to this “unplundered” form, Solly’s heavily pregnant body is envisaged more promiscuously as “a village that over time had sprawled and grown until it became a bustling centre, cut through with
new roads and modern developments, some of them unsightly” (121). This image of Solly’s body as a network of roads irresistibly calls to mind Julia Kristeva’s conceptualisation of the maternal body as “a thoroughfare, a threshold where ‘nature’ confronts ‘culture’” (Kristeva 1980, 238), the final rampart, border or “filter” that separates the masculine subject of modernity from the archaic night of non-differentiation in the maternal body, and which Kristeva calls abjection.9

3 In contrast to the pregnable liminality of the female body as a thoroughfare or “threshold” that “warrants that everything is, and that it is representable” (Kristeva 1980 238), the males of Arlington Park venture out into the world bounded and intact in their bodies and engage in activities presented as perilous forms of risk-taking.10 Once again, bodily images are enrolled: Dom Carrington toils through the hostile “viscera” of the world from home to office and back, whereas his wife Maisie only remains “suspended, like a foetus in its fluids” (170); Benedict’s high risk job in an inner-city school where “[b]oys with knives and shaved heads, ... boys with drug problems and drink problems ... were searched for weapons before they were allowed on the premises” (11) confers meaning and transcendence on his existence which he “ran off their joint life as if it were a generator fuelled by Juliet, and then he separated himself and thought” (11).11 “Separation” and “thought” become synonymous with autonomy and freedom here and are the rewards of risk-taking, which is that which confers agency and creative power as Beauvoir reminds us; when she claims that in primitive societies men asserted themselves as subjects by risking their lives in hunting and combat, thereby transcending their given situation, she equates risk-taking with subjectivity itself, as Fredrika Scarth points out: “Beauvoir writes infamously that ‘it is not in giving life, but in risking life’ that man asserts himself as subject, and that woman was doomed because she was excluded from the warlike forays of the men ... she equates subjectivity with the risk of death: becoming a subject requires risk” (Scarth 106).12 As in the hunt or warfare of nomadic societies, the modern-day combats and risky encounters that take place in Arlington Park to secure a peculiarly masculine form of subjectivity for its denizens are enabled by a number of devices or instruments—machines and tools—that are, however, experienced as devitalising for the female characters: the figure of the generator that fuels Benedict’s life recurs, for example, with more entropic suggestions in Amanda’s story, in which the “drive of [her] desires” and ambitions is figured as “a kind of run-off energy, like a wheel continuing to revolve after the motor has been switched off” (55).13 The former marketing executive may feel herself to be predatory and tool-like, “all steel today” (43) in her “mechanically discreet” car which “did her bidding powerfully” (41), but hers is a paltry imitation of self-assertion through risk-taking and her car endows her with an illusory sensation of mastery: certainly, her arrival in Arlington Park has been orchestrated along the lines of a hunt (she and her husband have “trained their sights on Western Gardens ... tracked it through the thickets of Arlington Park’s property market ... brought it down between them with a single bullet,” 49), but it has not procured anything more than a sense of desolate emptiness conveyed semantically in the markers of negativity that characterise her story, the suffixes and prefixes of absence (“a feeling of colourlessness had stolen steadily over her ... She began to suspect some inadequacy in herself and James, a lack of substance,” 49). Amanda’s compensatory punitive household actions are similarly couched in the lexicon of control, will and mastery as she “subjugate[s] the rooms of her house,” “master[s] the weekly disciplines of shopping and cooking” and even “penetrate[s] her husband” with her “sanitary force” (56-57) in her efforts to make the
performance of her domestic chores synonymous with her sense of self: “as she washed
the floor or wiped down the cupboards ... she exercised what was nothing less than her
title to perform the daily task of being herself” (AP 60; emphases added). And yet her
predominant sensation is one of naked fragility (“Amanda felt strangely naked,” 49)
leaving her with a “feeling of precariousness” (50) like walking on a high wire: “She stood
on her wire, swaying, while the turbulence of the situation moved slowly around her”
(46).

2. “Burdened by time” (41)

Despite her high-flying career, Amanda is the most obsessive of Cusk’s housekeepers,
slavishly devoting herself to keeping the place pristine “in a transfigurative cycle of
cleanliness” (57). In the pages Beauvoir devotes to the analysis of housework in The Second
Sex, she intimates that there is no reason why this predominantly female activity should
not become synonymous with the transcendent project that founds subjectivity: insofar
as it “allows woman to grapple with matter, to entertain with objects an intimacy that
discloses being and that hence enriches her” (DSb 263; translation mine), housework has
no intrinsic relation to immanence. However, repetitive, circular modes of activity “can
never hope to be classified as authentically transcendent,” writes Toril Moi, on account of
their repetititious and Manichean nature, the existentialist project being represented
primarily as upward, forward or linear movement (Moi 1994 172). While housework’s
judgment over grime may resemble the “subordinat[ion of] the defeat of evil to progress
towards the good” that characterises any “doctrine of transcendence and liberty”
(SS470-71; DSb 268), writes Beauvoir, “it is a sad fate to be required without respite to
repel an enemy instead of working towards positive ends, and very often the housekeeper
submits to it in a kind of madness that may verge on perversion, a kind of sado-
masochism” (SS 470-71; DSb 268). Housekeeping resembles “the torture of Sisyphus ...
with its endless repetition,” so that a link is established between housework and a specific
kind of cyclical temporality that obliterates the subjectivity-founding project: “The clean
becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife
wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present. She
never senses conquest of a positive Good, but rather indefinite struggle against negative
Evil” (SS 470; DSb 266), which is not sufficient to “tear her away from her immanence nor
permit her a singular affirmation of herself” (DSb 263).

Cusk’s novel registers this link between housework and “marking time,” perpetuating the
present. The sense of time as an indistinct flux in which the past and the future vanish,
and with it the possibility of “distinguishing” the self, is caught by Solly: “sometimes she
tried to think about the past and couldn’t. She couldn’t locate a continuous sense of
herself” (120). Instead, time is likened to a uniform grey mass, unamenable to any kind of
projection, be it into the past or the future: “Time extended round her like a grey ocean,
moving imperceptibly in its depths. She could not distinguish her own body” (122).11 No
more can the future be invested, thereby curtailing the “expansion into an indefinitely
open future” that in Beauvoir’s existentialist philosophy alone allows the subject to come
into being (SS 28-29; Dsa 33). This is what Maisie discovers: “The room, the house, even
Arlington Park itself, increasingly wore the lineaments of a lived past into which future
possibilities were unable to intrude” (175; emphasis added). Meanwhile, Juliet observes how
her relation to time has changed: when a young girl “the passage of time ... would [make
her] feel reconfigured, carried over into the next thing, a part of it all” (165), enabling a transitive and participative engagement with the world; but for the woman she has become the transport no longer operates: “You’re waiting for the next stage. Then in the end, you realise that there isn’t a next stage. This is all there is” (166). The moment of transcendence has passed.

6 The central, anonymous, section embedded at the heart of the novel describes a recurrent scene in the park in the insistent terms of temporality, where “the clockwork mechanism of the playground” has the swings going “back and forth like the pendulums of little clocks” (143-144). The female figures there move about in sluggish torpor, unable to inscribe themselves in what Kristeva calls “linear time as the time of project and history” (Kristeva 1986 193), and although they can reflect that “the future had rehoused itself in children clad in red and yellow and blue” (144), the mothers of Arlington Park remain enthralled to the repetition emblematised by the movements of the park rides (the “back and forth” of the swings, “the rise and fall of the see-saw”), and excluded from “the onrush of time” (36) which would enable them to “decide what they were” (144). That onrush is described in Cusk’s characteristically accumulative prose style, which, in its piling up of substantives and participles, paradoxically conveys an impression of stasis rather than momentum, even though it is movement that is being described:

The people moved and everything around them moved too, the clouds hurtling across the sky, the tossing sun, the grass bending this way and that in the wind, the branches and the bushes, the kites and balls, the dogs and the springing birds, the cars passing along the distant road. The whole mechanism of the world, running on, running like a machine: time poured into it like a blank river, and set off all these infinitesimal movements! (147)

7 Time is experienced as “painful,” “a form of agony” (147-148) when it is endured statically instead of being taken up as a project. Amanda’s solution to this Sisyphean “boulder” (“each hour ... was like a boulder she had to single-handedly lift and move laboriously out of her path,” 41) is to insulate herself from time in her car through whose windows she sees people “burdened by time, while she herself remained free” (41). But it is an artificial and provisional freedom, more akin to a form of suspension or stasis that can quickly leave her vulnerable, “with her feet shaking on the pedals so that the world would come surging alarmingly towards her through the windscreen and then jolt to a quivering standstill” (42). Amanda’s car cuts her off from all vital relation to the world.

8 Another image of suspended, stagnant time in the novel is that of the “bottled weekday” (169) that Maisie endures until her husband Dom comes home and confers on the day “a strange uprushing of time, as though the whole compressed day had suddenly been uncorked and allowed to come loudly exploding out” (169). The qualities of compression and compactness, of mass and density, rather than fluidity and motion, define the way the female characters of the novel experience and perceive both time and space, as a substance, heavily congealed and muffling: for Maisie the splashes of paint on the stairs are “like pieces of frozen time” which cause her to feel that “this moment would endure forever” (182) while her past is likened to “a bolt of thick, unpatterned cloth” (173); the same metaphor of cloth is spun around Solly’s spare room, which is cast as a refreshingly blank “little fold in the densely patterned cloth of her life” (113). Suspension and isolation, indeed insulation, are the sensations elicited by these densely material images of congealing and wadding, which also aptly translate Amanda’s situation in Western Gardens where she is “folded further and further into the creases of a thick, unpeopled isolation through which the attrition of the outside world could be no longer felt” (46).
3. The burden of flesh and the failure of transcendence

By depicting the domestic through the motifs of density, heaviness and encumbrance, Cusk rehearses in hyperbolic mode the existentialist paradigm which, according to Scarth, allows men to experience themselves as solitary pure freedoms “by identifying their embodied existence with transcendence and by projecting onto women the body as immanent, the body enmeshed in species-being, the body-as-flesh” (Scarth 8-9). In comparison to the more abstract realms of thought and separation in which Benedict, Martin and the other male characters of the novel move, Cusk’s women are more closely embedded within the material world, unable to separate themselves from “the crude life of the body” (133) which in Solly’s case boils down to “this crude business of reproduction” (137). All are tormented by their inescapable involvement in “the darkly secretive work of feeding [the] family” (45)—whether it be Amanda on her weekly visits to the butcher’s (44), Christine preparing chicken for her dinner party, or Solly, contemplating her kitchen cupboards “full of giant supermarket value-packs,” emblems of the redundancy of a life needing to be shored up by material bulk: “In the past Solly had felt proud of these things, practical and proud, but now they seemed monstrous to her in a way. Why had she required such bulk, so much heaviness? What was she afraid of?” (133). The monstrous bulk and sheer gross materiality of food is a recurring motif, nowhere more graphically described than in the “spectacle of dismemberment” of the butcher’s shop visited by Amanda (46) with its rows of carcasses and chickens, whose “pimpled, denuded flesh tightly wrapped in plastic” (44) stands as an emblem of how the natural body has been straitened in the cellophane wrap of culture and the cultural meanings brought to bear upon it. Food, destined to sustain the body, is in Cusk’s novel more specifically associated with the deformed body or the sexualised body, reminders respectively of humanity’s contingent mortality and the immanence of flesh explicitly gendered as feminine. Hence, the “twisted heaps” of “flesh-coloured sausages” at the butcher’s prefigure the “strange, twisted little hands” of the salesman whose “arms ended at the elbows” (44), while Christine’s preparation of the chicken is couched in terms redolent of female sexuality: “She prised open the slit and wiped her fingers all over the veined insides. Liquid ran out and coated the gobs of butter and made them slippery” (202).

What is more, the connection between the biological function of eating and that of reproduction is insistently foregrounded in the novel as being culturally sustained by marriage: indeed, Amanda feels that “if she were not married, it would not be required of her to go to the butcher” (43). Being married is seen as somehow responsible for the confusing conflation of her sexual and social identities: “These visits seemed to emanate from a core of physical embroilment, from a fleshly basis that sought out other flesh by which to feed itself. It all seemed somehow grotesquely related, the conjointing and making of bodies and the dismemberment and ingestion of them” (43). Marriage thus appears as another kind of cultural cello-wrap that perpetuates women’s relegation by enveloping and preserving their proximity to the biological functions that patriarchy has naturalised as woman’s destiny by endowing them with cultural meaning and effectively “limiting what their bodies can express, in effect making their bodies express only immanence” (Scarth 81).
It follows, therefore, that Juliet, although a promisingly gifted student, experiences herself as “heavy, full of lead. She sank like a stone through the onrush of time” (36), while Amanda sees the members of her household as so many “sandbags she was heaving one by one out of the basket of a hot-air balloon” (40). The imagined unburdening gives her a vertiginous “feeling of rapid ascent” (40). Solly, too, seeks release from “the weight of her family” that she imagines moving away from her, “like a great crowded liner decked with lights moving out into a dark ocean” (113). The momentary reprieve from the encumbrance of domesticity briefly glimpsed in these sensations of upward and outward movement (“ascent,” “moving out”), redolent of transcendence, are short-lived and abortive however; the reiteration of the notion of “transcendence” is insufficient to bring it into being, as Juliet discovers on listening to the music of Ravel:

It was ... so solitary and powerful, so—transcendent. It made Juliet think she could transcend it all, this little house with its stained carpets, its shopping, its flawed people, transcend the grey, rain-sodden distances of Arlington Park; transcend, even, her own body, where bitterness lay like lead in the veins ... Juliet did not feel transcendent any longer. She felt angry, dense and angry and dark, compacted, like lead. (31-32)

Juliet’s particular anxiety, which is indeed that of all the novel’s female characters, stems from the realisation that she has in fact chosen that which oppresses her, has voluntarily embraced it, of her own free will and as a form of transcendent “endeavour.” In Beauvoir’s terms, she is “mystified.” Destined after graduation to enter a career that seems intrinsically “hers” (“her university job, her newspaper by-line,” 36), Juliet discovers instead that it is her own femaleness, as a “thing of flesh,” that offers itself to her as “the strange new field of endeavour” (36) to be embraced and conquered, like a mountain to be climbed: “She had forgotten she was a woman. She had forgotten she was a native creature, a thing of flesh. One day she had met Benedict and it had risen up before her startled eyes, a great vista of challenges like a mountain range” (AP 36). The image is redolent of Sartre’s rock-climber, the emblem of the transcendent project of existentialism. But freedom, for the women of Arlington Park, is shown to be confusingly and ironically bound up, synonymous even, with constraint; in Beauvoir’s terms, their transcendence is inseparable from their bodily immanence. Hence, Maisie is forced to admit to the startling paradox of having chosen as a transcendent project the daily domestic round that now oppresses her: “There was nothing in their situation in Arlington Park she could say she hadn’t chosen, except to actually live it” (183). Amanda, meanwhile, remains stunned that what she regarded as a “solemn undertaking to spend her life with James, Jessica and Eddie” (76; emphasis added) should be rewarded in the devalued currency of bodily waste products, “repaid in her husband’s stained underwear in the laundry basket and his hairs from shaving in the sink, in her children’s discarded emotions” (77). Reminders of the body are everywhere for Arlington Park’s women, who seem to enact the patriarchal illusion described by Fredrika Scarth whereby men are deemed to have bodies whereas women simply are their bodies:

The illusion that marks patriarchy ... is that men, as Absolute Subject, are free of the body and necessity, and that women, as Other, are only their bodies, their bodies exist as a constraining, restrictive identity, as a destiny, as a nature. Butler calls this the ‘masculine disembodiment and the feminine enslavement to the body’ that marks modern political thought. (Scarth 110, citing Butler 1987 45)

That this is an illusion is precisely the point underlined by Beauvoir who repeatedly insists on the “bad faith” of the division, which occludes what she calls the “ambiguity of
existence.” For every human existence, both male and female, involves transcendence and immanence at the same time:

14 Man, like woman, is flesh, therefore passive, the plaything of his hormones and of the species, the restless prey of his desires. And she, like him ... is a consenting, a voluntary gift, an activity; they live out in their several fashions the strange ambiguity of existence made body. In those combats where they think they confront one another, it is really against the self that each one struggles, projecting into the partner that part of the self which is repudiated; instead of living out the ambiguities of their situation, each tries to make the other bear the abjection and tries to reserve the honour for the self (SS 737; DSb 658; emphasis added).

15 Recent revisionary critics of Beauvoir have sought to show how this Beauvoirean concept of ambiguity can be used to open up a new discursive space within which to reconceptualise notions of subjectivity in ways that break down traditional dichotomies. Scarth for example offers an account of pregnant subjectivity that builds on Beauvoir’s ethics of ambiguity as a new paradigm for thinking about the Subject which would be no longer “premised on finding the self in the other” but on “acknowled[ing] the other in the self” (Scarth 163). Cusk too seems to be seeking a new literary expression of female subjectivity that goes beyond the frustrating binary collisions that she nonetheless potently dramatizes. She finds it in the exploration of ambiguity on both the thematic and stylistic levels, which culminate in a number of epiphanic moments in the text that promise release and a reframing of her female characters’ lives.

4. Dissolving boundaries and the ambiguity of otherness within

16 One of the ways in which the ambiguity of embodied existence is registered in the novel is to be found in the unsettling figure of the dissolving boundary, which fails to keep otherness at bay. Boundaries of all kinds in the novel can no longer be sustained, and instead leakage, the seeping of one substance into another, one space into another, is emphasised. These boundaries, even when they are architectural ones, are repeatedly cast in anatomical terms, the house becoming coterminous with the contours of the female body. Amanda’s newly renovated house is an edifice born of the dissolution of boundaries between rooms that have been “torn down to create one vast room” (54) and although she later has misgivings about the “knocking through,” the space created furnishes Amanda with moments of transfigurative sensation that housework does not procure. The house is explicitly likened to a living body “that had flickered into life when Amanda’s kitchen was created ... heat surged in the radiators like blood in clean, vigorous veins” (55):

These moments came and they were beautiful, fragile pauses, like bubbles, in which Amanda experienced a feeling of summation, almost of symbolism. They were representations: they were advertisements, for something that lay half-way between the life that was lived here and her own feelings about them. (55-56)

17 The language of “symbolism,” of “representation,” of aesthetic expression, is always characteristic of such moments of revelation in the novel, as is the registering of a sort of in-betweenness, “half-way,” as we will see. Amanda’s persistent ambivalence about the success of the knocking-through project, however, betrays a deeper anxiety about bringing down the boundaries between the self and others, inside and out. Hers is an
“unending struggle to maintain separation between outside and in” (62) as she prises off her children’s muddy shoes before they enter the house. It is “messy work” policing “the confines of her provable successes” (62) of which the bounded environment contained by her car’s silver bodywork represents the fetishized if obsolete emblem. Opening up the space of herself and her house to the coffee-drinking mothers of Arlington Park and their felt-tip pen-wielding offspring cannot but produce “mess,” which culminates in the leaching of the “suppurating tips” of the pens that “bleed” into Amanda’s cream-coloured sofa leaving “a big red patch like a stain of blood … indelibly” (71). The incident installs at the heart of her home a reminder of the otherness of death and of the darker side of her character that she has already encountered twice that day with the news of her grandmother’s death and that of the neighbour’s rabbit, reminding her of when she killed her sister’s rabbit out of jealousy. More importantly, the incident also discloses Amanda’s own unsuspected “otherness” within. Although she is secretly furious at the ruination of her sofa, Amanda also feels “strangely transfigured” when Liz Connelly, the mother of the felt-tip pen culprit, attributes to her a tolerant benevolence she does not recognise: “a sort of ghost passed through her that was both herself and not herself” (73). She experiences an uncanny but salutary realisation which is at the heart of Beauvoirean ambiguity, that although a subject to herself, she is an object to others and is exposed to their reading of her which she is unable to control. Beauvoir critic Claudia Card explains: “The central ambiguity of [Beauvoir’s] concern is that of a being who is, on one hand, conscious, a choosing subject, an agent, and on the other hand (at the same time), an object of perception (both others’ perceptions and one’s own), at the mercy of forces beyond its control” (Card 14). The final lines of Amanda’s story encapsulate this ambiguous mix of self and not-self, of subject being and object being, which has been revealed to her: “she would cause them to go … she would cause Eddie to let go of her legs … Then she would cook the mince” (77; emphasis added). The pointedly causative construction “cause them to do” stresses the exertion of control and freedom Amanda lays claim to, but it combines ambiguously with the expression of her continued thraldom to the realm of immanence, symbolised by the bladder-like bag of mince meat and the “red stain remaining as a reminder of … this day of her life in which all the other days seemed to be coming together and showing themselves at last” (77).

As Amanda discovers, the dissolution of boundaries is inseparable from a sensation of being unable to control such a breakdown. For Solly, it is the separating hyphen in her double-barrelled surname Kerr-Leigh that is charged with maintaining the separation that will vouchsafe her identity (indeed, Solly believes marriage should be a “state of hyphenation,” 123), but she is powerless to prevent the fragile typographical mark from dissolving into the ludicrous “Solly Curly,” “with the emphasis on the first syllable. That syllable was Martin’s: it seemed a particularly insidious form of discrimination” (123). Everything seems “merged” for Solly, “all jumbled together, shaken up like the sea by a storm so that nothing was clear and separate” (132), which engenders a “crisis of the flesh” (121) that is only deepened by the arrival of the unconventional Paola into Solly’s home as a lodger. Solly’s aim in renting out the spare room has been initially to provide herself with another sort of symbolic “boundary” in order to stem the tide of expansiveness and “expectant precariousness” that makes her feel like “a more and more voluminous foam” (113):

She wanted to feel a boundary with the world, before she was diffused entirely into fleshly relatedness. The spare room appeared to her as the place where this boundary
could be established ... it was also to be her means of return from all this marshy expansiveness towards a new independence. (113-114 emphasis added)

19 As a boundary, the spare room is intended to confer greater definition and with it, perhaps, legitimacy on Solly's sense of self as one of what Linda Zerilli terms “the passive bearers of a species teleology” (Zerilli 132): “Generally she believed that this was what she had been born for. She was grateful that she had been able to put herself to such prolific use” (120). However, instead of providing definition, Paola deepens Solly’s “crisis of the flesh” by eliciting a further, figurative, breaking down of boundaries between bodies, like a transfusion of blood: “It was as though ... Solly’s flesh, the thick hide of her accustomed self, had been peeled back and a softer, more receptive surface revealed ... The sensation of a warm brown hand, a stranger’s hand, passed into Solly as if through an open vein” (124). When it transpires that Paola is herself a mother, Solly is confronted with the possibility that her woman’s existence may not be confined to the reproductive function she has hitherto taken it to be, and she is forced into a new perspective. As long as she can explain Paola’s forsaken maternity as having been caused by a bereavement, the death of her child, Solly is still able to feel some sense of boundary, distinction, separation, since this explanation preserves and sustains the culturally endorsed figure of maternal devotion she subscribes to, allowing her to feel “sharply in focus ... becalmed, solid, ordinary ... She felt able to distinguish herself. She sat in her chair identifying herself, as the chair identified itself, as the table did” (136). But the table and chair analogies attest to the illusory nature of this sense of identity, which is equivalent to nothing more than a reifying form of Sartrean “in-itself.” Cusk’s thematisation of the boundary or border recalls the use of the motif by Kristeva in “Motherhood according to Bellini,” where she refers to motherhood as a “mute border” (249) which secures the humanist idea of the subject and the borders of masculine identity but makes of “the Mother as subject ... a delusion” (242), precisely because, as Zerilli points out, this muted woman-mother “is deprived of speech” (Zerilli 119): “The mother as subject exists, then, where women as subjects are not,” so that “the problem for feminists is not mother as subject but women as nonsubjects, as maternal ideal, mother as mute subject” (Zerilli 131). Cusk’s questing female characters register this paradox and seem to be searching for a way out of the double-bind. It remains for Solly to discover the truth: that Paola’s son is alive and being raised by his father. The discovery overturns her world view (“She was shrinking, diminishing, while Paola seemed large, as large as a tree, as large as a house,” 139), triggering the shift in perspective that enables a renovated approach to subjectivity as, from her “little podium or plinth,” Solly is given “a new, higher view of the world ... she would not come down again from her plinth. She would live at that new angle to them” (139).

20 By lodging a sense of “strangeness” and even of “failure” (129) at the heart of Solly’s self-complacency, Paola exposes and sharpens her sense of “otherness within” which Solly has, however, already registered as the very condition of childbearing: “No one could ever understand the feeling of a human body struggling inside you. It defied understanding. If you thought about it, you would go mad” (130-131). What defies understanding and brings Cusk’s mothers to the brink of insanity is perhaps that which Kristeva has called “motherhood’s impossible syllogism,” the fact that gestation is the one act of creation that does not involve an act of will:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously
dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. 'It happens, but I'm not there.' 'I cannot realise it, but it goes on.' Motherhood's impossible syllogism. (Kristeva 1980 237)

21 Beauvoir had already made the same point, calling childbirth "a strange kind of creation," for the mother "does not really make the baby, it makes itself within her ... the mother lends herself to this mystery but she does not control it" (SS 513-514; Dsb 351-352). As such, it differs from the creation of the artist or artisan whose "transcendence ... contains the element of subjectivity; but in the mother-to-be the antithesis of subject and object ceases to exist; she and the child with which she is swollen make up together an equivocal pair overwhelmed by life" (SS 512; Dsb 350). This "equivocal pair" ushers in the possibility of a new paradigm for subjectivity and for imagining human relations, one that neither obliterates the woman-as-subject by condemning her to the muteness of the Kristevan maternal, nor relies on the masterful projection of otherness outside the self, but is based on ambiguity and the recognition of uncontrollable "otherness within." 22 Cusk's novel represents a literary exploration of such an alternative mode of subjectivity. Not only maternity, but also family life itself are some of the situations her fiction creatively explores as tropes for articulating this ambiguous mode of subjectivity founded on acknowledging otherness rather than rejecting it. The domestic scene becomes a locus of exposure and risk, not risk of the self-assertive Sartrean kind deemed to found the subject of existentialism but the risk involved in openness, in reciprocity and in the repeated acts of generosity required by family life. This kind of risk is not only physical but also ontological, and Cusk's novel figures it as the truly creative act.

5. The risk of exposure: generosity as a creative act

22 In her 2001 memoir A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother, Cusk writes: “In becoming a mother I became, briefly, both child and parent, both individual and other, and it was this rare and fleeting exposure of the psyche that I sought to capture in A Life's Work” (5). The experience of (m)othering as an “exposure” spawns numerous related images as figures for family life in Arlington Park, especially that of being at sea and exposed to all the elements. Hence, Maisie reflects that “It was a dangerous place to live in, a family: it was as tumultuous as the open sea beneath a treacherous sky, the shifting allegiances, the flurries of cruelty and virtue, the great battering waves of mood and mortality, the endless alternation of storm and calm" (186-187). The potentially transcendental “wind of possibility” she has the impression of being buffeted by leaves her feeling “exposed to strain, constantly fretted on every flank and in every crevice” (183-184; emphasis added); Solly meanwhile clings on to “the solid matter of her life” “as though to the deck of a ship in a storm” (135). The vertiginous sense of being out of control, vacillating at a great height, is also common to many of the women’s narratives: Amanda’s “writ ran through the centre of the day like a single wire on which she maintained an unpredictable balance” (41), while Solly’s opening of her home to foreign students with whom she cannot communicate leaves her with a sensation of being “at the edge, at the very limit of her own civilised self, vacillating there as though on the perimeter of a vast darkness ... she became aware of how much of her lay shrouded in this inarticulable darkness” (118). This sensation of precariousness often translates into having gone “too far”: in thinking of her marriage Christine is reminded of a walk on the Cobb at Lyme during which they
“had gone out too far” (234) and only just managed to avoid being “swept out to sea” by taking shelter behind the harbour wall; Maisie feels that she and Dom “had gone too far” from London in coming to Arlington Park (192) and she experiences her kitchen “like the end of a pier, where seagulls might wheel and waves fling themselves at the harbour wall, and you waited for some clear thought to come to you over the open sea” (194). The kitchen is also a dangerously liminal place for Amanda, who feels that she has gone “too far” in knocking through the walls of the rooms “until they had created not space but emptiness” (64).

Both enticing and repelling, the beguiling pull of non-differentiated emptiness, the lure of engulfment in the “unarticulable darkness” figured by the sea or the void, evokes the archaic Kristevan maternal space, “that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out” (Kristeva 1982, 9-10). This space is, as Zerilli glosses, “a state beyond representation, an unsignifiable space in which the mother may trouble the word but at the unspeakable price of losing her own relation to language” (Zerilli 114). It is a space that Cusk’s mothers, and also her prose, flirt with continually, taking her writing at times to the limits of intelligibility. A case in point is Maisie’s contemplation of her daughters before leaving for the dinner-party. The “cluttered darkness” of their room delineates a chaotic but intimately uterine space of “twisted forms” and “tangled sleep” (198) and gives rise to reflections that are just as confusingly “tangled,” to say the least, about Maisie’s wanting, needing and possessing of her daughters:

She felt she had deceived them, that she had stolen them from their rightful homes and carried them off with her on her getaway, her flight from authority. And yet there was nothing in the world that she wanted for them, nothing in the whole world except for them to live, like two stolen bars of gold in a carpet bag, within her possession. There was nothing in the world they needed, only for her to believe they belonged to her. And it was this belief, so necessary, that had marked her, as one way or another it marked everybody. It made you manifest, visible. It took away your anonymity, perhaps forever; and wherever you went, there you stood, between yourself and the world. (198-199)

Who wants what and needs whom, who belongs to whom, or is possessed by whom or only “believes” or “needs” to believe that they are, is simply not clear here, at least to me. As a verbal representation, this writing verges on the non-representational. It is, however, a suggestive expression of the inextricably embroiled relations of dependency, need and want that are bound up within a family environment, so that it is, precisely, no easy matter determining who needs whom, who possesses whom, who belongs to whom—if indeed it is legitimate to frame such relations in terms of possession and belonging. Maisie’s indulgent contemplation of her daughters restates the radically split location of the mother (“there you stood, between yourself and the world”) which is what finally makes possible her relenting towards her husband, expressed as an almost epiphanic discovery, which is actually a re-creation, of his “reality”:

[S]he felt him coming towards her, as though out of the core of some unseen fire or furnace, where he was remade for her, manufactured again and again out of his absences. She felt an almost unbearable sense of his reality, of his life and of the task, her task, of keeping these representations of him together, making them continuous. That was love, that work of deciphering and interpolating and testifying; to bear witness to something in its entirety, that was love. (198)

Maisie re-founds her relationship on grounds that are akin to a process of craftsmanship or artistic production: love is wrought out of the continued reinvestment of the beloved
with meaning (“keeping these representations of him together”) and is an unending “task,” the “work of deciphering and interpolating and testifying,” in other words, a repeated act of creation, as the analogy between Dom and a wrought iron artefact emerging from a furnace, “remade for her, manufactured again and again” implies. The effort required by openness and generosity in her newfound relation with her husband is palpable at the end of Maisie’s story but her new perspective, which the narrator with characteristic ambiguity calls her “merry servitude” (200), is one she voluntarily embraces. Likewise, Juliet’s decision to open herself to a more reciprocal relationship with Benedict is also couched in the terms of artistic endeavour, as the “masterpiece” that has eluded her until now:

Could she not tear down this veil of anger? Could she not bend them a little, these rules, this rod of marriage? Might not that be her single achievement, her masterpiece? To say to Benedict, I cannot go on as we are. We have to change things, just a little. You had to love someone, to say that. You had to be prepared to give, in order to ask for something in return. (167-168; emphasis added)

Juliet’s epiphany, adumbrated in the vision of swans taking flight “in a kind of ecstasy, lifting themselves from the shadows by their slow, labouring wings” (168), embraces the generosity of giving which is at the heart of her new perspective, her new subjectivity. Beauvoir identifies the erotic encounter (Maisie and Juliet call it “love”) as the locus in which generosity as a mode of subjectivity that is open to the other, a mode of intersubjectivity in effect, “most poignantly discloses to human beings the ambiguity of their condition; in it they experience themselves as flesh and as spirit, as the other and as subject” (SS 423 TA; Dsb 190). There are, of course, as Fredrika Scarth recognises, dangers in emphasising generosity as a mode of subjectivity “in a context in which women have always been expected to be self-sacrificing” (123). This is the risk that Cusk embraces, just as, as a writer, she runs the artistic risk of embracing the immanent “Other” of patriarchy by dealing with conventionally “female” themes of domesticity and family life. Cusk seems indeed to suggest an analogy between the risks and exposures of female subjectivity and those of the female artist. Both are involved in an ambiguous kind of creation, a process that cannot be controlled or completely mastered, that is always open for interpretation in ways that may not have been anticipated, but which give the creation meaning. The other thus appears as “the possibility of a recreation,” intrinsic to the processes both of procreation and artistic creation, a form of reinvention of the self through exposure to and dependence on the other to freely take up and extend our projects.

The sharing of domestic space, the daily tussle and confrontation with uncongenial otherness, are envisaged in Cusk’s novel as the mainspring of creativity and life, as well as a paradigm for renewed ethical relationships with others through which a meaningful world may come into being. At the end of her article on “Shakespeare’s Daughters,” Cusk explicitly suggests that such “shared domestic space” may be a fitting emblem for female creativity, insofar as it encompasses the “situational link between women’s lives and their work,” the book written behind the sitting-room door as in Jane Austen’s case rather than Woolf’s “room of one’s own,” conventionally lauded as the pre-condition for the emergence of women’s writing. In thus advising the woman writer to “come out of her room, and take up her old place behind the sitting room door,” Cusk seems to be urging post-feminist women writers and critics to uncover that situational link, with its interruptions and ordinariness and mediocrities, so as to disclose a world newly “rich in intersubjective meanings” (Scarth 171).
BIBLIOGRAPHY

NOTES

1. “But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: ‘I am a woman.’ This truth is the background from which all further claims will stand out. A man never begins by affirming that he is an individual of a certain sex; that he is a man goes without saying” (SS 15; DSa 16 TA). She also writes: “no woman can, without bad faith, pretend to be situated beyond her sex” (SS 14; DSa 15). References to Parshley’s English translation of The Second Sex are indicated by SS in the text, and their French originals Le deuxième sexe I and Le deuxième sexe II respectively by DSa and DSb. Amended versions of Parshley’s translation are indicated by TA.

2. “To be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards this world; but nothing requires that this body have this or that particular structure” (SS 39; DSa 42).

3. “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (SS 16; DSa 17).

4. I have used Moi’s amended translation (Moi 1994: 175).

5. In a more recent Guardian article (“The simmering but stymied rage of stay-at-home mums”), Cusk has unveiled the contemporary face of this paradox or ambiguity which persists in the home where women’s willingness to perform domestic work “is raised to the status of a contractual obligation”: “It is this notion of willingness, of ‘want to’ or ‘ought to’ acting as a screen for ‘have to’, that makes domesticity so very difficult to radicalise … [Woman’s] pleasure, her freedom to choose, becomes entangled with the actual work of house and children to the point where they become impossible even for her to separate.”


7. I borrow this concept from Scarth, examining Cusk’s novel as a literary exploration of a reframed theory of subjectivity that Scarth sees Beauvoir’s work as having cleared the way for.

8. I have used the amended translation by Fredrika Scarth from The Other Within (119).

9. In Powers of Horror, Kristeva underlines the ambiguity of abjection: “We may call it a border: abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary; abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger … Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which the body becomes separated from another body in order to be—maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out” (Kristeva 1982, 9-10).

10. The bounded nature of masculinity recalls Beauvoir’s notorious description of the male organ as “simple and neat as a finger” (SS 406; DSb 166). Although “it is neither plough-share nor sword, but only flesh … however, man imparts to it a movement that is voluntary,” thereby associating it with freedom and transcendence.

11. Beauvoir draws an explicit parallel between professional work and transcendence: “the husband … goes beyond the family interest to that of society, opening up a future for himself through co-operation in the building of the collective future; he incarnates transcendence. Woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home—that is to say, immanence” (SS 449; DSb 226).

12. “Early man’s activity had another dimension that gave it supreme dignity: it was often dangerous. If blood were but a nourishing fluid, it would be valued no higher than milk; but the hunter was no butcher, for in the struggle against wild animals, he ran grave risks. The warrior
put his life in jeopardy to elevate the prestige of the horde, the clan to which he belonged. And in this he proved dramatically that life is not the supreme value for man, but on the contrary, that it should be made to serve ends more important than itself. The worst curse that was laid upon woman was that she should be excluded from these warlike forays. For it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth [life] but to that which kills.” (SS 95-6 TA; Dsa 115) As recent commentators on Beauvoir have pointed out (Scarth, Moi, Zerilli), it is important to be attentive to the measure of irony present in these lines, due perhaps to Beauvoir’s overt disclaimer early on in The Second Sex that the “finalistic language” she will adopt, which “ascribe [s] meaning to vital phenomena” (SS 41; Dsa 45), is the one used by physiologists and biologists.

13. In Sartre’s existentialist account of subjectivity, not only one’s own body but also the bodies of others are seen as instrumental: “Le corps de l’autre m’apparaît donc ici comme un instrument au milieu d’autres instruments. Non point seulement comme un outil à faire des outils, mais encore comme un outil à manier des outils, en un mot comme une machine-outil” (Sartre 360). In Arlington Park, Christine’s husband Joe is described in instrumental terms, “his arms like girders, his hands like shovels” (234). The little imperialistic mechanism of two figurines, a “dark-skinned” native being decapitated by a colonialist, which Joe demonstrates to his guests at the dinner-party (228), is perhaps emblematic of the latent violence of instrumentalist conceptions of the body.

14. In French, the text runs as follows: “On a hautement vanté la poésie des travaux ménagers. Il est vrai qu’ils mettent la femme aux prises avec la matière, et qu’elle réalise avec les objets une intimité qui est dévoilement d’être et par conséquent l’enrichit.” As Toril Moi and Elizabeth Fallaize have pointed out, many of the passages on housework are omitted from Parshley’s translation (Moi 2002, 1010).

15. This image again seems drawn from Beauvoir who writes: “Eating, sleeping, cleaning—the years no longer rise up towards heaven, they lie spread out ahead, grey and identical. The battle against dust and dirt is never won” (SS 470; Dsb 267; emphasis added).

16. Cusk’s male characters’ more linear relation to time is perhaps what enables them to perform housework with greater equanimity than their wives: Martin is “a hands-on father” (131) who comes home early to bathe the children; Dom returns from work at a law firm to tackle uncomplainingly the huge pile of dishes left by Maisie (175) and put the children to bed. Beauvoir explains how such escape from the monotony of housework is possible: “The male and female writers who lyrically exalt [housework] are persons who are seldom or never engaged in actual housework. It is tiresome, empty, monotonous, as a career. If, however, the individual who does such work is also a producer, a creative worker, it is as naturally integrated in life as are the organic functions; for this reason housework done by men seems much less dismal; it represents for them merely a negative and inconsequential moment from which they quickly escape” (SS 472-473; Dsb 275).

17. The motif of the rock climber is used by Sartre in L’Etre et le néant to illustrate the existentialist notion of the project through which the subject posits himself as a transcendence (527). Even more significant, perhaps, is the implicit parallel Cusk draws in her memoir A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother (26-29) between motherhood and venturing out onto an icy mountain slope, which she describes as a contest between fact and feeling: “What I feel, it seems, is no obstacle to what I am able to do … I have not yet thought much about motherhood, but I suspect that it combines fact and feeling in exactly this disturbing way” (29).

18. Cusk offers no delight in ordinariness and domesticity, but her prose underscores the ambiguous boundaries of the real in poetically informed ways, conflating the tangible and the intangible: the smell of reheated food which hangs “in a meat-smelling shape around the doors” in Juliet’s school (152) or the scent of coffee and baking in the Merrywood shopping mall which
“stood around the open-air cafés like a replacement for walls and language” (88), all infuse the materiality of the quotidian with suggestively synaesthetic evocations.

19. Beauvoir defines this realisation that we are a subject for ourselves but an object for others and vice versa as a “conversion” in which “each individual freely recognises the other, each regarding himself and the other simultaneously as object and as subject in a reciprocal manner” (SS 172; DSa 240). What I have called the “epiphanies” experienced by Cusk’s female characters could be termed “conversions.”

20. “It was strange: in Paola’s presence she felt herself to be a failure, yet a part of her believed that a woman of thirty-four with no husband or children was the greatest failure of all” (129). The image of embedded otherness with its freight of life-threatening associations is also explicitly used: Paola “had found her and come to lodge in her brimming nest, had embedded the void of herself right here, like a clot next to Solly’s heart” (135).

21. Childbirth as a radical splitting of the female subject is described by Cusk in her memoir *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother* as “not merely that which divides women from men: it also divides women from themselves, so that a woman’s understanding of what it is to exist is profoundly changed. Another person has existed in her, and after their birth they live within the jurisdiction of her consciousness. When she is with them she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself; and so it is as difficult to leave your children as it is to stay with them” (123).

22. Beauvoir says of this “strange kind of creation” that it “is accomplished in contingency and facticity” (SS 513 TA; DSb 350). Maternity is an opening onto the future through the other, the child-to-be, and thus partakes of the transcendence of existence. Yet, writes Beauvoir, paradoxically “the pregnant woman feels the immanence of her body at just the time when it is in transcendence; it turns upon itself in nausea and discomfort; it has ceased to exist for itself and thereupon becomes more sizeable than ever before” (SS 512; DSb 349).

23. I am indebted to Scarth’s taking up and developing of this notion. Although Beauvoir herself did not articulate such a theory of women’s subjectivity, as Zerilli and Scarth both point out, she did “clear a conceptual space within which feminists might advance ... a conception of the female subject who is not defined by maternity” (Zerilli 132).

24. What Juliet craves is “expression,” the narrator makes clear: “the truth was, she had never expressed herself, in any native act. Not in sex, not in love, not even in childbirth ... She had expected to find expression by a different route” (36).

25. Interestingly Cusk has written in *A Life’s Work* “It is my belief that in this enterprise [of looking after children] generosity is more important than equality” (14).

26. The expression is from Sara Heinämaa (Card 81).

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**ABSTRACTS**

In the “book of repetition” that is *Arlington Park*, Rachel Cusk, I argue, runs the “risk of the feminine,” in ways that seem to rehearse the paradigm of sexual difference both raised and challenged by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. I start by looking at how the women of *Arlington Park* seem (to adopt the Beauvoirean terminology) mired in immanence and facticity, cut off from the transcendence that would confer subjectivity on them. Cusk’s endeavour in the novel probes the ambiguities of her female characters’ existences, which lead them paradoxically to *choose* that which oppresses them. This contradiction is the focus of Cusk’s “women’s writing,” which is less
concerned with questions of “female identity” than with questions of action and choice that limit women’s freedom in ambiguous and contradictory fashions, producing an alienating split in their subjectivity. Ambiguity is at the heart of Arlington Park, where the female characters are cast as “bodies at risk,” all seeking new ways of relating to others which will neither immure them in, nor exclude them from, prevailing representations of femininity. Cusk’s women experience the specific risks associated with the ambiguously shared spaces of domesticity which embed the “other within” and require exposure, openness and generosity. Drawing on the recent revisionary work on Beauvoir by Fredrika Scarth in particular, this paper examines the ways in which the lived experience of womanhood is dramatized in the novel as a kind of risk that is not only physical but also ontological. It is a risk that Cusk’s novel figures as a truly creative act.

Dans le « livre de la répétition » qu’est Arlington Park, Rachel Cusk court le « risque du féminin », d’une façon qui n’est pas sans rappeler le paradigme de la différence sexuelle à la fois mis en lumière et attaqué par Simone de Beauvoir dans Le Deuxième Sexe. Nous nous intéresserons d’abord à la manière dont les femmes d’Arlington Park sont (pour utiliser un vocabulaire beauvoirien) embourbées dans l’immanence et la facticité, séparées de la transcendance qui leur permettrait d’atteindre à la subjectivité. Cusk s’efforce de montrer les ambiguïtés de l’existence de ses personnages féminins, qui sont conduits à choisir ce qui justement va être source d’oppression pour elles. L’écriture féminine de Cusk s’intéresse donc moins à la question de « l’identité féminine », qu’à celles de l’action et du choix qui limitent la liberté individuelle d’une manière ambiguë et contradictoire, ce qui aboutit à diviser le sujet. C’est bien l’ambiguïté qui est au cœur d’Arlington Park, où les personnages féminins sont présentés comme des « corps à risque », qui cherchent tous de nouvelles modalités d’entrer en contact avec l’autre sans être emmurés dans les représentations dominantes de la féminité, mais sans en être exclus toutefois. Les femmes de Cusk font l’expérience du risque inhérent aux espaces partagés de la maison, qui inclut l’autre en soi et demande ouverture, générosité et exposition au regard de l’autre. En fondant ce travail sur la lecture de la philosophie de Beauvoir proposée par Frederika Scarth, cet article analyse la manière dont l’expérience vécue par les femmes est dramatisée dans le roman comme une sorte de risque qui n’est pas seulement physique mais ontologique. C’est un risque que le roman de Cusk représente comme un acte créatif réel.

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