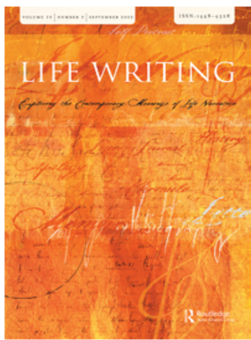

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Dialogic Reading Spaces in Autofiction: Rachel Cusk's *Kudos*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the conversational aspect of Cusk's autofiction and discusses its relevance for describing the relationship between an autofictional text, its author and its reader. In *Kudos*, this conversational aspect is actualised as dialogic reading space (*coaxing space*), in which the reader is invited to, and permitted to, take part in the polyphonic construction of the narrative based on the author's personal truths. The reader's perspective is thus introduced into a nuanced approach to the themes in the text, but also towards the writing process itself, including its commercial and human entanglements. The dialogic reading space allows the author to disentangle herself from any autobiographical pressures while enabling the reader to recognise the open indeterminacy of autofiction as a wellspring of ideas rather than a genre issue.

KEYWORDS

autofiction; Cusk; dialogic spaces; coaxing space; polyphony; autofictional truth

Introduction

Speaking to *The Guardian* in 2014, Rachel Cusk described the harsh criticism related to issues of self-centredness and privacy she received following the publication of her memoir *Aftermath* (2012). When asked whether the 'invisible narrator' of her autofictional *Outline* trilogy[1] was a reaction to the 'critical mugging' of *Aftermath*, she replied that 'it was creative death after *Aftermath*' and that she was 'heading into total silence' (Cusk 2014). She had found that fiction was 'fake and embarrassing', yet that she could not write autobiography anymore either 'without being misunderstood and making people angry' (Cusk 2014). Therefore, she needed a new mode of expression that could provide the space for the articulation of the many intricacies of her personal experience, but that could also, to an extent, shield her from the misunderstandings that were driving her into silence. She decided to make her writing 'less confrontational' (Dockterman 2018). The new mode or genre in which this could be achieved was autofiction. Such a turn is not surprising. As Sidharth Srikanth writes: 'for authors of autofiction both autobiographies and novels are formally inadequate to register the truths about the modern self' (2019, 351). Cusk had tried both but felt they had become inadequate. However, the autofictional mode she developed still bears traces of her past struggles in other genres, and with her public.

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A key aspect of the 'critical mugging' (Cusk 2014) Cusk received was the widespread conflation of the narrator-protagonist Rachel and the flesh-and-blood writer Cusk, not only in *Aftermath,* but also in her previous memoir, *A Life's Work* [2001]. By its very nature[2], autobiographical writing invites a certain degree of such conflation. However, for Cusk's memoirs, the conflation became significant beyond personal truth. While the mechanism behind this phenomenon is complex and not entirely transparent, Cusk's memoirs seem to have encroached on the society's idealised and internalised image of motherhood (i.e. the cultural concept of Good Mother) by daring to depict its negative side (Quiney 2007). Though Cusk's personal experience with the challenges of marriage and motherhood was not meant to be read as representative of female experience more broadly, such an intent was nevertheless attributed to her writing, which exacerbated her perceived transgression. Cusk has consequently been criticised for self-obsession, both in the online reading communities and by professional literary critics in newspapers and magazines. For example, Emma Gilbey Keller, contributor to the American edition of *The Guardian*, reduces the whole experience of motherhood described in *A Life's Work* to self-fascination: 'When writing about her own life, Cusk often sounds depressed, and appears not so much selfish as self-involved. Maybe it's an obvious point to make about a 45-year-old serial memoirist, but she finds herself disproportionately fascinating' (Keller 2012). This kind of risibly simplistic identification of real-life author and narrative protagonist points to the attraction of the more complex, slippery genre of autofiction.

However, while this slipperiness can be attractive to writers, it makes the genre of autofiction very hard to define. The term was first introduced by Serge Doubrovsky on the cover of his book *Fils* (1977) to designate his own text as fulfilling certain conditions for being autobiographical, while being in fact fictional. Since the term was coined, a host of texts have been read as autofiction, and there have been numerous attempts at delineating the characteristics of this genre. According to Gretchen Shirm, two aspects of autofiction remain reliably consistent to most definitions: that it is about the author's own life and that it, to a degree, critiques the very act of writing that has produced it (2021, 3). Karen-Ferreira Meyers provides a similar, but more precise perspective:

> An autofictional text can be seen as a literary puzzle, which a reader, through his/her acceptance of an autofictional pact, undertakes to solve. The autofictional author, through his/her writing style, transforms an instance of personal reality into a public literary work, because the text's fictionality showcases questions about authorship and authority, fiction and reality, truth and authenticity. Autofiction is also understood as a fictional and metaphorical self-translation because the author translates his/her own life experiences and memories into a literary text. (2018, 40)

In approaching the puzzle of Rachel Cusk's autofiction, the notion of autofictional pact becomes especially important. The term derives from Philippe Lejeune's notion of reading pacts or contracts. This implicit 'pact' is based on the relationship between the author's proper name and the proper name of the narrator/protagonist. In autobiographical writing, the author proposes the autobiographical pact as the mode of reading by establishing *the identity of name* between himself (stated on the cover), the narrator, and the protagonist (Lejeune 1989, 14). Lejeune, however, also points out that the reader does not necessarily have to accept the pact proposed by the author and is free to choose alternative modes of reading (126). In other words, there is scope for complex

negotiation here, which allows for moving beyond the autobiographical pact. In the autofictional reading space, the textual categories of both fiction and autobiography are inscribed, but the space itself is reducible to neither of the two (26–28). While autobiographical writing remains bound by the tenets of the autobiographical pact, autofiction oscillates between autobiography and fiction, allowing the author to find flexibility in the autofictional reading space. This makes both the structure of autofictional reading spaces and the role of an implicit dialogue with the reader in determining the appropriate reading mode crucially important. This article thus offers a closer look into the dialogic reading space in *Kudos*—its creation, effect and outcomes—and positions it firmly as a feature of autofiction that emerges in Cusk's writing and that is responsible for her successful turn to this genre.

Establishing the dialogic reading space: the coaxing space

Cusk's 'adjustment' towards autofiction has created a dialogic reading space in which her readers are invited to take a nuanced approach to the themes in the text, but also towards the writing process itself, including its commercial and human entanglements. Of course, an important marker of that new space is the naming of the narrator-protagonist. The first step towards making her writing 'less confrontational' (Dockterman 2018) would precisely have been to reduce the risk of conflation. In the case of Cusk's memoirs, the tendency of the readers to 'find' the author in the text was exacerbated by the autobiographical contract with its assumed identity of name between the author and the narrator-protagonist. In order to begin mitigating the reader's tendency towards conflation and the resulting possibility of confrontation, Cusk gave her autofictional narrator-protagonist a name different from her own, thus signalling that *Kudos* (2019) should not be read entirely according to the rules of the autobiographical contract. And yet, she seems nonetheless to have given several hints towards an autobiographical reading. In the first place, there are the similarities between Cusk's and Faye's biographical information: they are both writers, divorced, with two children; they both travel to events for writers and speak to the same kinds of people at these events; and they have both remarried. Secondly, Cusk continues to write about many of the themes that were the focus of her two memoirs: motherhood, the relationship with one's children, the changing conditions of the self in parenthood, separation and divorce. And lastly, the name Faye is only mentioned once in the entire book, when her younger son calls her on the phone towards the end. The presence of these hints indicates that Cusk's personal truth is being reimagined through her autofiction.

The name itself here arguably functions as an indirect comment on the criticism that Cusk received for her memoirs. 'Faye' plays on the adjective 'fey'[3], meaning 'excessively refined', 'quaintly unconventional' or 'marked by a foreboding of death or calamity' (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. 'fey'). In the article published in *The Guardian* in 2008, Cusk writes that '[she] was accused of child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness, of doom-mongering and, most often, of being too intellectual' (Cusk 2008). One could hardly find an adjective that better fits the target of the criticisms Cusk lists! The name Faye, then, seeks to create a distance between the writer Rachel Cusk and the narrator-protagonist of *Kudos*, while also signalling to the readers and the critics that this character should be understood as the writer Cusk's response to the public's tendency towards conflation.

The dialogic reading space emerges from a story that is not focalised through just one subjectivity, but instead built around a polyphony of voices. In order to allow for the other voices to be brought to the surface, the narrator-protagonist here becomes displaced, taking a step back or inhabiting a different role. This allows for other characters, other sources of illumination, to step into the role of the narrator-protagonist and bring to view perspectives that otherwise would have remained hidden. It is thus not accidental that the character who manages to best describe precisely this effect is not Faye, but another character, Paola.

> 'But then I noticed,' she said, 'that in certain places where statues had obviously been, new lights had been installed which illuminated the empty spaces. These lights,' she said, 'had the strange effect of making you see more in the empty space than you would have seen had it been filled with a statue. And so I knew,' she said, 'that this spectacle was not the result of some monstruous neglect or misunderstanding but was the work of an artist.' (Cusk 2019, 213)

The description here is of a church heavily damaged by fire, but subsequently secured and made suitable for continuing use. It is a church that Paola has seen, and wants to show to Faye, but when they arrive at its doors, they are locked. Metaphorically, the absence of the statue and the locked doors can be seen as an analogy for Faye's role in *Kudos*. The narrator-protagonist Faye assumes the role of the *coaxer* and is mostly absent from the spotlight in order to let other characters illuminate the themes of the novel. This means that the only way for her to approach those themes is to allow others, in this case Paola, to enlighten her. A coaxer can be 'any person, institution or set of cultural imperatives that solicits or provokes people to tell their stories' (Plummer 1995, 21). According to Smith and Watson, '[i]n giving thematic shape to life writing by virtue of decisions about what is included or excluded' coaxers 'subordinate the narrator's modes and choices' to their own (Smith and Watson 2010, 68), influencing the narrative as the result.

Faye's role as a coaxer first becomes visible to the reader in those places where the narrative shifts from direct quotes to reported speech and vice versa. In the first section of the book, she is seated next to a man on her flight to Europe, with whom she soon enters into a conversation. When Faye reports to the reader an observation about some unnamed friend of the man, stating that '[h]e worked for a budget airline that practised the most brutal economies, and *apparently the passengers behaved like zoo animals*' (Cusk 2019, 7, italics mine), the reader becomes unsure whether the comparison to zoo animals is made by the man or by Faye reading into what the man has told her. By using direct quotes in the passage immediately preceding this one, and by switching between direct quotes and reported speech throughout the section, Cusk strengthens the impression that the observation was actually made by the unnamed man. However, the reader still cannot be certain that this is the case, which leaves an indeterminacy in the text. This indeterminacy invites the reader to fill in the gap and decide for themselves, allowing them to actively participate in constructing the narrative. The reader is thus faced with an intriguing polyphony, to which they are expected to add their own voice. As Faye both retells and re-forms the stories of the many temporary narrators in *Kudos* in the manner of a coaxer, these stories inevitably speak to the reader and invite them to respond through the reading choices that they make. Though the voices may be antithetic, they create a revolving dialogue in which there is room for complex interpretation.

As it all starts with Faye acting as a coaxer, the dialogic reading space of *Kudos* will in this article be referred to as the *coaxing space,* but one in which stories are elicited by patience rather than by persuasion.

The polyphonic indeterminacy in *Kudos* gives rise to doubt, but this functions both as a sign of trust and a conversation starter. When a polyphony of voices obscures the identity of the narrator so that the only thing that clearly comes across is the discussion of a common theme, the readers are trusted to enter the conversation and become one of these voices as they interpret the text according to their own strategies and expectations. According to Shirm, autofiction is 'predicated on the understanding that in a post-Freudian era, autofiction understands that the truth of a self can only be revealed through the participation of another' as it 'co-opt[s] the reader as the participant and witness' (2021, 4). Where the nature of the autobiographical contract prompts the reader to be aware of inconsistencies between the life described in the text and the writer's life, which would suggest a breach of the contract (Lejeune 1989, 14), the dialogic space of *Kudos* invites them to approach the text as a wellspring of ideas where the factual veracity of any biographical information carries less importance compared to the conversation that the text starts. The coaxing space is open to the voices of all the characters who are telling and retelling, as well as to the interpretation that the reader brings into the story. In this way, the coaxing space opens up new possibilities for Cusk to reimagine her personal truth through polyphony rather than a single voice, and thus shield herself from potential new accusations of self-centredness.

Occasionally, though, Faye herself is brought to the forefront of the novel. Sometimes she speaks in short comments, but there are several longer passages in which the reader can hear directly from her. Such passages often concern her children, parenthood, or marriage—themes that are prevalent in Cusk's memoirs. These then are the moments that feel most strongly autobiographical. Nonetheless, *Kudos* is not meant to be read according to an exclusively autobiographical contract. In fact, such moments in *Kudos* seem not to strengthen the autobiographical impulse, but rather to amplify the idea of multiple ways of seeing in conversation with one another, where Faye's potentially autobiographical perspective is one of many, and itself liable to change through the conversation.

The mirroring effect inside the coaxing space

The narrative and the coaxing space of *Kudos* are also tools in a dialogic exploration of the most prominent themes in *Kudos*—parenthood, separation and divorce, the writing process and literature. Such exploration happens inside the coaxing space through mirroring: the characters see themselves reflected in the stories of other characters, while the readers observe their own lives reflected in the characters.

At one point in the text, both the reader and Faye are told a story about a ski instructor by one of the characters, Linda. The ski instructor had flown off the edge of a precipice, and those who were with her did not know what happened afterwards. She appeared at a ski refuge some time later, where she passed out. When she could not remember what had happened between her flying off the edge of a precipice and an indeterminate moment after collapsing at a mountain refuge, Linda reports that the instructor thought she 'simply hadn't known her bones were broken. She didn't even feel any

pain' (Cusk 2019, 59). Immediately after, Linda states that 'it suddenly felt like she was talking about me' (59). While listening to the ski instructor's story, Linda realises how the instructor's near-death encounter mirrors her own experience of motherhood, making it more transparent. Linda then compares motherhood to surviving one's own death with nothing left to do than either talk (write) about it or find a new way to die. Even though thematically different, the ski instructor's story acts as a mirror and helps Linda realise something about her own life story. The scene offers Cusk's readers a chance to see their own life reflected in someone else's experience of motherhood.

Mirroring not only allows for experiential dialogue, but also stimulates commentary about the process of writing and the uncertainty of factual truthfulness. Cusk's autofiction 'question[s] the undertaking at the heart of the idea that there is any such thing as a verifiable "truth" to lived experience' (Shirm 2021, 4). The abovementioned ski instructor supposedly does not remember what had happened, so she is asked what she thinks had happened. The reader would expect signs of guessing, such as modal verbs or a 'maybe'. Instead, Linda's report of her reply, '[she] simply hadn't known her bones were broken. She didn't even feel any pain' (Cusk 2019, 59), exudes certainty, which is suspicious. Linda's subsequent realisation about intersubjective mirroring only contributes to the indeterminacy of the scene, bringing into question the truthfulness of her account. When conveying an experience, one may not always be believed, the same way Cusk's version of the separation in *Aftermath* was doubted. *Kudos* asks of the reader to put the question of factual veracity to the side for a moment, and consider how Linda's story is structured and for what purpose. It refocuses the attention away from the postulates of autobiography and towards a multi-layered, polyphonic storytelling as a way of expressing one's life experience.

Furthermore, Cusk points out the importance of the choices a narrator makes for the narrative and the reader by introducing a temporal perspective. In the third section of the book, Faye meets with an interviewer for the second time in ten years. Faye says that, ten years ago, the interviewer described her town and her life as 'lack[ing] a quality that drove other people's lives into extremity, whether of pleasure or pain' (Cusk 2019, 63), and this has left a lasting impression on Faye, so much so that the interviewer's life became a mirror for Faye's own.

> She had talked, I said, about her husband and two sons and about the simple, regulated life they lived, a life that involved little change and hence little waste, and the fact that in certain details her life had mirrored my own while in no way resembling it had often led me to see my situation in the most unflattering light. I had broken that mirror, I said, without knowing whether I had done so as an act of violence or simply by mistake. (Cusk 2019, 64)

Mirroring depends on the way lives are described rather than on the lives themselves, which gives the person talking decisive influence. In this section of *Kudos*, the interviewer reveals that she had intentionally set up the mirror to make Faye envious. For this she used the knowledge about Faye that she had garnered from her writing. But the interviewer's own life has since come crashing down. She now feels trapped in a loveless marriage with her terminally ill husband (Cusk 2019, 79–80). The mirror that she had so carefully constructed for Faye now shatters, and she has to re-narrate her own life according to this new situation. In this scene, Cusk is drawing a parallel between her critics and the interviewer, given that Cusk's critics used both her memoirs and their own life

experience to construct a critical mirror for her. She is here implying that their mirror could well suffer the same fate as the interviewer's: as their lives change, they will need to reconfigure their own narrative and rethink the kind of mirror they are putting up. This constant risk of and need for reconfiguration is a common human predicament that brings Cusk and her critics together. Within the coaxing space, it allows for renewal and reconfiguration of old conversations in a new light, and a focus on what they have in common.

The interviewer also tells Faye the story of herself and her sister, which is one of jealousy, envy and shifting fates. The sister eventually goes through a divorce, and the interviewer confides in Faye that it felt as though the secret envy and desire for the pair's downfall that the interviewer and her husband felt 'had somehow brought about the destruction of [the sister's] family life' (Cusk 2019, 70). Faye then says that 'while her story suggested that human lives can be governed by the laws of narrative […] it was in fact merely her interpretation of events that created this illusion' (71). These words underscore the importance of interpretation for understanding one's own and other people's lives, as well as for how mirroring works. The dialogic aspect of the coaxing space is thus crucial: it gives the reader an opportunity not only to interpret according to their own inclinations, but also to see the story they are interpreting refracted through the perspectives of multiple narrators. It also invites the critic to consider how life narratives are created, how they constantly change, how mirrors are made, shattered and re-made, and how their attention is perhaps best directed at this constant ambiguity as a fertile ground for the study of human commonalities and entanglements.

Authorship and reading

If fiction felt to Cusk 'fake and embarrassing' and autobiography led to her 'being misunderstood and making people angry' (Cusk 2014), it is pertinent to ask how autofictional storytelling may be capable of functioning as a more truthful medium. The way that the notion of truth has been presented in Cusk's writing is illuminating here. In her second memoir, *Aftermath*, Rachel describes what she believes to be the relationship between truth and story: 'My husband believed that I had treated him monstrously. This belief of his couldn't be shaken: his whole world depended on it. It was his story, and lately I have come to hate stories. If someone were to ask me what disaster this was that had befallen my life, I might ask if they wanted the story or the truth' (Cusk 2012, Loc 73). Truth and story here seem to be treated as separate, mutually exclusive entities that cannot co-exist. But in *Kudos*, while talking to Faye, a journalist says that '[he] had deduced from [her] work that if [she] had an imagination [she] had the sense to keep it well concealed. "And there is no better hiding place," he said, "than somewhere as close as possible to the truth, something all good liars know"' (Cusk 2019, 185–186). This implies that in some cases the distance between story and truth is not that great after all. For Cusk, then, both the notion of truth and its relationship to the story become complex and shifting.

Towards the end of the book Faye gets a call from her younger son. He is in trouble and nobody seems to want to hear his side of the story. He and some friends accidentally caused a fire which was quickly put out, but produced a lot of smoke that led to a commotion. Due to all the smoke the fire alarm went off, and some people ran in. Faye's son

says: ‘They ask me things […] but they don’t connect the things up. They don’t relate them to things I’ve already told them. There are just all these meaningless facts’ (230), to which Faye replies: ‘You can’t tell your story to everybody […] Maybe you can only tell it to one person’ (230). ‘Truth’ here is inherently interpersonal, dependent on connection and unique response. While for Cusk, the truth does involve facts, those facts are not equally available to everyone and will thus get combined into stories in different ways by different people in different circumstances. Her readers are therefore invited to use the dialogic coaxing space to explore and connect with the emerging narratives from their own contingent position, while using them as mirrors and expressions of the changing nature of being human.

Kudos also comments on reading and authorship more metaphorically. In the first section of the book there are many parallels between the story of the man on the plane and his family on the one hand, and authorship, reading and criticism, on the other. If the man’s family is understood as a readership or audience, his daughter Betty is of particular interest. She has an odd relationship with the truth and a strained relationship with her father. What others identify as ‘normal conventions and speech patterns of adult conversation’ (Cusk 2019, 18) she sees as lies, from which she usually runs screaming with her ears covered: ‘She claimed that most of what people said was fake and insincere, and when he’d asked her how she could possibly know that, she replied that she could tell by the sound’ (18). Her mother started growing increasingly silent, which her father believed ‘to be Betsy’s doing, by creating such a minefield around communication that it was easier to say nothing at all’ (19). This illustrates how slippery the notion of truth can be, and what kind of consequences an unwillingness to discuss its terms can have. If the readers’ and the writer’s understanding of truth collide and no one is willing to adjust, certain voices will be silenced, as represented in this allegory by Betsy’s mother. Betsy forms a special bond with the family’s dog Pilot because she considers him to be incapable of lying. However, when Pilot on one occasion gets loose, follows his instincts and kills a deer in front of Betsy, this moment of violent truth about the animal’s nature causes her to faint and then to refuse to pay any attention to him for days. By doing this, she attempts to punish the dog; an attempt that her father characterises as ‘impos[ing] [her] sensitivities on him’ which only ‘interfere[s] with his nature’ (Cusk 2019, 22). In the same vein, certain readers attempt to impose their own sensitivities on the work of a writer. In Cusk’s case, those sensitivities were focused around sharing and oversharing, which parallels Betsy’s experience with ‘too much’ truth. She not only tries to punish Pilot, but also her father by refusing speak to him in the days following Pilot’s attack, which parallels the way readers sometimes punish writers for supplying too much truth. The coaxing space offers some protection from this kind of visceral readerly reaction.

The coaxing space beyond Kudos

Many readers will have approached *Kudos* already familiar with Cusk’s previous work and the controversy surrounding it. However, with the creation of the coaxing space, the readers who may have been negative towards her memoirs are invited to reassess their own reactions and consider the possibility that there is more to a story than what meets the eye. Initially, the man on the plane in the first section of the book has

no intention of sharing anything too meaningful with Faye, as his story sounds to her as though 'he had told [it] before and liked to tell, as though he had discovered the power and pleasure of reliving events with their sting removed' (Cusk 2019, 10). However, as his story progresses, meaningful relations and layers are revealed. As Faye coaxes forth his story through meaningful silence and sparing questions, the readers are invited to interpret, reconsider what they think they know, and explore the depths of what they do know. The coaxing space of *Kudos* functions as an invitation to look for the reasons for and circumstances of storytelling, and not just its real or imagined consequences.

Kudos is not only about one experience of being a writer—it is about the world of writers and the multitude of meanings involved in being an author. Later on in the second section, before she starts talking about the ski instructor, Linda describes her experience at a writing retreat in Italy. Their host, a countess, is a woman impossible to ignore, with her 'rapt, glittering, hawk-eyed expression, prowling the conversation like a predator monitoring it's hunting-ground' (Cusk 2019, 50), and the writers, due to her dominating presence, never led a real conversation around her: 'it was the conversation of people imitating writers having a conversation, and the morsels she fed on were lifeless and artificial, as well as being laid directly at her feet' (50). The retreat is financed by the countess; for the time being she is their patron. The sycophantic way that the writers act around her is artificial. This is a parallel for how writing itself changes when the writer is dependent on the laws of the marketplace, becoming artificial in its eagerness to please. Nonetheless, there is still demand for honesty, however this honesty may be understood. In private, Linda is struggling to write; she wants to write honestly about her family's dynamic, but is unable to. That is, until she focuses the writing on something solid and tangible even though imagined—a hamster:

> The problem, she now saw, was that she had been trying to describe her husband and daughter using materials—her feelings—that no one else could see. The solid fact of the hamster made all the difference. She could describe them petting it or fawning over it while its imprisonment got increasingly on Linda's nerves, and the way it solidified their bond so that Linda felt left out. (Cusk 2019, 55)

Linda's approach to writing raises a question that can also be attributed to autofiction itself: why blend fact and fiction when writing about real people and real dynamics?

When Lejeune asks the question of what makes some authors and critics believe that fiction can ultimately be more real than autobiography, he concludes that the only 'truth' that the novel makes more accessible is 'the personal, individual, intimate truth of the author, that is to say, the truth to which any autobiographical project aspires' (Lejeune 1989, 27), which reveals that 'it is as autobiography that the novel is declared the truer' (27). What happens then if, like Cusk, one does not want to write novels, but is unable to write autobiography either? We admittedly do not know whether this is entirely the case with Linda—we only know she wants to write about her family dynamic, but is unable to do so because the only materials she has, her emotions, are invisible and thus not entirely comprehensible to others. She needs a concrete situation in which to anchor those emotions and which can be used to explain them, and the imaginary hamster becomes her anchor, which ultimately allows her to share her 'personal, individual, intimate truth' (27) about her family. It enables her to share what she considers to be the real, honest image of her family dynamics, one that the rest of her

family may or may not agree on. Later on in the book, one of the writers in *Kudos* named Sophia talks to Faye about the all-female panel of thinkers and intellectuals that they both were a part of, and in which the panellists were asked to talk about their dreams. She says that:

> […] I suppose the moderator was hoping to elicit our so-called honesty; as though […] a woman's relationship to truth were at best unconscious, when in fact it might simply be the case that female truth—if such a thing can even be said to exist—is so interior and involuted that a common version of it can never be agreed on. (Cusk 2019, 131)

The question of personal, subjective truths is touched upon again towards the end of the novel, this time from the angle of Faye's translator, Felicity. Felicity has left her husband, but feels more trapped than ever as her husband still holds all the power over her life through their daughter, whom he can legally whisk away whenever he feels like it. She explains the manner in which she translated a passage of Faye's writing in which Faye talks about something similar: '[…] I translated it very carefully and with great caution, as if it were something fragile that I might mistakenly break or kill, because these experiences do not fully belong to reality and the evidence for them is a matter of one person's word against another. […] you had legitimised this half-reality by writing about it […]' (Cusk 2019, 224). Both Linda and Faye have managed to find a way to write about the 'truths' that are a matter of one person's word against another, the 'personal, individual and intimate truths' (Lejeune 1989, 27) that do not seem to be acceptable in the form of an autobiography that requires realities that can be fully supported by biographical facts. Ultimately, it is Cusk who deserves recognition for constructing a dialogic reading space, her coaxing space, that allowed her to reveal the important 'half-realities' (Cusk 2019, 224).

A further surprising interpretation of 'half-realities' emerges via Dante Alighieri. As previously mentioned, Faye spends some time talking about literature with her publisher, and when talking about online reviews he enjoys perusing, the publisher is amused by the negative ones that Dante's *Divine Comedy* [1320] received:

> It was entertaining, in a way, to see Dante awarded a single star out of a possible five and his *Divine Comedy* described as 'complete shit', but a sensitive person might equally find it distressing, until you remembered that Dante—along with most great writers—carved his vision out of the deepest understanding of human nature and could look after himself. It was a position of weakness, he believed, to see literature as something fragile that needed defending, as so many of his colleagues and contemporaries did. (Cusk 2019, 41)

To see something that is 'carved […] out of the deepest understanding of human nature' (Cusk 2019, 41) as something that does not need defending is, according to Faye, 'cynical, as well as strikingly indifferent to the concept of justice, whose mysteries, while remaining opaque to us, it has always seemed sensible to [her] to fear' (41–42). She further points out that:

> […] the very opacity of those mysteries […] was itself grounds for terror, for if the world seemed full of people living evilly without reprisal and living virtuously without reward, the temptation to abandon personal morality might arise in exactly the moment when personal morality is most significant. Justice, in other words, was something you had to honour for its own sake, and whether or not he believed that Dante could look after himself, it seemed to [her] he ought to defend him at every opportunity. (Cusk 2019, 42)

The justice Faye talks about here is the justice in *Inferno* [1320], in which each punishment is appropriate to the crime committed according to the principle of *contrapasso*. The world seems unfair to those living in it—the evildoers are not always punished, and those who do good are rarely rewarded—which may cause them to believe that nothing they do really matters or has consequences, which can further result in them abandoning any personal morality. In literature that is 'carved […] out of the deepest understanding of human nature' (Cusk 2019, 41), justice can become slightly less opaque, either by way of Danteesque explorations of crime and punishment or by way of giving voice to the voiceless wronged. Making justice even minutely less opaque arguably reinforces the respect for justice itself and serves as a reminder of the importance of personal morality. This is the case even when the move towards a sliver of transparency is an illusion created by the laws of narrative. The interviewer's narrativization of the relationship with her sister that has been explored earlier on testifies to this. The interviewer only reinforces what Faye has told the publisher when she says that she 'does not know whether justice is a personal illusion', but '[she] know[s] that it is to be feared, feared in every part of you, even as it fells your enemies and crowns you the winner' (Cusk 2019, 84). This is the reason why Faye believes Dante is worth fighting for, and, by extension, all others whose writing takes up the mantle. Cusk is included here, as she refuses to conceal the half-realities that 'are a matter of one person's word against another's' (Cusk 2019, 224) for the sake of autobiographical accuracy. Instead, she creates a dialogic reading space that both allows her to speak without fearing judgement for her personal choices, and empowers her readers to come forth and join in the conversation. What is more, by discussing the challenges of authorship from different perspectives, all of which can exist and function in her dialogic reading space, she arguably suggests that her coaxing space could not only meet the challenges of her own literature, but inspire others as well.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Kudos* has brought out those components of dialogic reading space that have enabled the appeasement of the public and openness to the readers and their hermeneutical choices, while at the same time maintaining the intended aesthetic and expressive value of the text. The space itself starts a conversation with the reader by offering multiple ways of seeing in conversation with one another. Cusk's protagonist Faye mostly leaves the spotlight to other characters, which ultimately achieves the polyphony that is a crucial trait of the coaxing space. This act is, however, not entirely selfless—it provides a shielded way for Cusk to curate various narratives in a way that will reconstruct her personal truth in a more publicly acceptable manner.

Much contemporary literature revolves around transformation of the autobiographical impulse, and this is what autofiction offers. Cusk's autofiction demonstrates how this can be done so that the public's eye recognises the open indeterminacy of autofiction for what it is meant to be—a rich puzzle to confront repeatedly from different angles, even when the author's intimate truths still make up a significant part of the puzzle. More broadly, the article has shown that autofiction provides room for complex negotiation of ideas between authors and their readers, which is why describing its reading spaces —how they are established and how their inner workings are negotiated—plays a

pivotal role in understanding autofiction as a genre and why it seems to be the preferred mode of expression for a number of authors.

Notes

1. *Outline* [2014], *Transit* [2016] and *Kudos* [2018].
2. See ‘autobiographical pact’ below.
3. Thanks to Erik Tonning for this suggestion.

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