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Cruelty Is Bad: Banality and Proximity in Never Let Me Go

BRUCE ROBBINS

One of the signature effects of Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction is a moment when a character behaves with sudden, inexplicable, and astonishing cruelty—not to a stranger, but to an intimate. These episodes are always a bit cumbersome to cite, as the reader cannot fully understand quite how bad or how inexplicable the cruelty is without a lot of detail being let in. It's almost as if the emotional violence were so intolerable that, even in the act of repeating the story, Ishiguro also resisted giving it a memorable anecdotal form that could be easily abbreviated, cited, and circulated. In the passage that follows, for example, nothing more happens than a silence, an absence of gesture. Yet this passage from *The Unconsoled* explains why it is that Gustav and his adult daughter have not spoken to each other for many years:

> *[W]hen she was eleven, a certain sad little event occurred. In those days Sophia had this little white hamster. She called it Ulrich, she became greatly fond of it.... Then one day the creature disappeared. Sophie searched everywhere.... [O]ne evening, my wife had gone out and Sophie and I were alone in the apartment. I was in the bedroom with the radio up quite loud—there was a concert being broadcast—when I became aware that in the living room Sophie was sobbing uncontrollably. Almost immediately I guessed she'd at last found Ulrich. Or what remained of him—he'd been missing a few weeks by then. Well, the door between the bedroom and the living room was closed, and as I say, the radio was up loud, so it would have been perfectly conceivable I might not have heard her. So I remained in the bedroom, my ear close to the door, the concert playing behind me. I did of course think several times I'd go through to her, but then the longer I stood there at the door, the more odd it seemed that I should suddenly burst in.* (83-84)[1]

Gustav hears his daughter "[call] out as though to herself" that it was "my fault" (84). She had left Ulrich in a box while playing with him, closed the lid, and forgotten to take him out. But when his wife comes home a page later, he tells her he hadn't heard a thing: "Oh dear, no, I was listening to the concert" (85).

Criticism has been a bit stymied by episodes like this. Admirers tend to give Ishiguro credit for his insight into the bleak truths of the human psyche. But they don't usually elaborate, perhaps because there seems less to say about why we should take the bleakness *as* truth, in other words as representative, or of what. What question would have to be asked in order to make our emotional blockage toward those closest to us count as a surprisingly valuable answer? Brian W. Shaffer notes that all the characters in *The Unconsoled*, like Gustav, are "revealed

[1] See Katherine Stanton for a reading of this passage in terms of the theory of sympathy.

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to have a pathologically self-destructive personal life that significantly mirrors Ryder's own" (93). Fair enough, especially given that in this scene Gustav is listening to music, which also inspires Ryder's high and familially inconvenient sense of vocation. But why should we find all this pathological self-destructiveness compelling? Why should it be worth hearing about again and again? Cynthia Wong, praising Ishiguro for his "effort to show the real difficulties involved in maintaining civility under domestic circumstances," doesn't ask why, for Ishiguro, maintaining civility under circumstances of domestic intimacy seems so very challenging—as challenging, her language suggests, as maintaining peace between hostile powers (23).

With these follow-up questions unasked, the field is left free for more skeptical readers (though lately these seem to be fewer) to doubt whether Ishiguro's vision of universal emotional estrangement is really so profound or so useful. Do we really need to be told, as *The Remains of the Day* untiringly tells us, that we should stop and smell the flowers? Isn't it pretty clear that Ryder, like Stevens the butler, takes his work too seriously and thus neglects and sometimes mistreats his family? According to Louis Menand, Ishiguro's "single insight into the human condition is that people need love but continually spoil their chances of getting it, a piece of wisdom slightly below the level of Dr. Joyce Brothers" (7). Given Ishiguro's early and continuing engagement with social work, Brothers, a family psychologist and long-time advice columnist for *Good Housekeeping*, is not as flippant a reference point as she may appear. Scenes of cruelty among intimates seem to glance invitingly at an offstage cohort of therapists, however embarrassing and middle-brow their language may be. (And in his latest novel, *Never Let Me Go*, the therapeutic encounter steals a good deal of the show.) Commenting on another such scene in *The Unconsoled*, this one involving Ryder, his perhaps-child Boris, and a handyman's manual, Wong writes as follows: "Hoping to produce a parent-child relationship different from his own neglected one, Ryder replicates his own wounds" (75). If an ethico-psychological lexicon of such striking banality is widely felt to be congenial to Ishiguro's fiction, if there is nothing in it to repel or force us to reconsider this banality, then many readers will surely feel encouraged to speculate after all that his fiction might just be, as Michael Wood calls *The Remains of the Day*, "overrated" (18).

I myself do not find Ishiguro overrated, and this is in part because, as I read it, his fiction does ask us to reconsider the conversation-stopping cliché that people are often cruel to those closest to them. Indeed, I will argue, Ishiguro offers a context for intimate cruelty that may not completely explain it, still less justify it, but that should make us hesitate to want to see it simply treated or cured, and that will certainly not leave our ethical attitude toward it unaffected. I will make this argument by looking at the therapeutic mini-plot that takes up much of *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and at how that novel's official institutionalization of caring reflects on caring generally, on failures of caring, and on the commitment to proximity that makes caring seem a natural standard by which the failures can be judged.

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In the first sentences of *Never Let Me Go*, its protagonist describes herself as a "carer":

> *My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year. That'll make it almost exactly twelve years. Now I know my being a carer so long isn't necessarily because they think I'm fantastic at what I do. There are some really good carers who've been told to stop after just two or three years. And I can think of one carer at least who went on for all of fourteen years despite being a complete waste of space. So I'm not trying to boast. But then I do know for a fact they've been pleased with my work.* (3)

If the word "carer" seems a bit mysterious, it's because the congenial everyday verb has been absorbed into an official-sounding occupational category. The mild chill it exudes—milder still in the UK, where the term is routine—is what the novel is most obviously about. The society that invented the carer, not our own, turns out to harbor a sinister semi-secret. In this dystopian England of the late 1990s, colonies of children are being cloned. They are raised in isolation from normal children. Once they reach adulthood, their vital organs are harvested, one by one, and used in the treatment of other people's diseases. Each operation is called a "donation." Before these cloned children become "donors," most of them spend some time as carers, health visitors who move around the country tending pre- and post-op to those who are making donations. Donors sometimes "complete," or die, after the first or second donation, and almost inevitably by the fourth. When Kathy says she will remain a carer "until the end of this year," we do not yet understand that she is announcing, with a noteworthy lack of complaint, the beginning of the organ donations that will lead more or less speedily to her death. Her cheerful patter about how long she has been doing this job and how much her superiors appreciate her work is thus encircled by an immense moral obscenity.

Kathy's thoughts are preoccupied not with her imminent end, but with her professional success. In dispatching that success toward a nightmarish terminus, Ishiguro would seem to be querying both the ideology of upward mobility and the institution of the welfare state, themes that his novel assumes, rightly, have become intimately connected. Kathy's professional ambitions are set within a bureaucracy that resembles the welfare state both in its rationale and in its total penetration of the private lives of those in its care. For the latter, who do much of the caring, this bureaucracy defines a certain possible path of modest professional advancement. Yet the advancement has a biological limit. Seen from the perspective of the cloned children, what's wrong with upward mobility stories is that they are not going to come true. One of the teachers or "guardians," Miss Lucy, explains this to her students in a sudden fit of frankness:

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> *You've been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some people are quite happy to leave it that way. But I'm not. If you're going to have decent lives, then you've got to know and know properly. None of you will be going to America, none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets as I heard some of you planning the other day. Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do. You're not like the actors you watch on your videos, you're not even like me.* (81)

One of the great virtues of this novel is that such statements are clearly not just for or about cloned children. In extrapolating from our own society, Ishiguro's science-fiction premise also of course sends us back to it. Reading Miss Lucy's speech, it is hard not to speculate about intended comparisons to upward mobility in the present. Here and now, in the absence of segregated clones or a system of obligatory organ removal masquerading as voluntary "donation," it is almost equally certain that the futures the vast majority of children dream of will not be realized. The organ-donation gulag, tucked away from public view and yet not kept secret, has its obvious real-world counterpart in what we call class. Doesn't class divide just as effectively, allowing some of us to expect a reasonable return on our career investments while deviously ensuring that little will come of any expectations the rest may have?[2] What difference does it make that class origin, in our society, does not define an official identity—a box to be checked on the census form, or grounds for compulsory segregation during childhood? We too have schools that resemble prisons and prisons where almost everyone seems to be from the same background. There is pervasive censorship in the cloned children's "progressive" school, as we can see when Miss Lucy defies it, and yet—this is one of the more striking ironies of the science fiction premise—the expectationless in the twenty-first century USA are probably told *less* of the truth about what will turn out to be their destiny than they are in Ishiguro's brave new world. Ishiguro obliges us to wonder whether the freedom on which his uncloned readers pride themselves is anything more than a similarly managed ignorance of what awaits them, even if the hope and (one can almost say) the happiness that ignorance sometimes brings with it may be hard to give up. How much does it matter that in the novel the split between those who have a future and those who don't results from the biological facts of one's birth, which results in turn from a deliberate decision by the authorities, while in our society it is an effect without originary legislation or identity, with no "they" visibly making the decisions, an outcome that can merely be predicted with high statistical reliability?

As the frame for this high-tech revival of quasi-feudal hierarchy, Ishiguro delivers an inspired piece of genre modification. He takes the bland, squeaky-

[2] Of course, this could always be the fault of the dreams themselves, as suggested by "film stars." The clause "working in supermarkets" seems added in order to head off that interpretation; in our world, the supermarket is a sort of class-neutral site, by no means impossible as a goal of eventual employment, though it might be especially attractive to the cloned kids, who are not allowed outside the grounds to shop.

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clean idiom of the middle-class boarding school novel, with its beguilingly motivational assumption that the world is just and that effort will eventually be rewarded, and infuses it with a dark, late twentieth-century punk or slacker vision of "no future."[3] The narrative choice is familiar from his previous novels: we look at the world through the eyes of a character of limited consciousness, immersed in concerns and anxieties that one cannot confidently call trivial, who prefers not to contemplate the Big Picture. What kind of system does her routine belong to? Where is the seemingly endless file of workdays leading? We ourselves do not look any ultimate questions in the face, but we watch as the character looks away from them, and are thus made to feel the force both of these questions and of our own resistance to them.

The technique assumes, justifiably I think, that at some point we will ask, defensively: who *does* want to contemplate the Big Picture? Who can afford to? Even as we recoil from Ishiguro's premise, its existential force jolts us into sudden sympathy with Kathy. Like her, and like the butler in *The Remains of the Day* and the pianist in *The Unconsoled*, I depend for my daily dose of contentment on a blinkering of awareness that I myself in my better moments would find outrageous and repulsive. If it is seeking to become the cause or occasion of such moments, as seems plausible, *Never Let Me Go* paradoxically does so by going deep into the partly existential desire that sustains the upward mobility story, the desire that keeps me identifying with the uncloned, who do or at least may have a future—so deep as to make the reader wonder which side Ishiguro is on. And which side we are on. Isn't it plausible for me to assert my conviction that after all I am not a statistic, that what holds statistically or generally need not turn out to hold for me in particular, that in any case I must act as if I didn't know what will happen, as indeed in a sense I don't? Such reasoning seems by turns logically flawless, socially dishonest, and practically unavoidable. The absolute peremptoriness of the practical—the responsibility to pay the rent, put food on the table, keep up the home, avoid humiliation—can be seen as a sort of state of exception, a falling back on irreducible individual sovereignty that precedes and overrides the ideology of collective justice.

Collective justice can provisionally reassert its authority only if we can be seduced into contemplating, coldly and impersonally, the absurd panorama that results as endless crowds of us, unique individuals all, try to assert our boundless sovereignty by packing ourselves into the cramped space of a minute statistical possibility. This is one hypothesis about what the upward mobility story at its best accomplishes. In what is less a negative critique than a riff on the genre's established repertory of images, Ishiguro suggests again that my logic of individual freedom, irrefutable as it seems, involves literally trying to get away with murder. Here upward mobility means turning your head away so as not to see

[3] A usefully synoptic discussion of how the styles and stages of working-class youth subculture relate to the ideology of upward mobility can be found in Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). Hebdige cites, for example, Phil Cohen's argument that the skinhead style was "'a metastatement about the whole process of social mobility' produced by the systematic exaggeration of those elements within mod style which were self-evidently proletarian" (55). See Cohen's "Sub-cultural Conflict and Working Class Community."

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that someone else's organs are being excised, and excised in order that your own life can go merrily forward. The reader's only apparent alternative in *Never Let Me Go* is to identify with the carer/donors, who speak the middle class's own optimistic, system-trusting language and yet embody the reality of the exploited, a collectivity of sheep who do not seem to have realized (as Monty Python's Flying Circus suggests) that their lives consist mainly of standing around waiting to be eaten. It is necessary to add, however, that this vision of upward mobility could also be taken as a backhanded argument in favor of sheep learning to fly, whatever the odds—in other words, as a case for arousing rather than rejecting social aspiration, if aspiration can be seen as including the impulse to change the system. In the same mildly perverse spirit, we might see Ishiguro as teaching that I must *try* to think of myself as a statistic, if only so as not to join the millions in thinking of myself as an improbable individual exception to the statistical rule. This is the demand for an impersonal coldness that, by the usual standards of proximity-first, could only register as ethical deficiency, even as cruelty.

If Ishiguro is urging us to perceive the horror that floats just beyond the horizon of our daily routine, it would seem to follow that he must also be urging us, if only obliquely and subliminally, to take some sort of action against this horror. He seems more directly concerned with the question of what makes action unthinkable. In this novel, the primary answer to that question seems to be not the ideology of freedom but the ideology of the welfare state, which gives a grateful semblance of meaning and legitimacy to the stopgap efforts of every day. Why is it that Miss Lucy's revolutionary truth-telling speech to the students makes no apparent difference? "[T]here was surprisingly little discussion about what she'd said. If it did come up, people tended to say: 'Well, so what? We already knew all that'" (82). At one point the characters drive to the coast in order to stand and gaze at a stranded boat, a mere symbol rather than an actual means of escape. The closest they get to challenging the rules by which they live and die is the heart-breaking myth—exposed as such in the novel's climactic scene—that it is possible to win "deferral" of one's donations on the basis of one's artwork, which is sometimes taken away without explanation by the headmistress of the school. (The irony, exquisitely compressed into this theology of provisional salvation, is that the school fails to recognize the children's genuine creativity, which expresses itself not in the artwork itself but rather in this myth-making *about* the artwork and its ability to transform their lives.) As an explanation of the headmistress's actions, the myth that their "best work" is preserved in her "Gallery" is also an explanation of how the children can avoid knowledge of "[w]hat's going to happen to us one day. Donations and all that" (29). They need to believe that the merit of what they are doing will be rewarded, if only by being recognized, and this entails a belief in the fundamental rightness of the authorities doing the recognizing and rewarding. This belief is already in evidence when Kathy introduces herself on the first page. Canny as she is about the existence of unfairness in the system—she alludes to cases in which the competent have been told to stop, or die, while the incompetent have been kept on—Kathy does not talk as if "they," meaning the system, are the people who have decided she will turn donor and die. "They" appear as those who are "pleased with [her] work." To

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question what they have proclaimed to be her future would mean also questioning what they feel about the value of her work, and thus her entire life narrative.

The ultimate sanction of this obstinate, almost suicidal clinging to the value of one's work is clarified in a late dialogue between Kathy and Tommy. Tommy, who becomes Kathy's lover only when she finally becomes his carer, although they have loved and cared for each other for years without acknowledging it, says to her:

> *"I mean, don't you get tired of being a carer? All the rest of us, we became donors ages ago. You've been doing it for years."*
>
> *I shrugged. "I don't mind. Anyway, it's important there are good carers. And I'm a good carer."*
>
> *"But is it really that important? Okay, it's really nice to have a good carer. But in the end, is it really so important? The donors will all donate, just the same, and then they'll complete."*
>
> *"Of course it's important. A good carer makes a big difference to what a donor's life's actually like."* (281-82)[4]

Here the ideology of the welfare state colludes with the ideology of upward mobility, lending its authority to the muted, socially respectable form that upward mobility has little by little come to assume. As in *The Unconsoled*, which this passage strongly recalls, the excuse for an excessive devotion to one's work (or a devotion that others will see as excessive) is the belief that the work is socially valuable, that it makes a positive difference to others as well as to oneself, that it responds to a genuine need. Caring means you can win credit and advantage for yourself without "trying to boast" or to get ahead of the others—that is, while innocently carrying out a service for the benefit of the social whole. The work may be self-destructive; as Tommy says, "all this rushing about you do. All this getting exhausted and being by yourself. I've been watching you. It's wearing you out" (282). But it's for the common good. The institution in our society that seems most centrally alluded to here is the welfare state.

Without leaning too hard on the pertinent biographical facts (Ishiguro is married to a former social worker whom he met during the year he spent doing social work himself), it seems plausible to read some of his most characteristic effects as attempts to hold up and examine, even at the level of the sentence, a welfare-state vision of life: a vision centered on that bittersweet compromise between social justice and the injustice enforced by capitalist competition.

[4] The passage continues: "But all this rushing about you do. All this getting exhausted and being by yourself. I've been watching you. It's wearing you out. You must do, Kath, you must sometimes wish they'd tell you you can stop" (282). Kathy's own self-description is even more reminiscent of Ryder:

> *Then there's the solitude. You grow up surrounded by crowds of people, that's all you've ever known, and suddenly you're a carer. You spend hour after hour, on your own, driving across the country, centre to centre, hospital to hospital, sleeping in overnights, no one to talk to about your worries, no one to have a laugh with.... You're always in a rush, or else you're too exhausted to have a proper conversation. Soon enough, the long hours, the travelling, the broken sleep have all crept into your being and become part of you.* (207-08)

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Nothing could be more characteristic of his style, for example, than the syntax of "muddling through." "The recovery rooms are small, but they're well-designed and comfortable" (17). Here, a mild concession to suffering (small rooms) receives, as if by a miraculously swift response from the appropriate bureaucratic department, instant—though trivial—compensation. Kathy's brisk efficiency leaves no space for surprise at the fact that there *are* recovery rooms; that recovery rooms exist in the first place only because of "donations"; that the existence of donations and recovery rooms signals a suffering that is beyond any possible compensation. The sentence structure seems engineered to guarantee that the best will always be made of a bad situation, with no acknowledgment that the situation will always be bad because the same system has also begotten it. The same is true, of course, of the opening sentences, which set Kathy's ingratiating consciousness that the reward system is unfair against her breathtaking *un*consciousness of the much greater unfairness that underlies it. She cheers us up, as she cheers herself up, with evidence of minor compensations, improvements, or advantages within what might otherwise be seen as an irredeemable disaster. Thus she makes her own peace with the inevitable, eventually deciding that it is "right": "though I'll miss being a carer, it feels just about right to be finishing at last come the end of the year" (4). And she takes pride in her professional ability to spread the same message around her, inducing others to make peace with their own fate: "My donors have always tended to do much better than expected. Their recovery times have been impressive, and hardly any of them have been classified as 'agitated,' even before the fourth donation" (3). Blank and bureaucratic, cravenly accepting of monstrously limited expectations, dedicated to suppressing all "agitation" at the deep injustice that underlies the system as a whole: this is the voice of the welfare state much as its severest critics understand it.[5]

The action of keeping donors from being "classified as 'agitated,' even before the fourth donation" throws a harsh light on the legitimacy Kathy claims for her labors. This description of what carers do is central to the first and longest of the novel's three parts. Like Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, Kathy does not want to recognize that hers is a sort of love story—a rivalrous triangle in which her best friend Ruth pairs off with the passive Tommy, who might have seemed better suited to Kathy, until the time of the donations has begun, when Kathy briefly inherits the little that is left of him. On reflection, however, the focus of these hundred-odd pages seems too significant in its own right to be considered a mere diversion from the love triangle. The issue here is Tommy's anger: his fits, when he is teased or not chosen for a team, and how he overcomes his feelings, learning to fit in better with those around him. Both the problem and the resolution seem to hop off the brightly lit shelf devoted to young adult fiction. But given this novel's macabre framework, they make more sense if considered as an example of welfare state ideology. Kathy tells Tommy that he's "happier these

5 Ishiguro seems not to want to present this system as either private or public, the result of the profit motive or of government bureaucracy. The point seems to be that it doesn't much matter. The "they" is not seen as divided in this way, though it's divided in other ways—ways discovered to be trivial, as one expects to find that a hint of division will reveal someone's full revolt and is each time disappointed to see that the divisions are only *within* the horror.

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days" (23). He knows what she means: "You're talking about me not ... getting so angry" (23). The secret of how he has stopped getting so angry is revealed as a conversation with Miss Lucy about his artwork. His other teachers have judged his artwork to be unsatisfactory. Miss Lucy tells him that this is not his fault: "What she said was that if I didn't want to be creative, if I really didn't feel like it, that was perfectly all right. Nothing wrong with it, she said" (23). "I realised she was right, that it wasn't my fault. Okay, I hadn't handled it well. But deep down, it wasn't my fault. That's what made the difference" (28-29). Both the advice and its effect—less anger or "agitation," therefore more happiness—are again perfectly in keeping with the critical view of the welfare state that permeates so much of the novel. The welfare state, so the moral would go, is the institution that bribes us with minor restitutions and supplements so as to divert us from deep and systematic injustice, which is to say from our legitimate causes for anger.

This seems unambiguous enough. Logically speaking, however, it is a case for the expressing of anger—which is to say, a case in favor of the cruelty that the free expression of anger can cause. One of the most subtly shocking aspects of *Never Let Me Go* is the way its dark satire of the welfare state's anger-management program also creates a space in which readers can be asked to countenance and even admire cruelty.

As the words "it wasn't my fault" suggest, the key here is a depersonalization of anger. In the film *Good Will Hunting*, the welfare state's "no fault" philosophy seems committed both to getting rid of the protagonist's anger and to liberating his aspiration, which the anger has blocked. In order to alleviate Tommy's sense of unworthiness and make him happier, Miss Lucy's version of this therapeutic wisdom seems at first glance more willing to shut the aspiration down along with the anger. Yet Miss Lucy is the same teacher who rebels against the reigning policy (by telling the children the truth) and soon afterward disappears from the school. The "no fault" advice likewise is taken, at least by Kathy, as the expression of a revolt rather than as a mere repetition of the school's common sense. Kathy is normally a reliable representative of that common sense, and she dismisses Miss Lucy's words as "just rubbish" (24). And when Tommy replays the conversation for her again—"It was wrong for anyone, whether they were students or guardians, to punish him for it, or put pressure on him in any way. It simply wasn't his fault" (28)—again Kathy can't believe anything so subversive was sincerely meant. "She wasn't having you on, was she?" (28).[6] This advice must therefore be understood to contradict the principles of the school.

In eliminating fault Miss Lucy's words also eliminate merit, hence aspiration. The school encourages the children's aspirations to excel, and children cannot be expected to demonstrate their excellence if they don't think that failure to do so will be taken as their own fault. In her revolt, Miss Lucy is of course implying

[6] Elsewhere in this novel Ishiguro alludes to earnest movements of dissenting opinion—for example, opponents of the "progressive" school where Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth go—that take themselves seriously, and are so taken, yet clearly miss the point entirely. Indeed, this is another of his signature effects. So we cannot assume that "It simply wasn't his fault" represents an ideological position to reckon with.

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that it makes no sense to encourage these futureless children to think in terms of merit and reward. She knows the habits of aspiration inculcated by the school are intended merely to distract the students from the dark truth of the impending donations. Yet her straightforward logic leads to a devious conclusion. For if her articulation of the "no fault" philosophy is a way of soothing Tommy's anger, it simultaneously asks to be construed as a way of adapting his feelings to the terrible truth of his situation. The truth of his situation is of course something very much worth being angry about. It would seem, then, that getting rid of anger by getting rid of merit leads circuitously but logically back again to anger.

One of the things Tommy himself doesn't know how to interpret in his conversation with Miss Lucy is the place of anger in it. "When she said all this, she was *shaking*.... With rage. I could see her. She was furious ... I don't know who she was angry with. But she was angry all right" (28). Getting rid of anger, Tommy's anger, is what the scene supposedly accomplishes. But rather than vanishing, anger is displaced to Miss Lucy. If for the moment at least Miss Lucy is the representative of the welfare state, as she seems to be, then the welfare state would seem to be something quite different from a therapeutic agency that preserves the system by cushioning its worst blows and dispelling violent anger from it. In the very act of delivering its most characteristic message, Miss Lucy reveals the welfare state as a bearer and embodiment of anger.

At the very end of the novel, the meaning of this anger is confirmed. Tommy and Kathy, now donor and carer, find the address of the retired head of their old school, which has since been closed down, and they confront her with the question of deferrals—their childhood belief that they could be saved for a while from the donations by the quality of their artwork, or the quality of their love. They discover that deferral was a myth. On the drive back, Tommy runs off into an open field and expresses the feelings appropriate to this discovery. Seeing "Tommy's figure raging, shouting, flinging his fists and kicking out" (274), Kathy is inspired to tell him the following: "maybe the reason you used to get like that was because at some level you always *knew*" (275). And Tommy agrees. On some level he did know. In which case, Miss Lucy seems to have failed in the mission of eliminating Tommy's anger. Or on the contrary maybe she has succeeded in an unacknowledged effort to maintain that anger. Miss Lucy's advice to him that his conduct in school was "not [his] fault" was not "conservative" but politically correct, if that phrase can be cleansed of recent associations: it confirmed that what his anger expressed (as in so many stories of juvenile delinquency) was a precocious knowledge of a collectively blocked future, knowledge of a general social injustice to which anger was an entirely appropriate response.

About striving, as about anger, Miss Lucy can advise Tommy properly only by contradicting herself. For contradiction is inherent in the situation she is trying to address. Of course she wants Tommy to aspire. But in order to aspire, he must inhabit a system that makes aspiration reasonable. He doesn't. Instead of delivering a coherent message, therefore, she acts out the incoherence around her by taking back what she has said. Just before departing from the school (and the plot), she shifts from reassurance to what might appear to be another of those moments of gratuitous emotional violence. As Tommy recalls it: "And she said,

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no, I wasn't all right. My art was rubbish, and that was partly her fault for telling me what she had" (108). Telling a child that his art is rubbish is an act of cruelty. But Miss Lucy's recantation obviously cannot be understood as simply or inexplicably cruel. Miss Lucy is also protecting Tommy. If there is no way out for him, then perhaps better to leave him in a state of self-delusive aspiration, even if he therefore blames himself for failures that are not his fault. Yet the recantation also implies that fault, which goes with aspiration, should rightly be placed not on Tommy's shoulders but on the system that she herself represents. This is included in her message: "[it] was partly *her* fault for telling me what she had" (emphasis added). Just as anger was displaced from Tommy to Miss Lucy in the previous scene, so here fault again passes from the passive object to the active subject of the welfare state.

This passage has various consequences. If the representative of the welfare state can be angry and at fault, then it is much easier to imagine working within the welfare state—being "like me"—as a potential terminus for the upwardly mobile juvenile offender of talent. It becomes possible to hypothesize such a thing as angry aspiration, a goal that would require maintaining rather than eliminating the anger that seems to block the passage upward. The system itself might be imagined, accordingly, as supple or self-contradictory enough to be capable of seeing legitimate merit in those who aspire to change it—to change decisions about which aspiration is and which is not legitimate, about what merit there is in caring and who deserves it, and whether society should be divided into donors and those who benefit from their organs.[7] The implication of this line of thinking is that Miss Lucy was also exaggerating when she told the children that they are "not even like [her]" (81). In a sense, they are. They are about to enter into training to be carers. But our understanding of caring, the generic work of the welfare state, has clearly been expanded by the anger against the system expressed in Miss Lucy's supposedly anger-managing "no fault" speech. Perhaps that occupational category has even been expanded far enough so as to become a goal of angry aspiration. As Kathy works with donors, Miss Lucy works with donors-to-be. As Kathy works to keep her donors from being "classified as 'agitated,' even before the fourth donation" (3), Miss Lucy works on Tommy's anger. They both work "on" Tommy. And they both care for him in more than one sense of the word.

The parallel in their caring gets even more intriguing when one notices that both of them end up telling him, with much the same visible cruelty, that his art is "rubbish." Miss Lucy's declaration has just been quoted. Kathy's moment—the origin and inspiration for the present essay—comes in this novel's version of the paradigmatic scene that I discussed above: a scene of inexplicable cruelty between people who love each other. Ruth, whose earlier acts of emotional violence have seemed explicable enough, suddenly tells Tommy that when he dreams of getting his pictures of imaginary animals into the Gallery, he is making a fool of

[7] To the extent that the novel permits us to compose Miss Lucy's two contradictory messages into one—a message whose full articulation would have to lie beyond the horizon of its plot—this message would seem to be that Tommy must aspire, just as he must be angry. If his aspiration must be informed by his anger, then it would have to be a new kind of aspiration.

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himself—not because the Gallery and deferrals are merely mythic, but because his pictures are no good. She says that she and Kathy have talked about it and that Kathy agrees with her: "Kathy here finds your animals a complete hoot" (194). This is a lie. Kathy has never said anything of the sort. Kathy knows she has to tell Tommy so, but she doesn't. Once again, therefore, an act of omission forces us to ask how a character can be so cruel to the one person she has always loved. Is it simply the fatality of human nature that stops people from ever seizing the happiness offered them, as critics like Menand have exasperatedly suggested about similar scenes in *The Unconsoled*?

Kathy's account of her silence goes as follows: "Something in me just gave up. A voice went: 'All right, let him think the absolute worst. Let him think it, let him think it'" (195). Does Kathy want him to think the absolute worst about her, or the worst about himself? The latter, which seems more likely in context, would exactly duplicate the logic of Miss Lucy's recantation: telling him his art is rubbish, that he has no talent as an artist. But since Kathy has never expressed this opinion of his drawings before, it seems more likely still that she is drawing your-art-is-rubbish into a larger judgment about things in general: let him think the absolute worst about his own situation, about what awaits them all, about the system to which they belong. Love wants to face the truth, and this is as close as Kathy can come to it. In short, either of the two likeliest interpretations would suggest that here, at least, cruelty is indistinguishable from caring. It's only by being cruel to Tommy that Kathy can lovingly hold open the possibility (however theoretical) of an aspiration that he would be allowed to enjoy. From this perspective, true caring, even love itself, would necessarily have cruelty in it. And in this it would have something in common with the official caring of the carer.[8]

Given the argument thus far, in other words, Kathy's cruelty would seem to make more sense not as a general fact of human nature but as a response to a particular historical situation. It would make sense as her sole and unique expression of anger—an anger that is somewhat misplaced, perhaps, but not totally incoherent. Kathy's ability to understand the emotions of those around her and to make things right between them, leaving her own needs and desires out of play, has been one of her genuine attractions both as a character and as a narrator. It certainly makes her as convincing as she is. But in this sense it is her very *reliability* as a narrator that Ishiguro seems to be asking us to question. Could she be so reliable, locally, if she were not so shockingly indifferent to the larger, more distant context that looms beyond the children, their emotional entanglements, and their school—a context that makes anger and self-contradiction inevitable, that sheds a different light on their emotions? Could she be so self-effacingly calm and believable if she did not accept the fundamental rightness of

[8] It would perhaps be possible to read Kathy's gesture differently: as an act of solidarity with Ruth. Taking the erotic element away from their triangle—and it's so weak that it would hardly be missed—Ruth would seem to stand for Tommy's opposite: creative, successful, competitive, and aspiring (it is her "possible" and the attendant image of work in a modern office that represent aspiration for the children). Unlike Kathy, she believes in fault: Ruth has said "it's his own fault. If he learnt to keep his cool, they'd leave him alone" (10).

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the system? If Kathy's seemingly inexplicable cruelty toward Tommy is a sign of anger against the system, an anger that she cannot acknowledge but that she has every reason to feel, an anger like that of Miss Lucy and of Tommy himself, then the cruelty would of course no longer be inexplicable. Nor would it be simply what it seems: cruelty. It would also be, like Miss Lucy's, an oblique expression of ethical generosity. But in order to see the generosity, we have to take a giant step back from the local, intimate exchange between two people. We would have to allow distance back into our ethics.

The point is worth emphasizing because, as I've said, Ishiguro has so often seemed to be committed to making only the most banal and uncontroversial ethical statements, statements of the sort I've invented for my title: "cruelty is bad." Cruelty *is* bad. All things considered, "civility" would be preferable. But here at least cruelty and incivility also seem to be part of a more expansive and counter-intuitive political vision, one that allows us to consider caring here as possibly conflicting with caring there, that allows us to consider the welfare state as a distanced, anger-bearing project in which the anger is a necessary part of a genuine concern for people's welfare. This vision demands we look beyond the welfare of those immediately around us, even if the glance away from the here-and-now can look like, and can be experienced as, cruelty. It would be interesting to reflect on whether similar scenes of intimate cruelty in Ishiguro might also register, if only partially and distortedly, the pressures of moral responsibility to the long-term and the far away. It would be interesting to ask, in other words, whether what seems to be an ethical platitude—don't work too hard, remember there are more important things in life, like your family, like love—might turn out to be a loud warning *against* ethical platitudes, and in particular against the easy ethical comfort with which Ishiguro is so often associated: the idea that your first moral obligation is to be good to your family and to those immediately around you, to be a loving husband or parent or friend. Be nice. Don't be cruel.

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