

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 30 (2014)  
  
**Artikel:** When sympathy fails : the affective turn in contemporary fiction  
**Autor:** Armstrong, Nancy  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-583878>

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# When Sympathy Fails: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction

Nancy Armstrong

This essay considers how and to what effect contemporary novels – as demonstrated by Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* – are altering the generic form that traditionally elicits a sympathetic response. I focus on protagonists with inhuman features that make it all but impossible for us to imagine ourselves positioned as they are on the frontier where autobiography converges with biology, i.e., the organism’s endeavor to keep on living. Rather than attribute this change to another, ostensibly “real” event – say, the Holocaust or 9/11 – I turn to nineteenth-century fiction and social theory and identify a new form of affect that emerged alongside the biological redefinition of human life.

Given that for almost 300 years human protagonists capable of mirroring the reader’s norms and values have earned the sympathy of a mass readership, why would a novelist ever abandon this component of the novel form? Yet, a number of contemporary novelists have done exactly that. Rather than representative men or women, these novelists offer protagonists that might be described as human “extremophiles,” a term for biological life forms that survive under conditions thought to be incapable of sustaining life.<sup>1</sup> I use this term in order to call attention to

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<sup>1</sup> Cooper uses this term to explain how the biosciences, in rethinking the limits against which biological life was previously defined, have also redefined its law of evolution as “autopoietic rather than adaptive.” I see the anomalous protagonist rising to challenge, as Cooper does, the optimism attending biotechnical capitalism’s appropriation of the evolutionary process.

protagonists – like J. M. Coetzee’s Michael K., Kazuo Ishiguro’s Kathy H., W. G. Sebald’s Austerlitz, Indra Sinha’s *Animal*, or Lauren Beukes’s *Zinzi December* – who embody human norms and values that apply to no one but that one character. In view of the international popularity of these novelists, the radical singularity of their protagonists indicates nothing short of a disconcerting sea change. This transformation of the novel form coincides with the development of a major trend within several disciplines to rethink the source and operations of human emotion, or “affect.” I plan to contribute to this interdisciplinary conversation by showing how a novel that replaces the norm-bearing protagonist with an anomalous human being transforms the sympathetic identification that novels have traditionally demanded of their readers.

I take as a given that the novel form that rose to dominance among literary genres was the one whose protagonists persuaded readers to imagine their own possibilities for achieving gratification within a set of social norms (see Armstrong). Over the span of three centuries, novels in ever-increasing numbers and in very different ways put representative flesh on these norms, charged them with emotion, subjected them to judgment, and periodically revised them. Such novels may offer objects of desire and standards of behavior that later seem ridiculously out of tune with the reader’s own time in history. To continue to be read, they have nevertheless continued to convince readers that a line could and should be drawn indicating exactly where culture confronted nature and made instinct bow to the interests of community. No matter how and where a given novel sets such a line, three centuries of protagonists who assume human shape in relation to that line have made the idea of a world without some principle of normativity virtually unthinkable.

To mount a sustained challenge to the principle of normativity itself, a novelist must break the circuit of desire and self-confirmation in which we expect to participate when we pick up a novel. Kafka does this so memorably that he comes first to mind as a novelist known for writing not novels so much as fables, parables, or what Deleuze and Guattari have called a minor literature. Critics consider J. M. Coetzee the contemporary novelist who most resembles Kafka in this respect. But when we find an increasing number of Anglophone novelists doing much the same thing, it is not so easy to dismiss them *all* as courting marginality; they are reformulating the center. By altering the novel form in so basic a way, these novelists require their readers to question what novel readers have always taken for granted. Without some basis for identification, what does compel us to engage these protagonists? How do they recalibrate the circuit of feeling in which novels have routinely

hailed us as novel readers? In that the feeling they elicit necessarily precedes our response, how is this protagonist revising the reader's response to human behavior? To address these questions, I shall begin with a theory of sympathy once considered sufficient to explain how novels make us feel.

### *How Novels Feel*

I read Adam Smith's 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as a rather transparent effort to defend Locke's liberal individual against the invasive surges of feeling that could transform otherwise powerless people into a dangerous mob. As Foucault describes the problem in the first chapter of *Discipline and Punish*, the increasing frequency with which spectacles of punishment incited riots made it only too apparent that the masses were more likely to identify with the victim on the scaffold than with the government that choreographed these elaborate displays of its power. The emotion generated by such an event was considered capable of infiltrating the mind through the body, swaying rational individuals to abandon their own self-interest and become one with the crowd. Smith proposed "sympathy" as a solution to the problem of how to promote feelings that strengthened common bonds without eroding individual judgment.

This is how Smith did it: Even if we see our brother suffering on the rack, he observed, we cannot feel what he feels, for the very reason that each of us inhabits an autonomous bubble of consciousness. However inclined to imagine ourselves in the other person's position, we can't be in two places at once and will consequently feel only a faint approximation of that individual's suffering. Smith asks us to think of our capacity to feel for other human beings as something like emotional capital that accumulates as we vicariously experience pleasure or pain. This accumulation both enriches and refines our character. As we inquire into the cause of another's suffering or joy, we naturally develop a standard of value and learn to invest our feeling in that person in proportion to the cause of his or her emotion. This standard provides the basis of self-mastery. In evaluating the emotional responses of others, we cannot help but become aware of how an individual with mastery of his emotions would evaluate our own behavior. Once we can imagine being the object of his gaze, we have taken this "impartial spectator" into our breasts and as good as adopted its normative viewpoint as our own (Smith 156). Let me offer an example from Jane Austen's *Northanger*



*Abbey* that shows how central this process is to the heroine's maturation and thus to the novel itself.

Amused at his houseguest's fondness for gothic fiction, Henry Tilney encourages Catherine Moreland to anticipate the same sensational phenomena at Northanger Abbey as those that terrify the heroine of Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. When a few key objects in her bedroom do uncannily match Henry's description, Catherine responds with "breathless wonder" (Austen 123). The physical symptoms of her excitement multiply as she reaches into the "further part of the cavity" of an old Japanese cabinet and grasps a manuscript sure to contain a lurid account of captivity and abuse. Her "feelings were indescribable," the narrator tells us, describing them quite well in terms that suggest erotic arousal: "Her heart fluttered, her knees trembled, and her cheeks grew pale" (124). At this point, she is so thoroughly captivated by the objects Henry has embellished that her emotional response outstrips her cognitive control. By light of day, however, Catherine discovers that the cause of all this fuss is nothing more than several laundry lists left behind by a careless servant, and she hastens "to get rid of those hateful evidences of her folly, those detestable papers then scattered over her bed" (126). As she turns on herself in shame for having taken Henry's bait, Catherine adopts what she imagines to be his view of her behavior. He in turn assumes the role of normative spectator, now a function of her self-reflection.

This is the socializing effect of shame. To serve as the butt of a joke, an individual must be reducible to a body, its parts, or its drives. The resulting type or caricature produced must nevertheless be recognizably human to fall so short of meeting the criteria for full humanity. In order to create the conditions in which Catherine would be likely to mistake fiction for fact, Henry must first have imagined himself in Catherine's place and let himself be guided by her infatuation with gothic fiction. To make this leap of imagination, he had to be at once sensitive to Catherine's excesses and sufficiently detached to view them critically. In contrast to the conventional jokester and resembling nothing so much as Smith's "impartial spectator," Henry's exercise of his superiority does not degrade but improves the object of sympathy. His joke enables Catherine to see herself as he would see her were she not behaving so inappropriately in the privacy of her bedroom. This leap of imagination trumps her sympathetic bond with Radcliffe's heroine as it affords her a critical perspective on her behavior worthy of Henry and his sister's company. Austen uses a similar process to redirect the sympathy of her readers onto a proper object. Guided by her free indirect style, we with-

draw our emotional investment from gothic heroines in order to experience the more refined pleasure that comes with ironic distance from Catherine's scene of shame.

Let us now fast-forward from Austen's late eighteenth-century country house to the twenty-first century boarding school for future organ donors in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, and compare the impact of Henry's joke on Austen's protagonist with that of Madame the headmistress on Ishiguro's narrator, Kathy H.:

As she came to a halt, I glanced quickly at her face. . . . And I can still see it now, the shudder that she seemed to be suppressing. . . . And though we just kept on walking, we all felt it; it was like we'd walked from the sun right into chilly shade. . . . Madame was afraid of us. But she was afraid of us in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders. (35)

This encounter interrupts the sympathy born of first-person narration. By giving the power of narration to someone whom normative society considers less than fully human, Ishiguro persuades us temporarily to accept the alien view as normative. Madame's involuntary shudder troubles that identification by recalling us to the commonsense awareness that as novel readers we actually belong to Madame's world. Ishiguro has calibrated Kathy's perspective so that we cannot fully share the dehumanizing impact of Madame's shudder. But who among us could acquiesce to the conditions of Kathy's existence? Her casual use of an estranging idiolect – "carer," "donor," "completion," "normals," "deferential," and so forth – indicates that she not only accepts her subhuman status as given, but also prides herself on an ability to function under conditions we would find intolerable.

Austen's free indirect style enfolds us in a single community as we ascend with Catherine from the position of the butt of the joke to the ironic perspective of the gentleman jokester. By contrast, Ishiguro positions his reader between Madame's involuntary shudder and Kathy's acquiescence to her biological destiny, both of which we partially share, neither of which earns our unqualified sympathy. Smith himself called attention to the exclusionary function of sympathy when he acknowledged that class differences limit the reach of sympathy: "The fortunate and the proud wonder at the insolence of human wretchedness, that it should dare to present itself before them, and with the *loathsome aspect* of its misery presume to disturb the serenity of their happiness" (Smith 64, my italics). In confronting a spectacle of human "wretchedness" that exceeds his capacity for identification, the "fortunate and proud" individual responds with disgust. Where Smith clearly disapproves of class

contempt, he elsewhere suggests, when dealing with the failure of sympathy in the abstract, that it is only natural for one to see phenomena “which have their origin in the body” as “*loathsome* and disagreeable” (Smith 35, my italics). Like the “fortunate and proud” observer, then, Smith, too, shifts the source of involuntary “disgust” onto “the loathsome aspect” of the object that elicits it. Ishiguro challenges this tenacious commonplace, when he portrays the normative observer as committed in theory to educating clones and yet unable to suppress a shudder at the thought that one of her protégées might brush against her.

It makes a kind of sense that Smith’s man of taste and judgment should respond with disgust when confronted with the “wretched” condition of the very poor, but what makes Madame shudder is not nearly so apparent. Her own efforts to reform the institutions for raising clones have ensured that Kathy H. is a superbly healthy though undereducated child who shows none of “the loathsome aspect” of her subhuman condition. Unable if not unwilling to imagine herself in Kathy’s position, Madame relocates the cause of her involuntary disgust in the child. Given that both Madame and Kathy H. are subject to the baleful affect that pervades the novel, however, its source is neither in the eye of the beholder nor in the object beheld but in the novel that has engineered the failure of sympathy. Reversing the logic of Smith’s emotional economy, the exchange between Madame and Kathy H. diminishes the humanity of each. As Madame shudders, Kathy H. feels a chill, which she recalls years later as beginning “a process that kept growing and growing over the years until it came to dominate our lives” (37). That “process” also strains our relationship as readers to both Kathy and Madame. The two unwittingly conspire to reproduce the assumption that only rights-bearing individuals are fully human. This assumption designates certain people as disposable and then doubles their mortification by rendering them eager to remain invisible. By eliciting something akin to disappointment, if not disgust for their inadvertent collaboration, the novel eliminates the ironic position that passes for impartiality in Austen. For lack of this self-confirming resting place, the affect rising from the collapse of sympathy has nowhere to go, no target but the novel itself. This is the mark of the contemporary novel: its use of the anomalous protagonist to turn the novel form against itself.

To understand this act of aesthetic sabotage, we must fill in the historical gap between Austen and Ishiguro. I propose to do so by identifying a change in the cultural function of the feeling that arises from the failure of sympathy. Virtually indistinguishable from disgust and contempt, Smith considered this feeling either a visceral reaction to spoiled

or desecrated flesh or an expression of class arrogance. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, we can observe his opposition between natural disgust and social contempt folding in on itself to emerge as loathing, both an instinct common to man and animal in Darwin's later work and a cultural response to people, food, and practices that obscured differences essential to group identity in Victorian anthropology. The emergence of such loathing as an affect that originated paradoxically in both nature and culture tells us that, between Darwin's time and ours something has altered the composition of the affective glue that held such a community together. The basis for fellow feeling consequently shifted from positive identification, or what that feeling embraces, to negative identification, or what a group must reject as capable of destroying its identity. As the means of updating as well as naturalizing normativity, the novel obviously played an important role in this transformation. Using Austen and Ishiguro as the beginning and end points of this larger historical process, I now want to look at key points in between, where certain novels began to think their way outside the box that Smith describes as sympathy.

### *The Touch of the Fuegian*

Let us assume with Michel Foucault that during the nineteenth century, as new institutions of education and remediation made individuals perpetually anxious about controlling themselves, normativity itself became the primary means of government. The disciplinary mechanisms that produced this self-supervisory self needed something to supervise and found it in the terrifying drives and compulsions presumed to originate in the biological body. Thus, as Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality*, volume I, the nuclear family and its protectorate, liberal society, gradually reorganized themselves around the abnormal potential harbored within each child in order to apply all the parental and social pressures necessary for normal development. Foucault wants to see abnormal individuals as the genealogical displacement of earlier monsters that violated natural categories – hermaphrodites, Siamese twins, and the like (*Abnormal* 38-39). Looking at the nineteenth century through the bifocal lens of psychiatry and the law, he describes the Victorians' preoccupation with monstrosity as their way of distinguishing normal people from those who were biologically but not psychologically human and thus ineligible for individual rights. In this sense, then, the abnormal individual was not really an individual at all because he or she was as manifestly



incapable as a child of observing the norms codified and implemented by the great social institutions of the century. By calling attention to the fact that any number of human beings could not be held responsible for their actions, the Victorian obsession with human abnormality arguably created a problem. But the curious deviations that leapt off the pages of sensational journalism and psychiatric case studies also solved a problem; they made abnormality seem more fascinating and normalcy more necessary than ever before. This did not hold true for human life that fell outside the normal / abnormal binary. Such forms of human life asserted biological continuity exactly where the Victorians felt it was essential to establish difference. Where the identification of abnormal individuals had a stabilizing effect on normative society, manifestations of this other form of difference (as Foucault explains in the lectures published in English as *"Society Must Be Defended"*), called into question the very basis of liberal society.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* appeared the same year as Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and gives us a protagonist obsessed, at the expense of all ties to home and family, by an ambition to create human life scientifically. Frankenstein's attempt to manufacture a biological man traumatizes every individual who encounters the result. It is not the creature itself so much as Frankenstein's loathing that reshapes both his life and the novel form that tells his story. When he saw his theory come to life, Frankenstein felt that he could not "endure the aspect of the being I had created" and had to rush "out of the room" (Shelley 39). Though biologically human, versed in the classics of Western literature, and a student of the manners of well-socialized human beings, this creature instantly repulses everyone who happens to set eyes on him, just as he does his creator. Shelley's narrative stages a sequence of such encounters that eliminates the possibility of a rapprochement between the new scientific definition of man and a traditional concept of humanity.

In formulating a biological definition of human life, Charles Darwin arguably followed in Frankenstein's footsteps, as did the most prominent psychologists and physicians of Darwin's time. George Henry Lewes was among those who argued that the rational mind itself was part of a complex network of nerves that could receive sensations from stimuli and respond without any intervention on the part of conscious decision-making (67-69). Throughout his major theoretical works, Darwin maintained that if even the simplest organisms could respond to sensations, then sympathy must be part of our biological makeup and as such did not require Adam Smith's leap of consciousness in order for us to feel what other people feel; that capacity was part of our biological

heritage.<sup>2</sup> To make his point, Darwin called attention to Smith's failure to account for "the fact that sympathy is excited in an immeasurably stronger degree by a beloved than by an indifferent person." Better to assume that our sympathy for other human beings comes from "an instinct, which is especially directed towards beloved objects, in the same manner as fear with animals is especially directed against certain enemies" (*Descent* 823). When he made sympathy a natural impulse, Darwin limited fellow feeling to the kin group and confined the kin group to those to whom one instinctively feels attached. The importance of this change in the basis for human sociability cannot be overestimated. Where Smith had attributed sympathy almost exclusively to individual consciousness and human culture, Darwin put our positive social instincts on a continuum with the antisocial instinct of "fear," which in "*animals* is especially directed against certain enemies" (*Descent* 823, my italics). Thus where Smith had proposed sympathy as perhaps the most important curb and corrective to natural impulses, Darwin insisted that natural affection for kin might actually collaborate with a group's anti-social impulses toward rivals in the struggle for survival. The people of Tierra del Fuego caused him to violate the conviction that human and animal emotions sprang from a single source in nature.

As the narrator of the epic *Voyage of the Beagle* (1839), Darwin regarded his chiefly non-human subject matter with the same kind of fascination he later brought to the intricate labor of the honeybee, as well as with an awe he subsequently expressed when contemplating the grandeur of the system that had created so many subtle and spectacular differences (*Origin* 760). Thus it comes as something of a shock when Darwin suddenly abandons his sense of wonder at the creatures of South America and takes to denigrating the human inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego. His account of his first encounter with these people suggests that he participated reluctantly in what was obviously a greeting ritual:

Their very attitudes were abject, and the expression of their countenances distrustful, surprised, and startled. After we had presented them with some scarlet cloth, which they immediately tied round their necks, they became good friends. This was shown by the old man patting our breasts and making a chuckling kind of noise, as people do when feeding chickens. I walked

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<sup>2</sup> The recent insights of psychologist Antonio Damasio support Darwin's claim that human emotions have their roots in the sensitivity that is basic to biological life: "Unicellular organisms are 'sensitive' to threatening intrusions. Poke an amoeba, and it will shrink away from the poke" (Damasio 257).



with the old man, and this demonstration of friendship was repeated several times; it was concluded by three hard slaps, which were given me on the breast and back at the same time. He then bared his bosom for me to return the compliment, which being done, he seemed highly pleased.

(*Voyage* 190)

Here, we see Darwin attributing emotion to his host while withholding his own. Were it not for the affect that enters his account by way of the Fuegian's touch, we might mistakenly consider Darwin an impartial spectator to the encounter. But physical contact with the Fuegian would seem to trigger the negative feelings that radiate outward and blight his ensuing description of the surrounding landscape: "The entangled mass of the thriving and the fallen [trees] reminded me of the forests within the tropics – yet there was a difference: for in these still solitudes, Death, instead of Life, seemed the predominant spirit" (*Voyage* 194). This affect intensifies, as the "atmosphere" of Tierra del Fuego seemed to Darwin as hyperbolically "blacker than anywhere on earth" and the "channels [of the Strait of Magellan] appeared from their gloominess to lead beyond the confines of this world" (*Voyage* 195).<sup>3</sup>

Consistent with the logic of his theory, Darwin maintains that what differentiated the Fuegian from European man also enabled the former to survive in this unwholesome environment (*Voyage* 199). But inconsistent with that logic is the sudden introjection expressing his incredulity "that they are fellow-creatures, and inhabitants of the same world" with himself (*Voyage* 196). Contempt mounts as he recalls that their "hideous faces [are] bedaubed with white paint, their skins filthy and greasy, their hair entangled, their voices discordant, and their gestures violent" (*Voyage* 197). But their disheveled appearance is the least of it. What really turns Darwin's emotional stomach is the Fuegian practice, "when pressed in winter by hunger, [to] kill and devour their old women." Adding insult to injury, the source of this information was a Fuegian boy who "imitated [the old women's] screams as a joke, and described the parts of their bodies which are considered best to eat" (*Voyage* 197). Though otherwise unable to "put [himself] in the position of these savages, and understand their actions" (201), Darwin seizes on this anecdote

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<sup>3</sup> This sudden turn of a world full of life into a world of death anticipates Melanie Klein's notion of the self as one formed and held together defensively. These defenses are of two basic kinds: "The defences against [persecutory] fears are predominantly the destruction of the persecutors by violent and secret and cunning methods." The second defence takes the form of "sorrow and concern for the loved objects" to which she gives "a simple word derived from everyday language – namely, . . . 'pining' for the lost object" (151). A melancholic mix of anger and sorrow is indeed in evidence here.

dote as an occasion to identify with the object of the Fuegian's tasteless joke: "Horrid as such a death by the hands of their friends and relatives must be, the fears of the old women, when hunger begins to press, are more painful to think of" (*Voyage* 197). This momentary flash of sympathy with the victim intensifies disgust for the Fuegian jokester until, as he puts it, "I got to hate the very sound of their voices" (*Voyage* 207). This intense and pervasive aversion was certainly not Darwin's problem alone.

By the last three decades of the nineteenth century, novels were regularly tapping the power peculiar to this aversion and offering bizarre quasi-supernatural explanations for its cause. In this context it makes sense to see Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as an attempt to account for an anti-social reaction so immediate and yet intense that it defies psychological explanation. Hyde is another botched scientific experiment aimed at purifying man's moral and intellectual thoughts and feelings of the human impulses that drag them down. All who lay eyes on Hyde take "a loathing to the gentleman at first sight" and some "turn sick and white with the desire to kill him" (Stevenson 7). Yet witnesses are at a loss to explain exactly why Hyde elicits this "loathing": "There is something wrong with his appearance," one explains, "something downright detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point" (Stevenson 9). Compare this to the scene in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where Basil Hallward, once society's favorite portrait painter, witnesses the changes that have mysteriously disfigured his painting of the irresistibly handsome young man: "An exclamation of horror broke from the painter's lips as he saw in the dim light the hideous face on the canvas grinning at him. Here was something in its expression that filled him with disgust and loathing" (131). Monsters who disfigure human nature beyond recognition do not last long; for they are doubly dismissed in these late Victorian romances. They not only vanish. The supernaturalism that marks their entry and departure from the novel also allows the reader to dismiss these monsters as unreal. What cannot be so easily dismissed, however, is the affect that they unleash. Aggravated by "real-life" accounts of Jack the Ripper, Sacher-Masoch, and the like, the loathing embodied in these monsters does not redefine human nature so much as extend its definition beyond the limits of the knowable.

Against this background, it seems oddly significant that in the concluding paragraphs of *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin resurrects the Fuegian male in a form resembling these literary monsters. He fashions various details from the *Voyage of the Beagle* into a figure of “savage” man so void of positive social instincts and so given over to anti-social behavior that it could not be mistaken for that of a merely underdeveloped or abnormal human being. The Fuegian difference was of another magnitude. Although Darwin had no trouble pushing conventional morality aside in order to map the social instincts inherited from animal forebears onto a continuum from affection to hostility, he regarded the Fuegian’s anti-social behavior as completely off the scale. In doing so, Darwin situated himself in the same relationship to his Fuegian as Frankenstein to his fabricated human being. The involuntary loathing produced by his imaginary relationship to the Fuegian informs Darwin’s final appeal to those still resistant to the idea that we evolved from animals:

He who has seen a savage in his native land will not feel much shame, if forced to acknowledge that the blood of some more humble creature flows in his veins. For my own part I would as soon be descended from that . . . old baboon, who, descending from the mountains, carried away in triumph his younger comrade from a crowd of astonished dogs – as from a savage who delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, practices infanticide without remorse, treats his wives like slaves, knows no decency, and is haunted by the grossest superstitions. (*Descent* 1248)

Ordinarily moved by a sense of wonder and fascination with the abundant evidence of nature’s creative power, Darwin intrepidly eroded the line separating man and animal. But as he was about to offer a final drumroll celebrating the continuity among biological species he had always argued for, the figure of the Fuegian overtook his imagination and once again turned Darwin’s nature into the dark and violent habitat of “savage man.”

In *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animal*, published only one year after *The Descent of Man*, Darwin tried to contain the contaminating power of this affect by reducing it to a more manageable but nonetheless visceral response. As he explains, “The term ‘disgust,’ in its simplest sense, means something offensive to the taste. It is curious how readily this feeling is excited by anything unusual in the appearance, odour, or nature of our food” (*Expression* 1411-12). When Darwin applied this concept to the Fuegian, however, he reanimated the negative affect that once connected his food to the savage and the savage back to his Euro-

pean food and by way of that tainted piece of meat to Darwin himself: “In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty” (*Expression* 1412). Where the Fuegian’s disgust arises from food that appears to be rotten (“soft”), Darwin attributes his disgust neither to the food nor to the hand that touches it but to the figure of the “naked savage.” In recalling the incident, his disgust again expands well beyond his definition of “something offensive to the taste” and becomes an altogether different affect. No doubt the feeling was originally linked to food by way of the rumor that the Fuegians ate old women when other food was scarce. But the term “disgust” cannot do justice to the enduring intensity of Darwin’s initial encounter with a tribe that in living beyond the limit of the habitable world, lived under conditions where their humanity, as he understood it, had no chance of survival. Thus although he usually took delight in the idea of such extreme forms of life, he reacted very badly to this idea when it assumed human form. What began as a Fuegian greeting ritual took on aggressive energy that intensified until it spilled out in prose that objectified that loathing.

### *The Importance of Refusing Reparative Work*

It is against this background that I’d like to try and make sense of the contemporary novel’s focus on extreme forms of human life. I see the recent appearance of anomalous protagonists as an attempt to recuperate such life from the loathing that it came to embody and discharge during the colonial period. This attempt differs pointedly from the reparative work of identity politics, which shows members of excluded populations to have qualities of human subjectivity that should entitle them to a place within the ambit of public sympathy. Where identity politics argues that excluded populations can be normal too, the fiction I consider truly contemporary understands that loathsome forms of human life generate loathing because they defy exactly this translation. One cannot imagine a normal version of them. If each such form creates a category for itself, then integrating it into the sphere of normativity would call normativity itself into question in some fundamental way. Where most twentieth-century novels take up the project of endowing excluded groups with liberal selfhood, another tradition – in anticipation of the present moment – accepts the impossibility of that move. These



novelists argue that loathsome forms of human life offer alternatives to liberal selfhood that other novelists have phobicized lest such monsters displace the normative protagonist, as they do in Stevenson and Wilde.

I like to think that Kafka was out to mark this difference when he dragged the human/animal distinction inside the category of the human and installed it just where we would expect to find a narrative distinguishing between normal and abnormal human beings. In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka's protagonist goes to bed a harried salesman and family breadwinner and famously wakes up a harried cockroach and the source of family shame. At first, everyone assumes that Gregor Samsa is not himself — that his condition is, in other words, abnormal. But, no, Gregor is irreversibly on his way to being an insect associated with filth and the defilement of food. It takes but one sentence for this protagonist's biological body to slide down the scale of being from human to insect, so that the story of his short life can dwell at the stages in between, as a human consciousness settles into an insect body and strives to maintain a place within its kin group. At first, the Samsas use his room in their apartment as a closet for the shame they feel compelled to hide. After a while, they give up their fantasy that the creature in Gregor's room is an abnormal Gregor who can be either rehabilitated or confined. They begin to use his room for trash, by definition a space that belongs outside the house. At this point, we find it impossible to say whether it is the fact of being a disposable life form or his exclusion from the family that actually kills him. That Gregor looks, smells, sounds, and behaves like a giant cockroach, compounded by his tendency to wander from his room, convinces even his sister that there is no longer anything human about him. "I won't pronounce the name of my brother in front of this monster," she avers, "and so all I say is: we have to try to get rid of it. We've done everything humanly possible to take care of it and to put up with it; I don't think anyone can blame us in the least" (Kafka 37). This is welcome news to a family who know they can maintain their tenuous place in society by disposing of what had once been their kin.

But Kafka sees to it that his reader cannot do likewise, forcing us to acknowledge Gregor's humanity well beyond the point where a sensible human being could no longer call the cockroach human:

The rotten apple in his back and the inflamed area around it, which were completely covered with fluffy dust, already hardly bothered him. He thought back on his family with deep emotion and love. . . . He still saw that everything outside the window was beginning to grow light. Then,

without his consent, his head sank down to the floor, and from his nostrils streamed his last weak breath. (51)

A poignant death scene, to be sure, but one nonetheless designed to put a sympathetic response well beyond our reach. After all, this protagonist is an insect, and a banged up one at that, barely distinguishable from the garbage on which he feeds. As in the case of the Fuegian, the source of the reader's disgust shifts with the family's from food that one must not eat to the one who enjoys that food. Yet the poignancy of Gregor's enduring love of family renders the object of loathing too human for us to loathe.

For several decades now, a range of intellectuals have been strangely drawn to the space between human and animal and the secret of how those human beings consigned to such a space experience life that has been reduced to slow death. Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* provides an elaborate theory of the historical emergence into centrality of "bare life," which he defines as human "life that may be killed but not sacrificed" (83), the consummate testimony to which is the Nazi concentration camp – just as it is in Foucault's early lectures on biopower. What gets lost in both accounts is not only how the Jewish people became the source of the loathing that in previous decades had been unleashed by fictional monsters, but also how such radical reclassification affects the life subjected to it. Approaching the problem with characteristic vitalism, Deleuze and Guattari resist the definition of surplus life as inherently disposable and in this sense already dead. Rather than assume that death is the fixed limit of biological life, they understand life itself as a force that circumvents that limit, not by resisting the return of any individual to matter, but by producing new permutations of an exhausted form. We might indeed attribute the attraction that neuroscience holds for some humanists and the inroads it is consequently making in humanistic inquiry to the fact that brain theory has opened a conceptual space between the moment when sensation registers on the nervous system and the moment when it becomes available to consciousness. But cognitive scientists who have garnered fame and funding for discovering ways of filling in this gap can have no more success than philosophers in providing conscious access to an experience that is by definition inaccessible to consciousness. While they have cleared this conceptual space, philosophy and neuroscience have left it to the novel to imagine what it feels like to be in one of Deleuze and Guattari's in-between states.



With this in mind, we can begin to understand the emergence of a protagonist like Kathy H. as Ishiguro's attempt to expose the twin mechanisms of sympathy and its failure – i.e., loathing – as false alternatives. “I can still see it now,” says Ishiguro's Kathy H., “the shudder [Madame] seemed to be suppressing, the real dread that one of us would accidentally brush against her” (35). That shudder told Kathy that people who live in the normal world cannot help but regard her as they would a spider, not exactly a cockroach, but a variety of vermin nonetheless. Thus she knows, better than Madame does, “the real dread” that expresses itself in that shudder. Why, then, can't that knowledge set Kathy free to act on her own behalf, Ishiguro's reader wants to know (see, for example, Black). Hailsham is no different from the disciplinary institutions that produced both Madame and the novel's readership by providing its inmates with scant material with which to imagine an alternative world. And Madame is no different than Kathy in her failure to imagine an adequate alternative to organ donation, as the means of repairing the deteriorating bodies of her loved ones. Thus it is not surprising that as we acclimate to Kathy's macabre euphemisms, we also accept the limits of Hailsham academy. It would take a ruthlessly unsophisticated reader to go along with Kathy's faith in the myth that the art she produced as a child demonstrated her innate humanity and can earn her a deferral of the death that awaits her at the age of thirty-something.

It is not nearly so important that Kathy's fantasy is shattered as that of the reader's is. For although we can no longer hope that the myth of artistic originality will materialize for Kathy, who among us does not in some recess of his/her consciousness believe that to fulfill oneself is to become a special, indeed irreplaceable individual? Kathy's first direct encounter with Madame establishes the difference between Kathy's world and our own in this respect. But Kathy's second encounter with Madame exposes that difference as a fiction that depends for substance on the dehumanization that renders Kathy and her kind disposable. Despite the limitations of Kathy's education in the ways of this world, we see enough to know that the people protected by the institutions of liberal society proper are hardly better off – sick, fearful, tormented, angry, and unable to accept the finitude of individual existence. Like Kathy and Tommy, those characters representing the world of “normal” people in *Never Let Me Go* cannot imagine changing the way they live. They can only imagine putting off death, even if it requires – in an absolute reversal of the logic of sympathy – that other people experience mortality in their stead. Having arrived at this point, we are no longer dealing with a fictional encounter between an acquiescent human clone and a preda-

tory class of organ recipients, for both can be seen as victims of the fantasy of individual full being. It is at this point that my argument converges with Bruce Robbins's claim that Ishiguro sees cruelty to one's closest friends and family as something that cannot be simply treated or cured, but rather as an extension of institutionalized caring that promotes the life of some at the cost of others. Rather than see Hailsham as under the discursive control of real-world class divisions and Kathy as its unwitting scribe, I want to propose another reason why Ishiguro has Kathy represent that institution in such positive terms. There's much more to it, I believe, than her ignorance or insensitivity.

Like Kafka, Ishiguro refuses to explain away the sudden intrusion within the world of the novel of what had been either outside or invisible within it. In doing so, both novelists challenge what Walter Benjamin considered the protagonist and first principle of the novel form itself: "The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself [as earlier storytellers were] by giving examples of his most important concerns, himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others" (87). Gregor not only affects but is also affected by everyone who enters the family apartment. By thus rerouting the story's affect, he converts the family from an enclave to a hub opened up to new relationships. So, too, in her capacity as mature "carer" and narrator, Kathy H. gathers the members of her cohort into herself and disperses them according to a comprehensive network of remembering that opposes the operations of the market in human body parts. Rather than developing from childhood to completion as an adult, her tale expands with the bonds of friendship and retracts where that affect is repulsed. The narrator's self expression is consequently that of the group as a whole and, as such, creates an alternative to the community of individuals that Darwin felt compelled to protect from the Fuegian's touch.

Kathy H. begins her story after being a "carer" for eleven years as she is about to enter one of the donation centers into which her closest schoolmates, Ruth and Tommy, have already vanished. This, as Ruth put it, is "what we're *supposed* to be doing" (227), and Kathy feels the time is "about right" to fulfill her destiny (4). In accepting the teleology that produces and regulates her biological life, however, Kathy also displaces that linear plot from birth to death with another narrative form that comes closer to that of Benjamin's ideal storyteller. Finding human life especially impoverished by the culture of the novel, which makes "it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying" (Benjamin 93), Benjamin rejects the idea that death is opposed to life. It is only near death, he contends, that an individual's "real life . . . first assumes transmissible

form” and “the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him” (94). Benjamin equates this form of “completion” (the Hailsham term for death) with the aesthetics of storytelling. “Death,” he says, “is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell” (94).

By the time she writes that story, Kathy has assumed a relation to her biological life that resembles that which Jacques Derrida assumes on accepting his diagnosis of terminal cancer. He paradoxically assumes the position of a survivor.<sup>4</sup> “Survival is not simply that which remains,” he claims. Quite the contrary, it is “the most intense life possible” (quoted in Fassin 82). In thus feeling that he has passed the limit of his biological life span, he also came to realize that to experience life as a survivor requires more than understanding that one’s biological life is terminal. The acceptance of imminent death intensifies the experience of life for the person who can seize the moment, when, as Benjamin claims, “the unforgettable emerges” and life for the first time “assumes transmissible form” (94). Seen in this light, Kathy H. would have qualified herself to tell the story of the Hailsham children at the moment when she grasped fully the meaning of Madame’s definitive shudder. In assembling the intricate network of relations in which she played but a small part, she lends that community wholeness as well as herself, in and as her story. By so doing, Kathy assumes the role of Benjamin’s traditional storyteller who “imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him” (Benjamin 94). In contrast to the event that authorizes that storyteller, however, Kathy’s imminent dismemberment is at once real and not the least bit commonplace under cultural conditions that both require and suppress her death. The event that authorizes Kathy to “impart to everything that concerned [her] that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him” is one for which

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<sup>4</sup> Fassin’s groundbreaking “Ethics of Survival” first persuaded me to think of survival as an alternative relation to embodied experience. Fassin reads Derrida’s reflections on his own death as shattering the distinction between “biological life” and “lived experience”: “survival mixes inextricably physical life, threatened by his cancer, and existential experience expressed in his work. To survive is to be still fully alive and to live beyond death . . . in the traces left for the living” (83). I see this hope of absorption in “the living” as both ironically appropriate for Ishiguro’s novel and directly opposed to the myth of *individual* immortality in and through the work of art.

there is no historical precedent and our present vocabulary seems grossly inadequate.<sup>5</sup>

Abandoning the fantasy of full being is not without advantages, if only because it transforms the mix of fear, disgust, and anger expressed by Madame's shudder into the pervasive sadness of Ishiguro's novel. If Madame's struggle to hang onto that fantasy perpetuates the violence of organ donation, then Kathy's abandonment of the fantasy of full being understandably produces sadness akin to mourning in those who hold it dear. In Kathy's story, the alternative to the dismal process of serial death resides in the halcyon days of Hailsham School, which structures not only the lost world of childhood but also the network that transforms her memory into a protracted diversion from and redefinition of the fate of disposability. In order to prepare them for that fate, I mean to suggest, Hailsham inadvertently provided its students with a holding environment that served them much as the playpen does a child.<sup>6</sup> Here, students were allowed to run in packs enforcing a kind of equality in that everyone was part of a community that maintained itself by continuously replacing its parts. Confined within the fences surrounding Hailsham, their play necessarily consisted mainly of variations on a limited number of games, forms of gossip, sexual encounters, and arts and crafts, all of which circulated individuals in clusters with shifting hierarchies. Rather than assume a leadership role or develop a practical specialization, the group learned to apply the same caretaking skills in a variety of different situations. Where Madame understood student art as the means of materializing the humanity, or inner life of individual clones, the students valued it for earning each of them tokens with which to purchase the artwork of other students in a local market. Like their play, their practice of evaluating and collecting these recycled bits of self-expression maintain their identity as a single body, one that mirrored and collectivized the repaired body of the unidentified "normal" individual who will receive their organs. This form of play presumably

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<sup>5</sup> Massumi defines "the affective event" as one in which the collective anticipation of disruption becomes the disruptive event. Such an event creates a "future-past" that replaces the anticipated event with the very affect it would have caused.

<sup>6</sup> In providing what Winnicott describes as "the holding environment," Hailsham provides the students with something approximating this maternal environment, which reduces "the impingements to which the infant must react with resultant annihilation of personal being" ("Parent-Infant Relationship" 47). In "Primitive Emotional Development," Winnicott uses the peace associated with the play of selves to challenge the assumption that "in health the individual is always integrated, as well as living in his own body, and able to feel that the world is real" in order to suggest that we have an innate capacity to be just the reverse (150).



produced the estranged individual we encounter in Kathy's narration, one without a basis in material property, including even a body, on which to consolidate an identity. But while she lacks substance as an individual and defies our efforts to read her as a psychologically integrated whole, this narrator allows us to move fluidly and fearlessly between subject positions and across ontological divides.

The point of reading is to see our contemporary world, however briefly, through such alternative eyes – not to make us “see,” as Joseph Conrad once put it, but to make us feel what it is that loathing precludes. What is the industry in human organs, after all, if not the by-product of sympathy, a mechanism for repairing the individual, and a means of materializing the fantasy of full being well past its historical lifetime? The calm and yet complicated pleasure of a re-membered Hailsham is the only antidote that Ishiguro provides to the curious mixture of anger and sadness that we feel as Kathy alternately elicits and repels our sympathetic identification. If as Claude Lévi-Strauss claims, “the hero of the novel is the novel itself” (103), then Hailsham is not only the cause and formal logic of Kathy's arrested development, it also serves as the true protagonist of *Never Let Me Go*. In order to assume this role – and it's doubtful that it will so serve for everyone – Hailsham has to perform a positive attenuation of the fantasy of full being. Hailsham's differences from the disciplinary institutions that turn out disciplined subjects like Madame – and ourselves – are neither minor nor entirely aesthetic choices. By virtue of these differences, Hailsham provides Kathy and those under her care – which includes her readers – an alternative to institutions that interpellate and discipline their subjects. For the purposes of my argument, that institution would be the novel that disciplines both protagonist and readership, as Austen does, by eliciting sympathetic responses.

With Kathy H., we survive the linear march of a protagonist toward that fullness of being that Ishiguro, like Benjamin before him, equates with death. In its place, the contemporary novel offers a holding environment where readers can momentarily abandon the anxiety that sustains modern individualism and become the diffuse, discontinuous, and relational subject that manifests itself at certain “Hailsham” moments in Kathy's narration. The contemporary novel transforms this way of being – long understood as the child's way of not yet being in the world – into a better way for those in liminal positions to survive their death as individuals, namely, as several partial selves rather than integrated identities. It cannot be coincidental that Ishiguro, Coetzee, Sebald and the other novelists I consider contemporary in the true sense have each

transformed obscure, radically inhospitable places in the reader's own world into similar holding environments where we experience memorably inventive forms of this new relationship to death.

I would like to thank my efficiently studious research assistant, Ben Richardson, for his bibliographical work and editorial comments.



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