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AGAINST PREMATURE ARTICULATION

EMPATHY, GENDER, AND AUSTERITY IN RACHEL CUSK
AND KATIE KITAMURA

Pieter Vermeulen

AFFECTIVE AUSTERITY (VAROUFAKIS'S MATURITY)

The negotiations between Greece and its creditors—represented by the “Troika” of the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—that started after a first bailout in 2010 are a crucial episode in the recent history of austerity. If the economic meaning of austerity is fairly straightforward and refers to “the policy of cutting the state’s budget to promote growth” (Blyth, 2), the notion is overdetermined by moral and affective resonances (if only because there is no robust empirical evidence for austerity’s economic efficiency [Schui, 6]). Austerity, Mark Blyth notes, is less a coherent theory than a “sensibility . . . concerning the nature and the role of the state in economic life” (Blyth, 100); it relies on a moralizing conviction that self-inflicted “virtuous pain” (13) can redeem the state and its citizens from all too indulgent consumption and serve as “a source of moral strength and spiritual salvation” (Konings 2015, 127). Such affects, aspirations, and anxieties are not only the province of economics and politics but are also negotiated in artistic and literary engagements with austerity. In this essay, I explore how two recent novels set against the background of a ravaged Greece—Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* (2014) and Katie Kitamura’s *A Separation* (2017)—engage both the obvious devastations and the undeniable attractions of austerity. They do so in ways that directly confront the gendering of postures of austere self-limitation and self-control (as opposed to indulgent profligacy) to claim a form of feminine unsentimentality.

To get a sense of the ambiguous attraction of austerity and its implicit gendering, we can do worse than turn to one widely publicized

account of the Greek debt negotiations. Former Greek minister of finance Yanis Varoufakis's memoir of those negotiations derives its title—*Adults in the Room*—from an offhand comment by Christine Lagarde, the managing director of the IMF, who “at one point . . . remarked that to resolve the drama we needed ‘adults in the room’” (3). Varoufakis agrees but is dismayed when he discovers that the media report Lagarde's words as a personal attack on him and begin to describe him as “adolescent”—“an addition,” he writes, “to the long list of epithets they had used to describe me thus far” (432). Varoufakis confronts Lagarde (or “Christine,” as he consistently calls her), pouting that “the press report that your we-need-adults-in-the-room comment referred to me.” Lagarde provides the consolation Varoufakis craves: “‘Nonsense,’ she replied amicably” (432). Varoufakis's panicked eagerness to be counted as an adult and his fear of being considered immature, childlike, and overly emotional also surfaces at other moments in the book: when Varoufakis dismisses a political opponent for “spouting adolescent inanities” (437), when the Greek populace is likened to “unruly children screaming” (125), or when Varoufakis notes that his fraction is split between his own “team of professionals” and the “younger Syriza cohort” who make their leader feel “like a childminder” (342). The one moment Varoufakis and Benoît Coeuré, second in command at the ECB, indulge in less than mature behavior and “chat . . . like naughty schoolchildren” (380), Varoufakis is caught off guard by the threats implicit in Coeuré's words. Reason enough, then, never to surrender maturity and lose control again.

If *Adults in the Room* chronicles a crucial episode in the recent economic and political history of austerity, it also embodies a posture of austere self-curtailment. Indeed, *Adults in the Room* is an anxiously sustained performance of rationality, self-control, and carefully curtailed exasperation at others' passionate mediocrity. If debates over austerity are typically cast in moralizing terms as a struggle between the derelict indulgence of consumers on one hand and the principled self-control of responsible adults on the other, Varoufakis's anxious self-renunciation reveals the appeal of such a posture of severe emotionlessness to even someone intellectually (but, it appears, not temperamentally) opposed to the politics of austerity. Austerity, in other words, emerges in Varoufakis's memoir as an aesthetic and an affective issue, rather than as merely a matter of economic policy. Varoufakis's

persona invites a consideration of austerity as a question of affect and aesthetic form—and, as we will see, as a complexly gendered one that not only draws on figures of maturity and independence but also implicates an emotionally depleted masculinity.

Adults in the Room is deeply concerned with the question of what literary form can adequately render austerity. If austerity is popularly seen as a morality play between sinful consumers and virtuous savers (Breu, 25), Varoufakis situates his “battle with the European and American deep establishment” (his book’s rather grandiose subtitle) in a somewhat grander generic frame: the drama, he writes, is “populated by people doing their best, as they understand it, under conditions not of their choosing” (2). This is the stuff not of a morality play but of tragedy: Varoufakis sets out to narrate the mismanagement of Greece “through the lens of an authentic ancient Greek or Shakespearean tragedy in which characters, neither good nor bad, are overtaken by the unintended consequences of their conception of what they ought to do” (4). The notion that the Greek crisis is like an ancient Greek tragedy is a commonplace, and Johanna Hanink has drawn attention to Varoufakis’s “penchant for speaking about economic issues in terms of ancient Greek myth”—a tendency that has, remarkably, also “colored his more political and popular work” (236), as titles such as *The Global Minotaur* and *And the Weak Suffer What They Must?* (a quotation from the Greek historian Thucydides) make clear. Yet if such a tragic frame “does little to actually shed light on the nature of the crisis, its causes, or its probable outcome” (Groll), it also sits uneasily with the reality Varoufakis depicts—a prosaic reality in which “Christine” is said to respond “amicably” and in which the main players are referred to as Pierre, Wolfgang, Jeroen, and Christine. These elements point to a kind of chumminess that clashes with the dictates of a genre that, in Aristotle’s genre-defining words, “tends to represent people . . . superior . . . to existing humans” (35). If the frame of a morality play does not quite fit, neither does tragedy capture the affective life of austerity.

So what would a prose attuned to austerity consist in? As defined by the OED, “austere” means “severely simple in style or character; free from luxury; plain, unadorned”; definitions of “austerity” underline “harshness; ruggedness; bleakness.” An austere prose, then, is minimalist and sparse rather than excessive and sumptuous—Beckett, say,

rather than Shakespeare (a point Varoufakis captures, as he nominates Beckett's *Endgame* as "the leitmotif of Europe's establishment since the financial calamity of 2008 left it bereft of ideas" [402]). Critical analyses of recent political and economic austerity tend to emphasize *expressive* self-curtailment: the economically virtuous ability to postpone the expression of desire through consumption and to save resources for more propitious investments in the future (Schui, 49; Blyth, 110–11). As Florian Schui has shown, since the nineteenth century abstinence has come to be closely linked to "heroic entrepreneurial figures" whose ability to postpone gratification is taken to prove "their intellectual and moral superiority" (53)—a superiority that in its turn comes to legitimate their disproportionate claim on the profits generated by economic activity. Yet austerity discourse also emphasizes a form of *affective* self-limitation. Martijn Konings refers to austerity's deliberate "withholding of empathy" and describes it as an exercise in emotional "self-restraint" (2015, 110, 112). As Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker have emphasized, such a call for affective disinvestment is customarily cast as a masculine achievement: counteraction to a feminized indulgence in consumption and fellow-feeling, they write, "has consistently been framed in terms of a language of toughness and austerity premised on supposed masculine virtues" (2014, 2). The posture of affectlessness that austerity promotes, then, is an attitude that pathologizes an all too feminine desire to empathize.

The point here is not simply to *condemn* austerity's proscription of expression and empathy. As the case of Varoufakis shows, such austere affect management holds attractions even for people intellectually opposed to austerity policies. At the same time, *Adults in the Room's* combination of tell-all memoir and an austere posture of self-control shows that expressive and affective curtailment do not necessarily align and leave room for literary and artistic experimentation, as the examples of Cusk and Kitamura will confirm. Also, while a sustained resistance to emotive expression may seem to follow the dictates of austerity, it has also been upheld as a progressive aesthetic strategy that, far from fabricating moral justifications for the suffering generated by austerity policies, precisely aims to make economic inequality visible by removing emotive distractions. In the work of Todd Cronan, Walter Benn Michaels, and other authors affiliated with the *nonsite.org* journal, economic inequality—that is, the reality of

class—becomes visible only when literature and art deny their audiences the customary comforts of empathetic identification. For these critics, it is precisely the refused immersion in cultural difference and subjective experience that allows literature to throw the fact of economic inequality into stark relief. A focus on affective experience obscures the fact that austerity is a structural condition and, as Annie McClanahan writes, that such experience “is not produced primarily through affect or ideology but is an effect of specific historical and material conditions” (84).

For these critics, literary form becomes a work of studious affect management: for Cronan, channeling Bertolt Brecht, “open-ended affect” is “something that ha[s] to be continually *defeated*, neutralized by the artist” so that “emotional effects” become “the expressive *problem* of the work itself”; for Michaels, art and literature that counteract audiences’ desire “to feel the pathos of the suffering produced by [capitalism]” make room for “a different set of feelings”—for the power to “feel the structure” that generates suffering rather than the suffering itself (39, 42). On these accounts, emotive renunciation is not, as it is for austerity discourses, a paradoxical “road to redemption” (Konings 2015, 127) or “a kind of aggressively delayed optimism” (Appelbaum, 89) but rather a prelude to a more considerate and reflective emotional stance—beyond immediate reaction, pathos, and identification. This deliberate bracketing of affect is somewhat different from (and somewhat politically more promising than) both the aggressive masculinity on display in official austerity discourse and the more anxious version of it we encounter in Varoufakis.

Critics like Michaels, Cronan, or indeed McClanahan would argue that Kitamura’s and Cusk’s—and, indeed, this essay’s—occupation with affect operates *within* the horizon of a neoliberal austerity imaginary and that they fail to acknowledge that, even if austerity “may be felt as an affective and psychic condition, we are mostly in debt for more impersonal reasons, like the rising costs of health care and housing and education” (McClanahan, 95). For these novels, as for this essay, this is precisely the compromised place in which contemporary literature operates: not through an impossible renunciation of affect—impossible, because novels cannot avoid affecting their readers in some way—but through a deliberate sabotaging of particular codified forms of affect such as empathy. In her study of contemporary

fiction's engagement with neoliberalism's affective injunctions, Rachel Greenwald Smith foregrounds fiction's concern with "impersonal" feelings that cannot be recuperated by neoliberal subjectivity and thus destabilize "the prevailing notion that feelings only exist insofar as they are the property of the individual" (20). Such fictions, Smith writes, "like Brechtian drama, reject the primacy of personal experience, but they part way with this model insofar as they also have explicitly affective stakes" (19). *Outline* and *A Separation*, I argue, are two such works that manipulate affect to destabilize codified and aggressively gendered emotive injunctions.

If official austerity discourse proscribes empathy as part of a thoroughly gendered and moralized rhetoric of blame, critics like Cronan and Michaels join a respectable scholarly tradition that brackets empathy on more progressive political grounds: because it privileges cultural difference over economic inequality, because its affective charge threatens agency (Nelson), because it too easily equates incompatible experiences (Cvetkovich), because it consolidates existing power hierarchies (Hemmings), or because it bolsters rather than subverts neoliberal subjectivity (Houser). And if the *injunction* to empathize is thoroughly gendered as feminine, the *act* of empathy has also be conceived as an aggressively phallic operation: Qadri Ismail has analyzed the empathetic imagination as a form of sovereign "auto-displacement" that allows anthropologists to "pierce, penetrate, possess" their objects of enquiry (69), while Ross Truscott underlines an "associative drift between empathy and sexual predation" (257) that is endemic to Western civilization's penetrative thrust. The gendered injunction to empathize is, in other words, implicated in complex hierarchies and chains of violence. This means that empathy is by no means a guaranteed way out of the political complexity of the austere restriction on fellow-feeling. For one thing, the embrace of empathy would risk returning us to a traditional gendered association between femininity and sentiment.

Both Cusk's *Outline* and Kitamura's *A Separation* pointedly resist that sentimental imperative in their negotiations of the costs and affordances of austerity. The forms of the two novels bracket empathy—but do not, importantly, banish every form of affect, however minimal or awkward, which novels are constitutively unable to do—in ways that resist the moralizations and baneful gender politics of customary

austerity discourses, even while they ponder the attractions of austere postures of affectlessness. As several reviewers have noted (Clanchy; Domestico; Scholes), the two novels share many elements. Not only do both novels position recently divorced middle-class female narrators in Greece, they both feature narrators that evince a certain lack of empathy for and connection to their surroundings. Indeed, they are works *about* the gendered nature of empathetic work rather than instances *of* such affective work.

Declining the melodrama of a morality play, the grandeur of tragedy, and the expressive directness of Varoufakis' memoir, the two novels' formal choices critique the gendered imperative to feel and feel for others as well as the foreclosure of female voices in discussions of austerity. In a series of analyses that resonate beyond the Irish context on which she focuses, Diane Negra has shown how public discourse in the most recent age of austerity has tended to foreground white men "as the sign, symptom, and victim of recession" (2013a, 46), as "particularly and singularly impacted by economic adversity" (Negra and Tasker 2013, 346). Women, in contrast, are often reduced to roles of quietly endured "adjustment" (Negra 2013b, 129) and to the ubiquitous figure of "the passive woman of low agency" (2013a, 46). Cusk's and Kitamura's interventions do not claim the victimized position public discourse accords to men, nor do they choose to present their female protagonists as active and unadjusted women. Instead, they develop a deliberate strategy of passivity that, to the extent that it also refuses the reader's empathetic identification, short circuits the gender codifications that subtend official as well as popular austerity discourses.

Cusk and Kitamura shape their withholding of an empathetic voice as a deliberate act; they, in the words of Deborah Nelson, "activate unsentimentality as a choice, not mystify it as a character trait" (2). This decision to resist empathy aligns their projects with those of critics like Cronan and Michaels. Yet if, for these critics, art and literature that resist affect and identification point to the inequality-producing machineries of capitalism, these novels instead make visible a complex of ethnic, gendered, and economic power differentials. Even if these authors disagree with the likes of Cronan and Michaels on the precise nature of the oppressive structure to be reckoned with, they concur that an investment in empathy perpetuates rather than confronts structural

violence. In this way, their austere rejection of empathy shades into a deliberate politics of unsentimentality.

AGAINST OVERSHARING (RACHEL CUSK'S *OUTLINE*)

Rachel Cusk's *Outline* is narrated by a woman writer who travels to Athens to teach a creative writing course. The novel consists of cool, factual observations of her surroundings and of the stories that other people tell and that end up taking over most of the space of the novel. The result is an almost total elision of the first-person narrator herself. The novel's third chapter, for instance, covers the narrator's walk with a guy named Ryan, whose self-obsessed story begins after a few lines, takes up all of the chapter's eighteen pages, and ends with: "He turned his head to me. What about yourself, he said, are you working on something?" (49). Characteristically, the narrator does not comply, and the novel immediately begins its fourth chapter—a clinical, room-by-room description of the apartment the narrator is staying in. The description features "a glazed terracotta statue of a woman" positioned in "a hall, where the doors of all the other rooms converged." "You had to pass her frequently," the narrator notes, "going from one room to another, yet it was surprisingly easy to forget that she was there" (55). The statue is a clear emblem for the narrator's own self-effacing yet enabling role—her work as a facilitator of other people's stories rather than an instance worthy of her own story. "The terracotta woman," the description concludes, "made reality seem, for a moment, smaller and deeper, more private and harder to articulate" (55).

So what do we make of the formal device that organizes the novel—what one reviewer calls its "striking gesture of relinquishment" (Hadley)? Its effect is at least double. First, the quasi-invisible narrator does not become available for empathetic identification—her back story arrives only through intermittent text messages from her kids and banker, and only her peculiar attention to issues of love and its complications strongly suggests a recent divorce. The narrator, in other words, never comes into view as a centered object of empathetic identification and remains a dispersed presence between the lines of the novel. Second, the novel's relentless rendition of other people's stories at the expense of the narrator's own story shows the emotional

cost of the gendered injunction to empathize. The novel's first sustained conversation is typical of its overall procedure: the interlocutor's words are first rendered in direct speech, then shift to indirect speech marked by "he said" or "he continued" and other reporting verbs, only to later become unmarked free indirect discourse. Brian McHale has noted that free indirect discourse functions as "a tool for regulating distance from a character—from empathetic identification at one extreme to ironic repudiation at the other," and the recurrent shifts between different reporting modes serve to make visible the narrator's affective labor as she negotiates her distance from the stories that are dumped onto her. Rather than offering the reader an experience to empathize with, this constant transformation exposes the work of converting other people's words into literary discourse, the work of processing other people's stories, even if the novel makes it clear that this affective investment brings neither intimacy nor joy and only leaves the narrator affectively depleted. So while the narrator is insufficiently substantial to serve as a center of empathetic identification, she is still sufficiently present to split the reader's attention and affective investment between her sustained act of self-effacement and the stories the novel shows her attending to—stories that, because of this split attention, do not generate a full-fledged empathetic experience either.

If free indirect discourse was traditionally associated with third-person heterodiegetic narrators (McHale), it is especially Dorrit Cohn who has underlined the form's affordances for first-person narrators (Cohn 1969; 1978). Yet traditional narrative theory does not fully account for the peculiar effects that pertain when a narrator continuously filters monologues of which she herself is the addressee and in which the first-person plural then also includes herself. This means, for instance, that when one of the narrator's interlocutors formulates plans that include the narrator herself, the free indirect rendering of these plans enlists the narrator as part of a first-person plural that the interlocutor fully controls: "We would drive for a while, my neighbour called above the noise of the engine, and when we reached a nice place he knew, we would stop and swim" (69). If free indirect discourse customarily allows narrators a measure of agency in negotiating their distance to other characters and, in Anne-Lise François's words, "unlocks a range of relations of identification and nonidentification, possession and nonpossession" (François, 19), the device here forces the narrator

to echo and undersign (by speaking a “we would” that cannot *not* refer to herself) a plan imposed on her. The use of free indirect speech for rendering a clearly gendered face-to-face encounter thus foregrounds the clear power differences between the interlocutor (who decrees what “we” will do) and the listener who subscribes to the plans for a “we” in which she has no voice. When the excursion with the man’s yacht then leads to a scene of sexual harassment, the narrator notes that “through the whole thing I stayed rigidly still” (177)—a posture of emotional detachment that the novel’s narrative mode echoes, even if this elision, just as in this scene, also reveals the emotional cost involved.

The novel features many instances of casual and not-so-casual masculine aggression: there is abundant mansplaining, there are many instances of unwanted oversharing, and there is the harassment scene. These elements are intermittently entangled with indications of economic inequality. The narrator’s first interlocutor is, as the novel’s very first sentence has it, “a billionaire [she]’d been promised had liberal credentials” and, more important, has the money to bankroll a literary magazine and to pay for “a taxi to the airport,” which, the narrator notes, “was useful since [she] was late and had a heavy suitcase” (3). The second interlocutor is the man who will later attempt to harass her and who is a member of “the pre-eminent family of [a Greek] island,” the outcome of “the parental marriage” of “two strains of the local aristocracy” that consolidated “two shipping fortunes” (8). While the reference to the “heavy suitcase” shows the narrator’s awareness of her own relative privilege, the emphasis on such excessive opulence still points to the inequality between capital and her relative wealth. During her stay in Greece, the narrator is updated on her application for a mortgage increase that, she learns more than two hundred pages into the novel, is finally denied. Significantly, it is only in this conversation that we learn the narrator’s name—as if this stark reminder of her financial precarity is what finally determines her identity; the banker’s formulation—“Is that Faye?” (211)—underlines this belated emergence (from the status of a thing, a “that”) to full subjecthood (even if it is the qualified subject of debt analyzed by critics like Annie McClanahan, Maurizio Lazzarato, and John Mowitt). Equally significant, the narrator does not register her disappointment, but rather immediately turns to help “a woman in a polka-dot sun hat with an

enormous camera hung on a strap around her neck" (212) to find the way to the Binyaki Museum and returns to the classroom to resume attending to her students' stories.

It would be wrong to see the emphasis on gendered and economic violence as the novel's attempt to *represent* the social costs of austerity policies. More important than issues of representation is that the novel's engagement with austerity is embodied in its *formal* decisions. Indeed, the novel shapes its refusal of full-fledged empathetic experience through the near-total elision of the narrator-character and its exposure of the emotional costs of empathy through the shuttling between different modes of reported speech. It is these formal decisions, much more than its representational choices, that allow *Outline* to gesture toward the assemblage of masculine violence and finance capitalism that collects the rewards of the exploitation that the novel's emotionally depleted tone renders apprehensible.

Yet if this genders the novel's politics of unsentimentality (as a feminine choice rather than a female character trait or a sign of trauma), it also strategically engages with the proscription of affect that official austerity discourse promotes. One of the reviewers of the novel notes that the narrator's self-erasure allows people to "simply unload themselves" (Myerson)—to indulge a lack of self-restraint and immediately consume their desire to overshare. As Mark Blyth and others have shown, austerity discourse has long celebrated the virtuousness of postponing gratification; at least since the work of Adam Smith, personal frugality and parsimony are seen as "the engine of capitalist growth" (110), as money that is not immediately consumed can more productively be invested at a later and more opportune time (and it is no coincidence that Smith was also a theorist of what he called "sympathy," a notion that corresponds to what we now call empathy and which for him functions as a necessary complement giving the invisible hand a hand in managing capitalism; as Cusk's novel shows, if only by refusing empathy, this is still pretty much empathy's role today). There is, for proponents of austerity, "a connection between abstinence and growth" (Schui 167), which has historically meant that arguments for austerity have tended to shift from economic reasoning to moral prescription (Schui, 120). Withholding consumption, in other words, is cast as a virtue that enables future investment and accumulation; entrepreneurial individuals who manage to exercise the

appropriate self-restraint at once demonstrate the moral superiority that entitles them to receive the rewards of the virtuous business cycles that thrive on their abstinence (Schui, 57). If the economic track record of this argument is debatable at best, it does explain how austere behavior not only is perceived as an enforced diminishment of life but also holds certain attractions as, in Martijn Konings's words, "the means to achieve an actualization of the self" and as a strategy that permits individuals to "access new sources of strength and discipline" (2015, 66, 108).

In light of the logics of austerity, the novel's formal choice for emotive self-restraint can then be read as simultaneously a strategy for self-realization. If that self-realization is not *represented* in the novel (the story ends in the middle of another conversation, in which a man has the last word), it is achieved in the novel's *form*. Indeed, the narrator's self-effacing investment in the stories of her interlocutors also functions as a strategy to convert their unconstrained consumption into her own more patiently postponed and more opportunely timed writing project—the novel we are given to read. In the creative writing class, she merely listens to her students' stories, which will eventually make up the novel. She also explicitly claims the virtuousness of her approach, as she notes that she "had come to believe more and more in the virtues of passivity, and of living a life as unmarked by self-will as possible" (170). And as if to underscore the alleged vicious nature of premature articulation, the novel features no fewer than two episodes in which men unwittingly confess their affairs to their wives and ruin their marriages (one by singing in the shower [141–42], another when surprised in a deep sleep [173–74]). In these instances also, feminine self-restraint is an empowering strategy, while premature communication is bad for business. If unreflective consumption, in the reasoning of proponents of austerity policies, forecloses the way to wealth, affective disinvestment, for these proponents and for Cusk's narrator alike, keeps it open.

Outline's foreclosure of straightforward empathy and its decision to defuse readers' affective investment in less consuming ways resist the gender codes of austerity discourse; still, its refusal of untimely expression borrows the affective disposition of austere self-renunciation for a form of self-actualization that dominant austerity discourses cast as masculine. *Outline's* short circuiting of traditional gender codifications

achieves a particularly feminine form of unsentimentality that converts the traditional muting of women's voices (something the novel *represents*) into a deliberate posture (something the novel achieves on a *formal level*). The novel's politics of affective indifference, then, exploits even as it critiques discourses of austerity. In her book *Tough Enough*, Deborah Nelson has unearthed a posture of feminine unsentimentality in the postwar projects of Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy, Joan Didion, and others. These writers' and thinkers' projects, Nelson argues, are not, for all their cool and restraint, indifferent to suffering: they pay "attention to the same terrain as sentimental literature—painful reality, suffering, sufferers—but without emotional display" (5), which is not to say without affect. In that way, they forge alternatives for "an ethical system that rests on empathy" (9). Remarkably, Nelson repeatedly uses the word "austere" to capture the affective posture she describes—as when she highlights Simone Weil's "personal austerity" (19) and her "austerity of word choice" (34) or points to the "austere rule of heartlessness" (95) that cemented the friendship between Mary McCarthy and Hannah Arendt. In these examples, austerity shuttles between the status of an attitudinal trait, a stylistic choice, and a modality of thought. *Outline's* politics of affective renunciation achieves a combination of these elements, even while its gender politics counter the problematic gendering of such restraint in dominant political and economic discourses.

SILENCE AGAINST EMPATHY (KATIE KITAMURA'S *A SEPARATION*)

In Katie Kitamura's *A Separation*, which was published some two and a half years later than Cusk's book, the narrator is sent to Greece by her mother-in-law to find the narrator's husband, who disappeared while researching a fairly unfocused book project on mourning rituals. At her husband's request, the narrator has not told anyone that they have separated, and her mother-in-law's (and everyone else's) conviction that they are still a couple, together with a sense of obligation to the husband she knows to be a serial philanderer, leaves her without an excuse to refuse the assignment. She soon finds herself in a scorched countryside, destroyed by wildfires, with shops shuttered

and stray dogs on the loose, an environment that she will leave near the end of the novel after a fairly uneventful stay in which she never really commits to helping solve what turns out to have been the murder of her husband.

In Greece, her only interactions are with service workers—taxi drivers, waiters, maids (one of whom she strongly suspects had an affair with her husband), and, more surprising, a professional mourner. Mourning, it turns out, is another chore to be outsourced. The episodes dedicated to this theme contain a remarkably sophisticated theory of affective labor through which the novel, like *Outline*, confronts the gendered injunction to perform empathy head-on. When retracing her ex-partner's steps in the hope of finding clues to his disappearance, the narrator, in one of the novel's most disorienting scenes, comes to talk to one of the "professional mourners, the women who were paid to issue lamentations at funerals" (41). Through the affective labor of these professionals, "the bereaved . . . are completely liberated from the need to emote" and to perform grief "for the assembled crowd" (41). Such a performance is a social expectation, as "people expect a good show" (41). The problem with such social expectations, the novel notes, is that it is incompatible with the profound nature of grief, which tends to inexpressibility rather than conspicuous display: "when you have experienced a profound loss, you are impaled beneath it, hardly in a condition to express your sorrow" (41–42).

That, at least, is the husband's theory *before* he sets out for Greece. The narrator's meeting with one professional weeper complicates this neat scenario of emotive outsourcing. The narrator is surprised (and later embarrassed) to discover that the weeper's performance of grief occasions real suffering in the professional mourner: she witnesses the woman's "grief, whose authenticity [she] did not doubt," and observes that "she was in pain, and to what purpose?" (74). "I understood that this was why she was paid," the narrator notes, "not because of her vocal capabilities, not even for the considerable strength of her emoting, but because she agreed to undergo suffering, in the place of others" (75). The professionalization of affective expression, then, is merely a *transfer* of suffering, not the magical *dissolution* of pain that seems to be promised by the outsourcing of expression. If a woman of privilege (such as Kitamura's narrator) can save herself the additional pain of having to perform grief, that pain is merely transferred to

poorer women unable to pay in order to sidestep gendered emotive expectations.

Logically, this leaves only one option for minimizing suffering: if the performance of pain generates its own excess misery, the one available option is to not express emotion at all. If this option does not abolish pain, it at least refrains from adding performative insult to emotional injury. This insight into the workings of emotion powers *A Separation's* (fairly minimal) plot development and accounts for its austere and dispassionate tone. In the course of the novel, the narrator's enforced silence about her relationship status (after her separation, at the request of her partner), which unwillingly implicates her in the novel's events and her search for her husband (and thus for the one person who could potentially undo her complicity), gradually morphs into a more empowering understanding of silence as a salutary strategy for withholding excessive affect and refusing expression. The clearest indication of that empowering development comes when the narrator's refusal to share information almost casually sabotages the investigation into her husband's murder. Her only motivation is the "patent absurdity" (177) of the scenarios she imagines, which keeps her from facilitating the proceedings. There is neither a sense of guilt nor a desire for revenge, as she learns to keep silent seemingly simply because she can. Silence, as the novel progresses, no longer needs to be undone when it can be owned as a deliberate choice.

Such ownership is embodied in the novel's organizing formal device. Unlike *Outline*, *A Separation* does not deny the reader access to the narrator's interiority, but it grants such access only to make the reader aware of the continued failure (or refusal) of the narrator's interior life to spill over into conversation, communication, and connection in the world of the novel. The empathetic distortion, that is, operates not between reader and narrator (as in *Outline*) but between the narrator and her world. As in *Outline*, the conversations that are rendered shift between direct and (free) indirect discourse, but here the sustained elision of quotation marks keeps the reader at a distance from the immediacy of conversation and incorporates these conversations as indistinctive parts of the narrator's interior monologue. In *Outline*, the quotation marks serve to foreground the different interlocutors to the point that their intrusive presence obstructs readers' view of the narrator; in this novel, the narrator's interlocutors remain

at a distance from the narrator and the reader alike. The narrator's mode of operation is, then, the exact opposite of that of the professional mourner, whose empathetic labor assumes the suffering it expresses (an approach not all that different from *Outline's* narrator's processing of the stories she records). Kitamura's narrator works as a translator, an occupation that allows her to keep her affective distance from the information she processes: for her, there is no real difference between being "a translator or a medium," as it is especially "translation's potential for passivity" that appeals to her. Translation, she notes, "is not unlike an act of channeling, you write and you do not write the words" (27). If the ability to simultaneously express and not express oneself is traditionally claimed as a property of free indirect discourse (François, 14–20), it is no coincidence that, as we saw in the previous section, that feature is rendered inoperative in *Outline*. While *Outline* showcases the emotional costs of the injunction to empathize, *Separation* is a sustained experiment in presenting a world in which empathy is sabotaged.

This strategy is reflected in, for instance, the fact that the conversations the narrator has are typically interrupted by very long ruminations that affectively disconnect her from her interlocutors. When, in a difficult phone conversation, her new partner asks her, "Why don't I come out and join you?" (44), the flow of the conversation is interrupted by a ten-page sequence of reflections and memories that drifts off into the memory of an episode of blatant misogyny (49–51), before the reader is returned to the dangling phone conversation ("Why don't I come out and join you? Yvan asked again. I don't think that's a good idea, I said" [54]). The effect on the reader of this return to the conversation (again, unmarked by quotation marks) is a sense that this ten-page contemplation has materialized as real-time silence and awkwardness, which further underlines the blockage of empathy in the world the novel represents.

If *Outline* warns against the dangers of premature articulation through the two signature anecdotes in which men ruin their marriages by unwittingly confessing to their infidelities, *A Separation's* stand-out anecdote is an excruciatingly awkward incident that combines excessive empathy (overreading) with premature expression (oversharing). The narrator tells the story of a friend who, after a date with a man she finds "sexually very attractive" (93), is asked by the man whether

she would like to come in for a coffee. The friend's first thought is to wonder why he does not ask her in for a drink rather than a coffee, but when he "teasingly" (she think) repeats the question, she feels confident about her interpretation of his words and "she blurt[s] out, I can't, I have my period" (96). Nor does the sad spectacle of over-reading stop there, as she reads his three-word response ("Good night, then") as an extensive rebuke in which he almost sadistically indulges the deniability his formulation maintained for him: she reads his facial expression as if he is saying, "But I only asked if you wanted a cup of coffee, I didn't inquire after the status of your uterus, the availability of your vaginal passage" (96).

In light of the social awkwardness generated by this scene, the narrator's overall alienation from the world and her deliberate silences appear as calculated strategies to sidestep such anxieties over expression and empathy alike. By attributing the experience to a friend of the narrator, the novel avoids casting the narrator herself as scarred and traumatized. Her affective disconnection from the world is a formal feature of the work, not only part of the world it represents. By disabling customary affective and expressive protocols, the novel gestures toward the complex structure that generates the emotive distortions besetting lives like that of the narrator: there is the gendered violence of the narrator's chronically unfaithful ex; there is the racial exclusion she experiences as her in-laws continue to insist on her "foreignness" with "a familiar blend of suspicion, mystification . . . and pique" (2); there is the difference between an impoverished debt colony (which the novel paints in considerable detail) and the exuberant privilege of her in-laws, who, at the end of the novel, almost casually inform her that her ex has left her "roughly three million pounds" (221).

This windfall is a crucial moment in the novel's engagement with the logic of austerity: if, as we saw, *Outline's* refusal of empathy and expression ultimately works out as a strategy for self-realization, *Separation's* very different formal austerity is, at the end of the novel, also revealed to be inescapably implicated in the dynamic of self-actualization through self-renunciation that defines official discourses of austerity. Kitamura's novel sets up a split between the narrator's interior life, to which the reader gets access, and her worldly interactions, which are emotionally neutralized. Taking to heart the lesson of the emotive burden facing the professional mourner, she refuses the

social performance of her emotional life and retains it for an interiority to which only the reader has access. Yes her sustained silence about her separation—that is, her refusal of social connection—still brings her a financial reward; in the moralized terms of austerity discourse, her abstinence from expression can retroactively be seen as a well-timed investment. As if to illustrate the ways in which neoliberal austerity saturates the imagining of contemporary subjectivity, her self-imposed emotive austerity makes her sabotaging of the gender codifications of austerity discourse appear as an economic strategy in line with austerity morality.

This explains why the narrator's reaction to her unexpected inheritance is an ambivalent one: "That day," she remarks, "I experienced the opposite of closure" (221). Having earlier been sucked into the story through an undesired silence (about her separation), that silence now turns out to have been a canny investment strategy after all, as the maintained fiction of their relationship makes her the recipient of a huge sum of money. At the same time—and this prevents a sense of closure—it confirms her continued implication in a gendered, racialized, and financialized system she officially wanted to escape (a decision the novel supported through its formal separation between her interiority and her austere worldly interactions), just as it keeps her tied to the memory of a husband who instilled in her an "air of complicity" that "felt incongruous and without purpose" (3).

In the remainder of the novel, the narrator learns to own that incongruity and accepts her participation in a system from which she nevertheless marks an inner distance, yet now in the knowledge that such an interior reserve can always be seen as a virtuous act of frugality—as, in short, an affirmation of the discourse of economic austerity that circumscribes even if it does not cancel her agency. Indeed, the sum of money all at once gives her an extra motive to have killed her "philandering and careless husband" (227) and taints her existence with "the guilt of the living, for which it is impossible to atone" (227). At the close of the novel, that is, the narrator understands that her withdrawal from the gendered injunctions of austerity does not exempt her from the logic of austerity. She is a beneficiary, and, by the moralizing logic of austerity, this means that she somehow must have deserved her success. "I did not see how I could accept it and I did not see how I could refuse it" (221): the one logically available option, it seems, is

accepting the money and refusing to use it, not even to pay for the apartment that she will eventually buy.

At the end of the novel, the money “sits untouched” (227)—neither invested nor spent but, for now, withheld. Such an abstinence from immediate consumption and such virtuous frugality make her a heroine in the moralized scenario of austerity, but her quiet refusal to invest the money and accumulate capital also signals her decision to preserve an interior distance from the market, even if she knows that distance is inevitably tainted and compromised. The novel ends with the narrator leveraging the agency she has to affect the terms of her compulsory engagement with that system: she not only leaves the inheritance “untouched” (227) but also decides not to communicate about the “reservoir of emotion both unexamined and unknown” (229) that only the reader has had some access to, “the wounds you do not know you do not know about” (228). The novel’s austerity consists in its minimal refusal to obey the expressive protocols of the system that polices the relation between affect and expression, even if, like *Outline*, it ultimately comes to understand the attractions of austerity. To the extent that the novels know that their affective operations offer only local and inevitably compromised engagements with the material realities of austerity, they testify to an imaginative inability to do more than reconfigure the terms austerity dictates.

UNSENTIMENTAL FORM (NO SEXIT)

These two novels’ gendered aesthetics of self-curtailment assert their indifference to empathetic experiences of suffering, even as their commitment to postponed articulation capitalizes on rather than denies the logic of austerity. Still, these engagements do allow them to recode gender expectations and claim a third position beyond both feminized profligacy and masculine self-restraint: a position of resolute feminine unsentimentality, which, in Deborah Nelson’s words, looks “at painful reality with directness and clarity and without consolation or compensation” (2). As Nelson notes, this position is not a matter of denying the force of affect—it is, rather, a recognition that “emotions are only problematic insofar as they threaten agency, which they always do” (99). Both *A Separation* and *Outline*, for all their interest in different

modes of feminine passivity, affirm agency at crucial moments in their formal development: *Outline* in its decision to present the stories that continuously overwhelm the narrator as an achieved aesthetic product, and *A Separation* in its acceptance of the compatibility of its emotive renunciation and the moralized logic of austerity. Their narrators' postures of affectlessness are not an index of trauma or victimization but part of a deliberately assumed strategy for self-actualization.

If Kitamura's and Cusk's formal austerities reorder gender codifications and assert agency, they do so *within* the terms of the moralized logic of austerity. Rather than assuming a position outside the oppressive system they make visible, these novels take serious the strange attractiveness of austerity. Martijn Konings has shown that critiques of austerity that dismiss it as an economic error (which it also is) overlook its functioning as "an article of faith, holding out a promise of purification that commands considerable appeal and mobilization capacity" (2016, 86). Austere self-control, he notes, is "driven by the prospect that remains elusive and lies beyond the norms and signs of the market"; in his analysis, the abstractness of money symbolizes a logic that is "endlessly demanding but also endlessly promising" (92). If art and literature want to register their own critical difference, then, they must arguably do so *within* this promissory structure, through the formal elaboration of a *different* austerity—austerity not as an unthinking emotional stance but as a strategic intervention that intimates novel gender codes and different scenarios of self-actualization.

If these novels bracket empathy in order to gesture toward the system that generates suffering, they do not imagine that they can simply exit from that system. If such compromised operations—in the novels, but also in this essay—will not satisfy critics who desire more rigorously materialist engagements with the realities of austerity, such engagements are perhaps not immune from illusions of their own. For a critic like Walter Benn Michaels, bracketing empathy equals a confident declaration of autonomy: "the work of art that declares its separation from the world also declares the irrelevance of our feelings . . . it's only insofar as art seeks to be beautiful—seeks, that is, to achieve the formal perfection imaginable in works of art but not in anything else—that it can also function as a picture not of how, if we behaved better, we might manage capitalism's problems, but rather of capitalism as itself the problem" (41–42). Kitamura's and Cusk's novels agree

that capitalism is the problem; they even agree that declaring the irrelevance of feelings is a suitable strategy for making that problem visible; yet they do not share the fantasy that they are not part of this problem.

One reason might be that this fantasy of autonomy is a fundamentally gendered one. Sarah Sharma has coined the notion of “sexit” to point to “the patriarchal penchant and inclination towards exit.” For Sharma, the fantasy of being able to just walk away from an oppressive structure is an eminently masculine one: “‘pulling out’ is a deceptively simple solution to real-life entanglements, and . . . the very privilege to imagine doing so is fundamentally a male prerogative.” Exit, that is, “is an exercise of patriarchal power, a privilege that occurs at the expense of cultivating and sustaining conditions of collective autonomy” (Sharma, n.p.).

One example of such a fantasy of autonomy, hinted at by Sharma, is the fact that Yannis Varoufakis, during his tenure as minister of finance, always had a signed and undated resignation letter in his pocket, so as to remind himself that “pulling out” was always an option. In Varoufakis’s memoir, the repeated redrafting of the resignation letter serves as a refrain of sorts—it is finally the “seventh and final resignation letter” (471) that he posts on his blog as he walks away from his position. Until then, he writes, he had kept the letter “in [his] inside pocket, ready to submit the moment [he] senses signs of losing the commitment to speak truth to power” (143–44). What Varoufakis takes for granted is that such speech will be heard and taken seriously by the other adults in the room. It takes for granted that the speaker will be allowed to enter the room and, what amounts to the same privilege, to exit from the room. *Outline* and *A Separation* show that walking away from the adults in the room is hardly an option for those who have to fight their way into the room to be heard. Whether their politics of unsentimentality will be able to do more than redecorate the room is an open question—as is the question whether a bare minimalist interior will be an austerity worth living.

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