


Wait upon Ishiguro, Englishness, and Class

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Mustapha Marrouchi,
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Abstract: In his article "Wait upon Ishiguro, Englishness, and Class" Mustapha Marrouchi analyzes Kazuo Ishiguro's novels with focus on the writer's interest in Japanese culture and his preoccupation with matters of class in England. Marrouchi analyzes Ishiguro's novels as located astride of East, West, and the in-between: his precise, exquisitely made stories are shadowed by absences and silences, balanced "between elegy and irony" (Rushdie) and this is so whether the speaker is the obsessive butler in *The Remains of the Day* or one of the demented heroes in *The Unconsoled* or *When We Were Orphans* or the Japanese, guilty or exiled, in Ishiguro's first two novels *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*.

Mustapha MARROUCHI

Wait upon Ishiguro, Englishness, and Class

Western "writers have been visiting Japan since the 1860s, but for such a vast, thrilling and important country it has proven barren as a place of literary exile. Among those who made Japan their home, as well as their subject, there are to be found only few such as the Greek Irish Lafcadio Hearn, whose retellings of native ghost stories have made him more famous in Japanese translation than in English. The most interesting writing has been in sketches by those who have passed by and peered in without acquiring intimacy with the culture [of Japan]: Angela Carter's *Nothing Sacred*, an individual inspection, Anthony Thwaite's *Letter from Tokyo*, a collection of poetry, John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, a work of reportage" (Parry <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n16/richard-lloydparry/smilingly-excluded>>). In addition to Carter's, Thwaite's, and Hersey's texts Roland Barthes's *L'Empire des signes* (*Empire of Signs*) is a good example. Other — in my opinion less sophisticated — texts include Jay McInerney's *Ransom* full of machismo and *japonaiserie* (Vincent Van Gogh's nineteenth-century notion about the influence of Japanese art and culture), Clive James's comedy *Brrm Brrm*, or Alan Booth's and Richard Gordon Smith's travel writings (on travel and Japan, see, e.g., Goebel; Kawakami; Suvin; on the problematics between the literatures of the East and the West, see, e.g., Aldridge; Moore and Moody).

Richard Lloyd Parry writes that "Japan has never attracted the attention of a Chatwin or a Naipaul, let alone fostered a Kipling in spite of a short visit there in 1889, a Somerset Maugham, a Hemingway, or a Paul Bowles. I posit that exceptions to the rule are David Mitchell's *number9dream* and *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* ... Densely hierarchical, structured by invisible networks of deference, obligation, and taboo, conventional Japanese society offers no formal place to the outside person: this alienation is so absolute that it is experienced as something close to liberation, a stimulus to observation and analysis" (<<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n16/richard-lloydparry/smilingly-excluded>>). Barthes wrote that Japan afforded him a situation of writing, "one in which a certain disturbance of the person occurs, a subversion of earlier readings, a shock of meaning lacerated, extenuated to the point of its irreplaceable void" (4). Further, Parry suggests that it is hard to grasp how Tokyo, for example, with its "thirty million people; it is far and away the largest city that has ever existed. And yet to the Westerner with intellectual aspirations a small pond. The Catholic novelist Shusaku Endo compared Japan and the rest of Japan to a tropical swamp: when living flowers are transplanted from elsewhere they grow vigorously for a while, put out lurid blooms, but eventually wither in the strange minerals of the new soil. In 150 years, foreigners in Japan have produced important works of history, political science, anthropology and journalism, but no lasting work of literature" (<<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n16/richard-lloydparry/smilingly-excluded>>).

The two English-language novelists who have filtered Japanese characters into English successfully are Mitchell and Ishiguro, although neither has made a home in the country: Mitchell left Hiroshima for good in 2002 and Ishiguro, British in all but name, has not lived in Nagasaki since he was a toddler. In this article, I analyze Ishiguro's work whose novels are astride of East, West, and the in-between. It should not therefore come as a surprise that all of his novels are first-person narratives of people stranded in alien worlds, haunted by feelings they cannot quite put a name to: loneliness perhaps or maybe isolation and even dislocation. They are defined by the words and emotions they stifle, they have no sex, no violent action, almost no surface drama. For the most part the voices are quiet, civilized, formal and although a few of his novels are set in worlds he has not seen — for example Nagasaki in the 1940s — all have that same faintly autumnal air with characters looking back on vanished times and social order. Suffice it to add that all of Ishiguro's precise, exquisitely made stories are shadowed by absences and silences, balanced "between elegy and irony" (Rushdie 244). This is so whether the speaker is the obsessive butler in *The Remains of the Day* or one of the demented heroes in *The Unconsoled* or *When We Were Orphans* or the Japanese, guilty or exiled, of the first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*. Indeed, this way of speaking seems appropriate to Japanese conversation, to the talk of a society in which manners are always important, and in which they might sometimes take precedence over candor. The characters do a lot of deferring and apologizing and even when they are not expressly said to be bowing gently to one another you

can easily imagine they are.

One way to start writing a novel is to have a theory about what a novel is supposed to be for, like healing our wounds, holding a mirror up to the family, or engaging with the political issue of the day. If you know, as Milan Kundera knows, that your first duty as a novelist is to explore and explain hitherto unknown "existential problems," then, assuming you can dig up a hitherto unknown existential problem, you have a good start on your novel (29; on Kundera and the novel, see, e.g., Steinby). A theory of the novel like Kundera's gives us a guide to creating our characters, a sub-text for dialogue, a clothes line from which to suspend the narration of sex scenes and flashbacks. One does not need to stray too far beyond Kundera's internal and external focalizations of the novel as a cockpit of moods, orders, voices, characters, and settings to find a cogent explanation of the same theoretical knots given by Ishiguro: "A novel isn't some sort of sugared piece of nonfiction. Novels are about emotional manipulation" (Ishiguro qtd. in Iyer 45). True, insofar as we (readers) feel that Ishiguro is an unusually reader-sensitive writer and conscious of his responsibilities as a spokesperson — and an embodiment — of the increasingly multi-layered global village we all live in and are supposed to share together. Indeed, with his pauses and ellipses, his ability to tell stories about what people do not say, Ishiguro most resembles is Harold Pinter (who was so much taken with *The Remains of the Day* that he bought the film rights). Pinter had confidence in the language he used to articulate them, where Ishiguro, coming after Pinter, is prey to a further fear, the suspicion that the currency of common language is devalued and thus no longer adequate to meet the case of his distress. What emerges is an impression of great singleness of purpose. This is not a paradox in Ishiguro, this is messiness: "There is something in my makeup ... something in my past perhaps — there is some wound or something — that's never going to heal, that I can just caress at least. And I can only get to that wound by writing" (Ishiguro qtd. in Shaffer 112). This wound is of course the after-image of what Jacques Derrida called the violence of the letter (183) and in Ishiguro it can be located in what Edward W. Said called the "placeless place" with its catalogue of disaffected, dislocated, and oddly deformed objects (16). In this sense, Ishiguro's work is the presentation of identity as unable to identify with itself, but nevertheless grappling with the notion (perhaps only the ghost) of identity itself. Thus is displacement figured and plotted in the narrative he creates.

The inner tendency of Ishiguro's drive to tell by some other way of telling and to merge the separate elements of the world in the unity of the novel is an undoing of occupation in the mind of the writer. For Ishiguro, the important thing is not to assess the argument proffered, but always to identify the party to which the proponent belongs: not to ask, "is it true?" but "is it on the right side?" In a similar vein, from which mysterious perennial he draws his endless energy to argue for journeying over stillness, we are not sure. What is, however, certain is how alive and sensitive is his narrative to the selfishness of our hope and at times despair that one day he (and perhaps we) will be able to step across the line without going through one wall or another. Much the same is true of the following set of questions: how are we to interpret his way of telling, which has a somber grandeur with a vertebral thesis running from beginning to end? Is it at all possible to undertake the dissolution into evasive mystery of the most courageously elegant of all the "cultural amphibians" living today? Are social appearances essentially fraudulent? And finally, what are we to make of the home that never was and is not Ishiguro "doubly Other: caught between two facing mirrors that no one bothers to look into," except himself? "There is another lucky side effect for . . . [writers like Ishiguro]: personal alienation, the inescapable sense of being different from everyone else, is cancelled out, or at least rendered invisible, by the larger, universal alienation of being" a transplanted artist. At his most optimistic, he takes pride in his outsideness" (Parry <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n16/richard-lloydparry/smilingly-excluded>): "undisturbed by vagaries, I can regard what I think of as eternal" (*When We Were* 34). The Ishiguro who appears before us — although he is already fully formed in his *froideurs* suggests another reason for one's intention (and method) to deconstruct his works, for one would dearly like to know if there has ever been a time when his narrow-eyed distrust of worldly conventions and what many of us would embrace as conventional pleasures— is not in place.

The wonder of reading Ishiguro's novels lies in the precision he brings to bear on the narrative. This is not a matter of accuracy of outline or detail. Like a Rembrandt's drawing of a child learning to walk, surrounded by women where the lines are freighted with an astonishing weight of meaning, so are Ishiguro's novels: they lead to instant comprehension and as one grasps what the minimal

elements stand for things one does not know confirm what the story is meant to convey. Immediacy of this kind is much harder to achieve in writing than in drawing and/or painting. Yet, in Ishiguro's novels the gap between the mark and the imagination becomes so narrow that it is like sharing the moment of seeing and/or telling. The narrative, like the painting, say, *Woman Bathing in a Stream* by Rembrandt, is more like a translation of that moment (see Schwartz). The physical presence of the character in the text, like the picture in the painting, the pleasure one takes in it as an object, the solidity of the figure, the elaboration of emotions and feelings: all these offer a different kind of experience, an experience that combines the immediacy of observation with the relaxed, painterly and/or writerly intimacy of the characters in the novels or family portraits. The irony in all of this is that Ishiguro is one of the "happy few," as opposed to the hapless many, writers, who represents emotional and at times bodily functions seriously, but not humorously because he wants to take on the whole spectrum of human behavior. He does not turn his eye away from disgust or sickness either. His appetite for showing things as they are led him to create faithful servants and devoted civil servants to a cause, dangerous though it may be (think of the nazi sympathizer, Lord Darlington in *The Remains of the Day* and the case will be clear enough). In these transgressive portraits, like Rembrandt's contravening etchings of naked women with flabby breasts and sagging bellies, of people pissing and making love, Ishiguro refuses to acknowledge borders set by taste. Notions of what is tasteful and how a character should look, think, and feel not only make people unhappy with their own appearances, minds, and bodies when they fail to match an ideal, but persuade them to pretend things not as they are and follow fashions which — while they compliment some emotions — must be stretched unappealingly over others.

Stevens, the aging and obsessively punctilious butler in *The Remains of the Day* would never be so vulgar as to price anyone's shoes, but much of his earlier life was spent discreetly in the presence of substantial men exchanging views at a time of momentous events between the two world wars. In the service of the late Lord Darlington, at Darlington Hall, the great house to which Stevens is still attached as "part of the package," the butler sacrifices a whole life for the sake of waiting upon his lord (*The Remains* 242). Service, indeed, has been Stevens's guiding principle through a long professional career and his dry reserve and matter-of-fact tone are threatened by a troubling perception: perhaps his devotion to Lord Darlington, later disgraced for having tried to appease the nazis, was misplaced. Near the end of the novel when he briefly weeps for his wasted life, the pathos is shattering. This preoccupation with deceptive surfaces and false pretenses is in turn closely related to one of the most distinctive features of Ishiguro's style: his fondness for cold diction and relative indifference to metaphor. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the portrait he draws of Stevens: what distinguishes Stevens from other butlers is that he has thought much about "dignity" as a quality to be striven for by men whose lives are devoted to their employers. Now, in the summer of 1956, generously released for a time to go on holiday while his current employer is away in the U.S., Stevens looks back to his pre-war experience at Darlington Hall. Lord Darlington felt that "fair play had not been done at Versailles and that it was immoral to go on punishing a nation for a war that was now over" and from 1924 on he set himself the task of organizing an "unofficial" international conference at the hall (75). Stevens recalls with pride his own preparations for this great event: summoning the house staff for a preliminary pep-talk, he tells them that "history could well be made under this roof" (77). But gradually it emerges through the impassive formality of Stevens's reminiscences that the course of his employer's life was a troubled one. Idealism led to appeasement, to sympathy with the nazis and even to anti-Semitism. Lord Darlington was in disgrace, during and after the war and his reputation became notorious. Yet Stevens still sees him as "a gentleman of great moral stature" (126). This sounds simple, but the ambiguity is fiendish enough to keep the hounds confused. What we have here is not uncommon: the early progress of an intensely clever, emotionally febrile figure whose worries are further chafed by his dismay at seeing how directionless that progress feels. What lit the flame and never ceased to fuel it was Steven's relationship with Lord Darlington but also his (romantic) attachment to Miss Kenton. What we get, in other words, is the first hint of those engulfing shifts to which both his practical life and his consciousness would be subject in the coming years. What we glimpse here is how Ishiguro communicates life, death, betrayal, love, sadness, loyalty, and even hope with extraordinary delicate skill steering not only Stevens but also his other characters through his solemnities, deceptions, and self-deceptions trading with frozen dignity

through the corridors of power.

The earlier novels, *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, were wholly or almost wholly set in Japan. In an interview Ishiguro said that he begins by writing his scenes mainly in dialogue and then looks for a landscape in which to place them (Ishiguro qtd. in Veyret 56). He has also insisted that he does not really write about Japan and/or England but about an "imaginary homeland" (Rushdie) he has invented and that merely bears a resemblance to both his birthplace and adopted home. The second point is a little disingenuous, I think, a ploy by which Ishiguro detaches himself from Western Japanophiles who would like to relate him to such twentieth-century Japanese novelists as Natsume Soseki, Junichiro Tanizaki, and Yasunari Kawabata: there are distinct Japanese characteristics in Ishiguro's work however much he may disclaim them (see Sim 34-36). But the choice of a loyal servant as his English narrator Stevens has meant that Ishiguro can use indirectness, obliquity, and indeed the troubling pressures of obligation and indebtedness in a way that is clearly congenial to him and in an English context. In a sense, Stevens becomes an English version of that classic Japanese figure, the *ronin*, the masterless retainer who is still tied by firm bands to the master: "Nothing could be less accurate than to suggest that I regret my association with such a gentleman. Indeed, you will appreciate that to have served his lordship at Darlington Hall during those years was to come as close to the hub of this world's wheel as one such as I could ever have dreamt. I gave thirty-five years' service to Lord Darlington; one would surely not be unjustified in claiming that during those years, one was, in the truest terms, "attached to a distinguished household ... In looking back over my career thus far, my chief satisfaction derives from what I achieved during those years, and I am today nothing but proud and grateful to have been given such a privilege" (126).

The stiff formality of Stevens's style, tortuous with evasive speech, circumlocutory negatives, and grave protestations, obsessive with obsequiousness and quick to register any slur against whatever may have "dignity" or be "distinguished" is an elaborate contrivance. It is a dense hedge against the realization that he has devoted much of his life to something unworthy, something false, something which had evil consequences. The novel is also a brilliant *tour de force* of the fictional modes from which it at first seems to descend. Death, change, pain, devilry, the time-hollowed bonds between master and servant, and the codes by which both live are no longer dependable absolutes, but sources of ruinous deceptions: "You can't have dignity if you're a slave," the butler is informed in a Devon cottage, a reminder perhaps to us all of our true relationship to power (123). It is another version of Ono, the artist of *An Artist of the Floating World*, who misjudged his loyalties in pre-war Japan and who finds that history will not forgive him. Ono, without really knowing it, allowed himself to be used while Stevens, on the other hand, was seduced into reverence for Lord Darlington and permitted himself to be blind to the direction in which history was going. From this follows the desire to change things, to rewrite history from the bottom up and so Stevens spends his holiday, long after these events, driving westward toward Miss Kenton, the house-keeper with whom he shared (but also did not share) these experiences in the hope that she may come back into his life. In his rigid, inhibited fashion, he believes she may redeem the past, but when at last they meet again, her words "provoke a certain degree of sorrow" in him: "after all, there's no turning back the clock now. One can't be forever dwelling on what might have been" (239). It is in this sense that *The Remains of the Day* is a strange, sad, endearing novel, touched with comedy, as well as pathos. Unlike T.S. Eliot's Prufrock in *The Waste Land*, Ishiguro's is a memorable portrait of futility. His fascination with elders — the middle-aged Japanese woman, the prickly old Japanese painter, the aging English butler who are the narrators and subjects of his first three novels — his aesthetic with suggestiveness and his very mention of "dignity" indicate that he absorbed more of Japan than he is willing to admit.

One can see the point, then, of a perfect piece of ventriloquism. As the wandering butler speaks, he unwittingly exposes injustice, folly, even treachery not seen as such at the heart of the English upper class in the pre-World War II world he admires. Some of the success of the novel must be owing to the humor arising from the disparity between the butler's language and the conditions of which, by its very nature, it gives a falsified report. That he is traveling, ineptly, in his employer's grand car is in itself emblematic of his situation in life. Subtle although undoubtedly it is, this is the easiest of the novels as its popular success testifies. Almost as if to reject the rewards of such a success, Ishiguro wrote *The Unconsoled* next, a baffling narrative about bafflement. In one sense, it is an "outrageous game ... announcing fidelity to novelistic conventions in order to violate them"

(Kermode <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n08/frank-kermode/outrageous-game>>). I follow Frank Kermode's argument that Ryder, the storyteller, speaks so sincerely, humbly, and clearly in the first person so that we hear his voice inside ourselves: this inspires trust. Slowly and patiently, we are led to join a preeminent pianist and world-renowned artist, in a Central European town for a performance date during his world tour. He stays in a hotel in which Frederick the Great is believed to have stayed, schmoozes with intellectuals at the Hungarian Café in Old Town and so on until the novel promises to become a tour of old-world charm with a modern aesthete for guiding light. But then we realize that the exaggerated characters, mistakes in arranging rendezvous, and discords in the adulation of Ryder are moving the story in another direction where by then it is too late to establish distance from the protagonist. We feel his anxiety when demands upon his time prove outrageous and his dread when his polite decorum with strangers is unequal to their demands for intimacy. We suffer with him when he plummets into a universe where the natural edges of time and place warp and collapse, events he treats as normal. We want to help him as he struggles to perform his much-heralded concerts and fumbles through chance encounters with family members, but we cannot nor can we make sense of Ishiguro's fiction about the perplexing fate of artists by calling the novel an allegory. It is unclear whether it was the Kafkaesque humor stemming from Ishiguro's attention to incongruous detail or the novel's anti-climactic ending that led to the unnerving, mystifying experience.

Like various tracks, streets, and corridors in the story, the tale seems endless and the characters are clearly just characters in a novel. Yet they not only speak in character, but in doing so impede the progress of the main story and defy and delay important undertakings of the central figure and narrator Ryder. It is a *mise-en-abîme* of the first order: Ryder is a man with an intolerable and ever increasing burden of responsibility who never gets anything done, who gets lost pretty well every time he steps outdoors, who cannot find out where he is supposed to be or when, or how to get there. He is a scrupulous man who misses appointments by hours, a weary man who is awakened as soon as he falls asleep. A woman he encounters accidentally turns out to be his wife and the boy with her, who has a problem with adults, is his son. He bumps, unsurprised, into old friends. Arriving at his hotel, he meets a porter devoted to the establishment who insists that despite his age he must carry three suitcases: "You see, sir, as you can imagine, in a town of this sort, there are many hotels. This means that many people in this town have at some point or other tried their hand at portering. Many people here seem to think they can simply put on a uniform and then that will be tit, they'll be able to do the job. It's a delusion that's been particularly nurtured in this town. Call it a local myth, if you will" (*Unconsoled* 5).

The terse, choppy language the porter adopts bears little resemblance to the style of Ishiguro's other novels, although both contrast the shortcomings of telling from downstairs as opposed to telling for upstairs. Wandering in the margins of the narrative that is not about him, the porter is visible only as an anachronistic appendage to his master (in this case a visitor) and as a function of traditional narrative form. Yet his persistence signals more than the absence of the "ordinary people" he is taken to represent. His argument offers a new and distinctive approach to the literary analysis of class, while it also bodies forth a revisionist counter-politics to the realist tradition from Homer to Virginia Woolf (see Robbins). In the end, the porter turns out to be, or turns into, Ryder's father-in-law. The manager of the hotel is a great talker, but of little use: he has a son already a virtuoso pianist but refuses to admit it. Like everybody else he demands favors of Ryder and these add to the already impossible burdens he carries. He is a great pianist who must give a recital, although he cannot find a piano on which to prepare his performance. He also must save the city which has somehow fallen into a state of crisis. He is expecting his aged parents to arrive by horse-driven coach, and, when he happens to think of them, is anxious about their welfare.

Everyone in the city seems to have an informed interest in modern music, though the names of the composers they mention are unknown to the world outside. Ryder is acknowledged to be a great man as well as a world-class musician, but despite his magical acquaintance with their most private thoughts he can accomplish nothing with these people or in this place. He is what Samuel Beckett might call "a bum" of the kind one encounters (Molloy comes to mind) and who has few possessions, little will, less appetite, and almost no interest in the world (see Begam 103). Everything is either next door or impossibly far away. His hotel room turns out to be one he has occupied before. At one point he leaves the little boy, Boris, in a café and rushes off on some quest. After giving an obscure but

passionate speech about modern music he remembers that the café in which he has delivered this address is next door to the one where he left the forgotten boy and who now leads him on a bizarre search for his mother's apartment. Left in a hut containing an upright piano, Ryder hears from nearby the sound of the conductor Brodsky digging a grave for his favorite cat. At last Ryder makes the impossibility impeded, belated journey to the concert hall and is almost there when he finds his way blocked by an impassable wall. His response to this setback is to go to the Hungarian café frequented by hotel porters. He undertakes to defend their cause in his important, city-saving speech. Then he dances with them, then he sleeps. In a truly remarkable scene illustrating the comic possibilities of this kind of writing he comes once more upon the conductor Brodsky, who has been knocked over by a car. A passing surgeon, wishing to help, laments his lack of equipment, but Ryder opens a car boot and finds him a hacksaw, with which he amputates the old man's leg. The operation has surprisingly little effect on the conductor's health and he makes his way to the concert hall. As it turns out, he had a wooden leg and that is what the surgeon has cut off. Lacking it, Brodsky has some difficulty on the podium, but supports himself by using a folding ironing-board as a crutch.

Ryder's tale is an artist's nightmare, the threat of contingency, and of a world in which he must achieve great things but, as things are, things that are beyond his competence: "I see this novel as a sort of super-novel in which a failed novelist ... urgently aware of his responsibilities yet lost, failing, is betrayed by the trivialities that interfere with his overwhelming need to remake the world, in this case by the treacherous means of writing a novel. I have not succeeded in explaining that this is indeed a great novel" (Kermode <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n08/frank-kermode/outrageous-game>>). And yet, if you manage to sidestep the drenching emotions that plague Ryder and prevent him from doing anything redemptive, there is something exactly right about *The Unconsoled*: it traces much the same emotional arc as its predecessor, a buttoned-up narrator hero goes through several days of experiences and memories that finally reduce him to tears in *The Remains of the Day*. This time, however, readers may find themselves crying a good deal earlier not out of sympathy, but frustration. Unlike in *The Remains of the Day* the events in *The Unconsoled* seem to occur outside the space-time continuum and they grow more preposterous. Still, one of the merits of the narrative is its optimistic call to ignore novels where inaction looms large and replace them with a functionalist re-description of the human mind and its various potentialities. *The Unconsoled* is composed and ought to be read not through the lens of its international reception, but in terms of its own commitment to an essentially hybrid — as opposed to residual — project of cultural reformation.

It is a paradox, perhaps, that in order to read Ishiguro's novels, one must resort to the politics of difference as it plays out in everyday life and work. Refusing both the spectacular and speculation, Ishiguro narrates in a no-nonsense tone in which the familiar ruses of boudoir culture have been administered. The key point is of course the anti-spectacular matter-of-factness of his constantly mobile and restless characters. To my mind, the novel that best captures what Susan Sontag termed the "mental leap to figure out what artistic form means" (78) readers seem to look for an experience — like in *Never Let Me Go* — where we are given a little more information than we need, but in general the detail is illuminating. *Never Let Me Go* is different from Ishiguro's other novels in one respect: it does have a first-person narrative, but the narrative abandons the formality of the previous speakers in favor of a familiar, chatty style right for the character of a young woman of the place and date specified, namely 1990s England. Whatever the virtues of this authorial decision, the texture of the writing becomes altogether less interesting and this may be a reason why the novel seems to be, although only by the standards Ishiguro has set himself, a failure. Or is it? Here is a passage: "What with one thing and another, I didn't get a chance to talk to Tommy for the next few days. Then one lunch time I spotted him on the edge of the South Playing Field practicing his football. ... I went over and sat down on the grass behind him, putting my back against a fence post. This couldn't have been long after that time I'd shown him Patricia C's calendar and he'd marched off, because I remember we weren't sure how we stood with each other" (34). The story, slightly science-fictional, but set in the recent past, is told by a thirty-one year old woman looking back to the time between the present and her adolescence. Everything is arranged expertly as it always is in Ishiguro, but its "dear diary" prose surely reduces one's interest and at times his fondness for the genre leads to a certain monotony.

Ishiguro has long maintained that any novel worth the name is an ironic (in the sense of "uncertain") inquiry into the nuance and complexity of life, overthrowing tired wisdom, showing up

easy simplifications, and replacing them with only questions. I cite one example to make my point: *A Pale View of Hills* is set in post-war Nagasaki, but never mentions the Bomb. In this sense, the novel takes the form of a question rather than an answer because any answer, by definition, adds a new stitch to that curtain of pretty lies. On this score, it is not his ideas but his style of exploring those ideas that makes his fiction fly. For a sense of his real genius you need to go back to the unblinking psychological realism of *The Remains of the Day* or the marvelous physicality of the language in *Never Let Me Go*. This is not to say that Ishiguro does not rage quietly against some of his narrators only to point out that in the world of humans much is inevitably lost between the writer's intention and the reader's experience, whether that writer's intention is to stitch the canvas or tear it apart. Even so, Ishiguro seems to have faith that his novels will arrive in the reader's head as they left his hand. The problem is that wisdom is locked inside each story and that at times it hovers around is not an accident. Life goes on humbly, he appears to be suggesting, even when people die, even when insignificance is where most of us live, even when the most important moments of our lives are surrounded by an envelope of prosaic, boring detail and outright stupidity. That at bottom is his way of telling.

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