Review of Never Let Me Go by Rachel Cusk

"Rereading: Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro"
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In Kazuo Ishiguro's 1995 novel *The Unconsoled*, Ryder, a pianist, is due to give an important concert in a foreign city. The novel is written in the form of an extended anxiety dream: manifold impediments spring up to delay his arrival at the concert hall; at one point he realises he hasn't practised the pieces he intends to play. In a field outside the city where, through labyrinthine causes, he finds himself, he comes across the dilapidated wreck of his old childhood family car. "I stared through the spiderweb cracks [in the window] into the rear seat where I had once spent so many contented hours. Much of it, I could see, was covered with fungus." The elasticity of the subconscious is also the novel's elasticity – it is more than 500 pages long – and likewise the novel's procedures are those of its adopted system of Freudian values.

This tendency – which might be called a type of impersonation, a kind of camouflaging of the writer's authority and hence his responsibility – can be seen throughout Ishiguro's work, and goes hand in hand with his most persistent themes: the fear of disorganisation and abandonment; the psychical aftermath of childhood; and the relationship between the institutional and the personal through which these themes are frequently dramatised. His most popular novel, *The Remains of the Day*, recommended itself to readers by the purity of its translation of that perennial English favourite, the period piece: here the author's lack of presence was felt to be impeccable, as discreet and thorough as the butler himself, serving up an England of which he didn't personally partake. But impersonation is also hubris, arrogance, control, for it seeks to undermine or evade the empathetic basis of

shared experience. Without empathy, the impersonator can misjudge people quite as spectacularly as he second-guesses them: in Ishiguro's case, *The Unconsoled* bewildered and alienated the very readers *The Remains of the Day* had gone to such lengths to satisfy. And indeed, *The Unconsoled* can on one level be regarded as a sort of outburst, almost an act of personal aggression, though it is a lengthy and meticulous work.

Never Let Me Go is Ishiguro's sixth novel and has proved to be his most popular book since his Booker prize-winning heyday. As with *The Remains of the Day*, there is a film, replete with English celebrities. Ishiguro's ventriloquism announces itself in the novel's first lines: "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." The "now" and the "actually," the absorbed ordinariness, the vagueness of "they" and the precision of "eight months, until the end of this year": Ishiguro's ear is acute, and these are the verbal mannerisms of the public services sector in the humdrum modern world. Kathy is a "carer," and indeed the notion of the "caring professions" represents precisely that elision of the institutional and the personal that generates the undertone of disturbance in so much of his work. There are undertones of Kafka, too, in these words, and in the immediate sense they convey of the reader's imprisonment in the narrator, and thus of the narrator's actual powerlessness. Another elision is the humdrum and the sinister: triviality is the harbinger of evil, and Ishiguro's prose from the outset is conspicuously dull with trivia. Kathy calls the people she cares for "donors," and on the third page she says of one of them: "He'd just come through his third donation, it hadn't gone well, and he must have known he wasn't going to make it." And so the association, the elision, is

swiftly clarified. This is a book about evil, the evil of death, the evil of banality: "he must have known he wasn't going to make it."

Never Let Me Go takes place in the late 20th century, in an England where human beings are cloned and bred for the purposes of harvesting their organs once they reach adulthood. These "clones" are reared in boarding school-type institutions: much is made, in the clone community, of the differences between one institution and another. Hailsham, where Kathy grew up as inmate before her "promotion," is mythologised for its special ethos: a Hailsham childhood is idealised, with somewhat grotesque and faintly Dickensian sentimentality, by those who were "born" into less fortunate circumstances. Hailsham is a grand place whose ample grounds encompass a pond, a pavilion and, towards its perimeter fence, a sinister area known as "the woods." It is staffed by "guardians" who have the quasi-parental function of the boarding school housemaster or mistress: these worthies bear the knowledge of their charges' fate as best they can. Once the children have reached maturity they leave their school-type community and embark on a twilit adult life, in which they are given limited access to the normal world while they await the summons to make their first "donation." This is where Kathy, as carer, comes in: she is the attending angel, seeing her portfolio of donors through the series of operations and consequent deteriorations that will lead to their certain death, or "completion." This role has extended her own lease on life, and so she must endure the survivor's moral and emotional suffering. And indeed, it is her capacity for emotion that provides the narrative occasion, that makes her the writer of this account.

It would seem from this description that *Never Let Me Go* is a work of unremitting bleakness and gratuitous sordidity. At the very least the question might be asked what style of literary enterprise this is. It

isn't science fiction – indeed its procedures are the very reverse of generic, for there is no analogy at work in the text, which instead labours to produce its iterative naturalism as a kind of sub-set or derivation of our own. In this sense it has more in common with a novel such as Camus's *The Plague*, in which a dystopian but familiar reality dramatises the dilemmas of the age. But the dilemmas of our age are not really those of Ishiguro's dystopia: vainglorious science, meddling with the moral structure of life, is a kind of B-list spook whose antics have yet to offer any substantial intellectual or practical challenge to the populace.

In any case, the "scientific" basis of the novel is vague: it is the emotional world of the clones themselves that Ishiguro is interested in, for these are children without parents, children who lack the psychological burden of childhood that Ishiguro so painstakingly articulated in *The Unconsoled*. And what he concludes is that a child without parents has no defence against death; that its body is not sacred, that it is a force of pure mortality. The parent is a kind of god, sanctifying and redeeming the child: as in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the novel's horrific imaginings almost become a perverse kind of sentimentality, as though these (male) writers are unable entirely to distinguish between imagination and fear. The parent imagines the gruesome things that could happen to his child if he, the parent, weren't there to protect him; and the novelist tries to translate those imaginings into the empirical evidence valued by male literary culture. He creates a "reality" out of them, with every ghoulish component unrelentingly worked out and provided; a high-caste version of the tabloid newspaper's loving exposition of gory detail.

The Road has also been a popular success: readers seem to find the depressiveness of these novels exhilarating. In Ishiguro's case the "gory details" of organ donation and human exploitation are further

freighted with the artistic scruples of the impersonator. The prose is locked tight with the inescapable repetitions of reminiscence: "There's an instance I can remember from when we were about eleven. We were in Room 7 on a sunny winter's morning. We'd just finished Mr Roger's class, and a few of us had stayed on to chat with him." The greater part of the narrative proceeds thus, and Ishiguro gets his darkest effects from this "dead hand" approach, creating an atmosphere of unbearable constriction that is like looking back down a tunnel. But his simultaneous need to manipulate, to dramatise his own concerns, pulls the story in the opposite direction. He gives the world of Hailsham a dominant characteristic: the belief in, indeed the worshipping of, creativity. The Hailsham children are indoctrinated in – and, one suspects as the narrative progresses, deliberately blinded by – the belief that their personal worth and the meaningfulness of their lives resides entirely in their ability to create art. From their earliest years they paint and sculpt and write poetry; they "sell" their work to one another at passionate auctions known as "Exchanges"; the cream of the school's production is selected to be sent to "the Gallery," by a woman known as Madame, who comes two or three times a year in her smart clothes to make her choices. Kathy's friend Tommy, though highly talented at sport, is bullied and ostracised for being bad at art; when he tells her that one of the guardians has privately suggested to him that his artistic failure doesn't matter, she hears this as the cataclysm of heresy.

On one level Ishiguro seems to be saying that art is a con-trick, like religion; that it obscures from us the knowledge or awareness of our own mortality, knowledge that in the case of the Hailsham children is brutally withheld. We believe that art is immortal, and so we represent creativity as an absolute good; but in making this representation to children, are we

interfering with their right to know about and accept death?

At one point Kathy remembers the way poems were treated as equivalent to paintings or sculptures at the Exchanges: it seems strange to her now that it should have been so. "We'd spend precious tokens on an exercise book full of that stuff rather than on something really nice for [putting] around our beds. If we were so keen on a person's poetry, why didn't we just borrow it and copy it down ourselves any old afternoon?" Ishiguro's mask slips a little here: why go to such lengths to distinguish and devalue writing? Is he suggesting that this is what the culture does? Or is it the reverse, a further piece of evidence of the inside-out, perverted values of the novel's world?

Never Let Me Go, like the clones it portrays, has in the end something of a double nature, for it both attracts and annihilates. Or perhaps it is a book that requires two readers, the reader who can be blind to its ugly visage, and the reader who can see into its delicately conflicted soul. For those who perceive the latter, the novel's bleak horror will leave a bruise on the mind, a fetter on the heart.