

Very Busy Just Now: Globalization and Harriedness  
in Ishiguro's The Unconsoled

Readers of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel The Remains of the Day (1989) will have no trouble remembering the novel's case against professionalism.<sup>1</sup> "Our professional duty is not to our own foibles and sentiments," the butler-protagonist tells Miss Kenton, "but to the wishes of our employer" (149). Professionalism, the explicit center of the butler's belief-system, seems responsible both for his personal sacrifice of love with Miss Kenton and for his moral failure in backing his employer's pro-Nazi diplomacy. Lord Darlington convenes a conference of European diplomats at Darlington Hall in March 1923 in order to make "a strong moral case for a relaxing of various aspects of the Versailles treaty, emphasizing the great suffering he had himself witnessed in Germany" (92). In the years and pages that follow, we will see Lord Darlington as an open anti-Semite whose efforts to stop the approaching war with Germany align him with the fascists. In case we had missed the point, the 1923 conference is also the moment when the butler's father, lying upstairs gravely ill, has a stroke and dies while Stevens himself, who has been warned that the end is near, refuses to interrupt his professional attentions to the diplomats downstairs. Told that his father has passed away, he remarks that he is "very busy just now."<sup>2</sup>

It does not seem accidental that Ishiguro's case against professionalism, which leads the

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<sup>1</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, The Remains of the Day (NY: Vintage International, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Several of the following paragraphs are taken from my discussion of Remains of the Day in "The Village of the Liberal Managerial Class," Vinay Dharwadkar, ed., Cosmopolitan Geographies: New Locations in Literature and Culture (NY: Routledge, 2001), 15-32. The present essay extends the argument of the earlier one.

butler to serve Lord Darlington's ends so blindly, is simultaneously a case against cosmopolitanism. Each is presented as an unnatural detachment from ordinary emotions: erotic love, love of country. Each also offers substitute emotions, *re*-attachments, and these substitute emotions are reciprocally reinforcing. Lord Darlington's cosmopolitanism, the novel suggests, stems from his aristocratic status; rather than indifference, it expresses a positive solidarity with his German fellow aristocrats that's more compelling to him than the interests he shares with fellow Englishmen of the lower orders. "He was my enemy," Darlington observes of a German diplomat, "but he always behaved like a gentleman. We treated each other decently over six months of shelling each other. He was a gentleman doing his job and I bore him no malice" (73). A gentleman doing his job: skipping forward in time, one is tempted to say that doing your job competently has become the modern equivalent of feudalism's pre-national gentility. For it too overrides the moral obligations of national membership by conferring the moral privilege of *trans*-national membership: the privilege of being treated decently despite shelling or other forms of long-range aggression. One can speculate, in other words, that professionalism has replaced aristocracy in providing a social glue and ethical grounding for cosmopolitanism. This would explain why, for example, Alvin Gouldner sees his "New Class," forerunner of the Ehrenreichs' "professional-managerial class" and Robert Reich's "symbolic analysts," as encouraging "a cosmopolitan identity, transcending national limits and enhancing their autonomy from local elites."<sup>3</sup> With its peculiar ability to produce bonds among detached, institutionally scattered subjects, bonds that are suffused with affect though not always created or sustained by the frequent, face-to-face engagements of the same-site work group, professionalism would seem well suited to new trans-national demands for loyalty and solidarity at a distance, whether

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<sup>3</sup> Alvin W. Gouldner, The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class (NY: Continuum, 1979), 2. More recently Ulf Hannerz has made much the same connection in Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning (NY: Columbia University Press, 1992), 252-55.

corporate or quasi-governmental. The question is whether this is any cause for celebration.

Today's common sense would suggest, with Ishiguro's apparent blessing, that it is anything but.<sup>4</sup> In his book Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa Alex de Waal strikes a representative note of cynicism when he suggests that (quote) "the struggle against famine has become professionalized and institutionalized" (5). It has been taken over, that is, by a "cosmopolitan elite of relief workers, officials of donor agencies, consultant academics and the like" (3-4), and these people are mainly concerned with establishing "moral ownership of famine" (xvi), "widening the scope for humanitarian and human rights organizations to intrude (in certain ways) into the affairs of African nations" (xv). Quoting Ivan Illich, who advocates the abolition of schools and hospitals in the name of peasant self-sufficiency, de Waal proposes that "'to help [is] to interfere'" (5).<sup>5</sup> He suggests that "the intrusion of humanitarian institutions represents, in an insidious but profound way, a disempowerment of the people directly engaged in the crisis, which drains their capacity to find a solution . . . external involvement, however well-intentioned, almost invariably damages the search for local political solutions" (xvi).

People like ourselves tend to be ambivalent about professional activities, including our own, and about *any* activities that cross national borders, especially when they claim to serve

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<sup>4</sup> Two pieces of evidence collected within days of each other in December 1999: the Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga, visiting Rutgers University, responded to a question as follows: "I don't believe in global sisterhood." And the Wall Street Journal, commenting on the WTO protests in Seattle, referred to the protesters as "shock troops [for] special interests trying to protect their privileges at the expense of the rest of the world." It's more than slightly disturbing to find the same line coming from the right and from the left: anyone in the US or the developed countries who presents herself or himself as acting out of global sisterhood or global solidarity—let's call it internationalism—is really acting on behalf of special, national interests.

<sup>5</sup> Alex de Waal, Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa (Oxford and Bloomington: James Currey and Indiana University Press, 1997).

purely humanitarian interests. Given the inequality of access to trans-national mobility and to credentials as well as the many reasons to distrust those humanitarian, altruistic rationales that cosmopolitanism and professionalism share, and given that warm affective ties within the profession are no guarantee of its ethical value from the perspective of those outside it, such ambivalence is probably on the whole a good and necessary thing. Still, people like ourselves should also suspect the general eagerness to view all professional claims to the “common good” as solely and inevitably a devious form of self-interest. Consider what the model of professionalism-as-disempowerment would suggest about such features of the social welfare state as— to take a pertinent example— taxpayer-supported public education. According to this model, public education would have to be seen as a conspiracy of the Powers That Be to create teaching jobs for the professional-managerial elite while also de-educating and mis-educating the masses. It could not be seen, alternatively, as a political compromise arrived at in large part because working class people demanded free public education for their children and actively fought for it. It’s as if providing jobs for middle-class teachers could only be a zero-sum game whereby working class families lost out for each teacher hired.

This zero-sum logic does not seem any more persuasive when it is aimed at humanitarian NGOs working trans-nationally, whatever other critiques may apply. Thus the interesting doubling up of anti-professionalism and anti-cosmopolitanism, whether in famine relief or in Ishiguro, provides an occasion when common sense seems to stand in double need of adjustment. That is the first hypothesis of my remarks today. The second hypothesis is that, thanks to this same doubling or mutual reinforcement, ambivalence about *work* also expresses ambivalence about *globalization*. In other words, the doubling is a perceptual convenience making it possible to work through the meaning of the latter in terms of the former.

For most of us in the metropolis most of the time, it is extraordinarily difficult to register the existence of the global or trans-national domain as a matter of personal significance. If we can see it, we can’t hold it in focus for very long or assimilate it to the other things we spend our days doing and caring about. And if it is not part of our everyday actions and anxieties, then it

will not become part of our fiction. This is the gist of Salman Rushdie's bon mot about the English not understanding their history because so much of it has happened elsewhere. And it is the point Raymond Williams' interviewers make, in the volume Politics and Letters, when they remind Williams that even the English social novel of the 1840s had virtually nothing to say about the Irish famine, a direct consequence of how English society was organized, and a consequence happening only a stone's throw from England's shores. The empire was not part of the "structure of feeling," hence not easy or convenient material for the novel.<sup>6</sup> We cannot assume in advance that the international division of labor will somehow inevitably show up in the cultural expressions of the metropolis, even when much of what goes on in the metropolis is arguably determined by its place in that division of labor. So if a window on such determinations does unexpectedly open up, if even a narrow slice of the logic connecting metropolis and periphery suddenly becomes visible, it's in our interest to have a look.

Along with the close historical link between professionalism and cosmopolitanism, another reason why the "very busy just now" moment in Remains of the Day offers us such a window is because it stages the intrusion of work pressure into the intimate sphere of the family, and because this somewhat anachronistic intrusion has an obvious basis in the late twentieth-century integration of capitalism on a global scale. What we now perceive as everyday harriedness, the perpetual time deficit and time anxiety associated with what National Public Radio has been calling "the juggling act," results in large part from the so-called "restructuring" of companies, the preference for part-time or "flexible" labor and "just-in-time" production, the systemic acceleration of innovation and cultivation of insecurity in the pursuit of short-term profit that has been called "flexible accumulation" or "post-Fordism"-- none of this will be news

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<sup>6</sup> Raymond Williams, Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review (London: Verso, 1979), 164-65. It would be too optimistic to adopt the Freudian model of empire as an Unconscious that must inevitably manifest itself somewhere in the metropolitan text, if only displaced and disguised form.

to anyone. Post-Fordism's harried style, speeded-up pace, sense of being beset by too many tasks and too little time, is not limited to the denizens of the new 24/7 digital sweatshops or to stockbrokers pressured to follow the markets in a dizzying multitude of time zones. Control of time has become a scarce and highly valuable commodity for almost everybody, and lacking that control has all sorts of repercussions for gender relations and the quality of family life. Basic acts of citizenship like voting come to seem heroic, and activism almost superhuman. Insecurity about the future, both immediate and distant, becomes a political issue of almost the same order of importance as wages. Especially in families with children where both adults work, as is now the rule (in single-adult households with children, multiply by three), all this harriedness means a new level of generalized stress. On the model of post-Fordism and post-Marxism and all the other posts of our time, we might rebaptize this period "post-Haste."

This time pressure *reflects* global capital, of course, but that is not the only relation between the two terms. The word "reflects" misses the relative autonomy of the cultural from the economic-- the possibility of economic damage translating, however unsatisfactorily, into some sort of cultural benefit, and even twisting back upon itself to offer purchase on or against global capital. In her book The Time Bind, Arlie Russell Hochschild observes that the cult of efficiency has been transferred from the office to the home, so that parents "increasingly find themselves in the role of 'time and motion' experts" (51). Yet it is also true, she concludes, that "many women are ... joining men in a flight from the 'inner city' of home to the 'suburbs' of the workplace" (247) and seeking at work the emotional satisfactions that had once seemed available to them only at home.<sup>7</sup> For many women, blurring the lines between work and family is exhilarating, even something of a moral liberation. And what holds for the possibility of acting and bonding outside the family also holds for the possibility of acting and bonding outside the nation. This second possibility is discursively attached to the first and carried along with it by the fact that the family serves as common term in two parallel debates. Both the domain of work, on

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<sup>7</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, The Time Bind (NY: Metropolitan Books, 1997).

the one hand, and the domain of the international, on the other hand, are repeatedly defined against the family, which is asked to stand in for all the values that are supposedly sacrificed to their voracious demands. Dickens' Mrs Jellyby in Bleak House, who neglects her own children while devoting herself to a scheme for emigration to Africa, is the type (I've seen her quoted recently in two books of political theory) of an argument in which the family is mobilized against international commitments, its natural intimacy metaphorically bestowed on the vast anonymous populations of modern nation-states so as to claim correspondingly natural priority for those near-and-dear to us at the expense of immigrants, foreign workers selling goods on American markets, and other non-nationals.<sup>8</sup> From the viewpoint of the family, work is a foreign country.

But this equation can have unexpected results. Even the notorious conflict between the demands of work and family is a true dilemma in the sense that it cannot simply be resolved in favor of either side. Much will be said, will *have* to be said, on the side of work. And anything said on behalf of work will also resonate on behalf of the foreign. Think for example of Warren Beatty's film Reds, which made an uncharacteristically sympathetic case for American solidarity with the Bolshevik Revolution, and did so by framing its internationalist politics within a much more familiar narrative, a narrative about—of all things— the conflict between work and family, the strains of the two-career couple as lived by John Reed and Louise Bryant, Beatty and Diane Keaton. If work *is* a foreign country, as the film in effect suggests, if it is no more of a stretch to imagine someone giving her strongest feelings to work than to imagine someone giving her feelings to another nation's revolution, then what we've got here is something like the opposite to the anti-professional and anti-cosmopolitan logic Ishiguro seems to be laying out: making a case *for* work may mean making a case *for* internationalism. Or less ambitiously: if a case for cosmopolitanism *can* be made, meaning a case for some mode of global belonging that does not merely reflect global capital, but that will be necessary in order to *understand and act upon* global capital, such a case will perhaps only be made, or made real to us, within the shared

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<sup>8</sup>. This will be familiar to anyone who recalls the many indignant responses to Martha Nussbaum's essay "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism."

vocabulary of everyday over-commitment, overload, harriedness.

In Ishiguro's penultimate and perhaps most extraordinary novel, The Unconsoled (1995), this "very busy just now" theme is both intensified and tied still more tightly to the domain of the international.<sup>9</sup> The Unconsoled seems to elevate harriedness into a sort of ontological principle, a description of Being itself. A famous musician, Ryder, arrives for the first time in a foreign city. In a citiscape of classical abstraction— no language specified, but no translation problems; no maps, street plans, or calendars, no ties to any identifiable locality— he finds himself moving at strangely varying speeds, sometimes breakneck, sometimes boring, through the seemingly choreographed but always confused schedule of his much-awaited visit. Asked again and again by near-strangers for awkward if not impossible favors, he is manifestly incapable of answering the many and wildly divergent claims on his time and attention. A globe-trotting father somewhat estranged from a stay-at-home family, Ryder finds he cannot do everything he has promised; he cannot practice for his performance, write his speech, act fast on a new house for his family, take care of the child who is or is not his. The novel's distortions of time and space become a metaphor for the harriedness of ordinary life, and the conflicting demands of home and work become a metaphor for the conflicting scales and rhythms of the foreign and the domestic.

The two metaphors join in Ryder's memory of a recent conjugal argument:

"Look," I had been saying to her, my voice still calm, "the fact is, people need me. I arrive in a place and more often than not find terrible problems, and people are so grateful I've come."

Sophie's response to this rationale echoes de Waal's critique of humanitarian professionalism:

"But how much longer can you go on doing this for people? And for us. I mean for you and me and Boris, time's slipping away. Before you know it, Boris will be grown up. No one can expect you to keep on like this. And all these people, why can't they sort out their own problems? It might do them some good!"

To which Ryder answers:

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<sup>9</sup> The same is true of Ishiguro's When We Were Orphans (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), about which I hope to write at some future date.

“ . . . Some of these places I visit, the people don’t know a thing. They don’t know the first thing about modern music and if you leave them to themselves, it’s obvious, they’ll just get deeper and deeper into trouble. I’m needed, why can’t you see that? I’m needed out here! You don’t know what you’re talking about!” And it was then I had shouted at her: “Such a small world! You live in such a small world!” (37)

Critics of Ishiguro often point to a mysterious blockage of emotion between his characters. The frameworks usually chosen to describe this blockage are psychoanalytic and metaphysical. Despite his intriguingly anomalous status as a British writer with a Japanese name, critics have not leapt to interpret this theme of dammed-up emotion in the “small world” (that is, larger world) context of globalization. Yet the move seems worth trying out. In her book The Overworked American, Juliet Schor argues that it is not merely health and repose that are sacrificed to overwork: “People *will* work on their time off. They will work hard and long in what is formally designated as leisure time.” But this work is not to be confused, Schor says, with a “quest for the second paycheck. Americans need time for unpaid work, for work they call their own. They need the time to give to others. Much of what will be done was the regular routine in the days when married women were full-time housewives. And it is largely caring work—caring for children, caring for sick relatives and friends, caring for the house. Today many haven’t got the time to care” (160).<sup>10</sup> Not having “the time to care”—the phrase links two of the most distinctive aspects of The Unconsoled, time deficit and the blockage of caring. If this is right, if the inability to care results from or is an aspect of the deficit of time, then stories about not having enough time, like The Unconsoled, acquire another interpretive dimension. The temporal limits on caring, which can be experienced without leaving the kitchen, become a way of confronting experientially the *geographical* limits on caring, the global borders of solicitude, which are harder to experience or to make into stories.

With this suggestion in mind, even Remains of the Day perhaps deserves another inspection. If a novelist as deep as Ishiguro seems to be saying something as superficial and

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<sup>10</sup>. Juliet B. Schor, The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure (NY: BasicBooks, 1992).

uninteresting as “don’t work too hard” or “overwork is bad for the family,” perhaps the dullness is more in our reading than in his writing. We need not take at face value those easy, tried-and-true moral counters that Ishiguro seems to favor, like showing proper respect at the death of a parent and proper disrespect for Nazis, neither one of them a very controversial position. Perhaps this extreme moral obviousness is the sign of a mystery, an interpretive invitation.

In a “post-Haste” or “time bind” context, the title The Remains of the Day takes on a different irony. The mild pun on “remains” as both “time remaining in” and the “corpse of” the day would seem to underline the waste of the butler’s life, a life evaded and distorted by means of professional rationalization and overwork. But it also suggests, less obviously, why readers should care about such a monstrous and unrepresentative creature. After all, even those of us who have not ignored a dying father in order to serve a pro-Nazi master also have reason to ask, along with the title, what remains of the day when the hours devoted to work are over. Or, more subversively: are we making a mistake when we think of “real” life as the remainder left over once work has been subtracted? At the risk of perversity, I’m tempted to suggest that Ishiguro makes use of the anachronism of the butler and the great English country house in part so as to offer an almost futuristic portrait of a *pure or absolute workplace*: a workplace which is also a residence for those who work there and which thus precludes the daily contest between work and family that would otherwise seem so inescapable. There is no familial life: we are left in the dark as to when and how Stevens *père* ever could have managed to sire Stevens *filis*. Yet one can perhaps detect a utopian tinge to this microcosm. When the titular metaphor displaces the work/family conflict from the scale of the day to the scale of the life, it conflates one’s daily leisure, or “real” life, the locus of the family’s claims, with one’s retirement, hence also with one’s mortality, thereby taking on a somewhat melancholy if not morbid coloring. Can we imagine that the sinking of the heart produced by this conflation of familial privacy with approaching death is part of an argument on Ishiguro’s part, an argument *against* opposing work now to the endlessly postponed real life to come?

This would of course be counterintuitive, given the novel’s enthusiastic satire of the

butler's emotional frigidity and compulsive industriousness. But it dovetails nicely with a provocative reading by Renata Salecl. According to Salecl, professionalism in this novel is not set against love, as it might appear. "The masks of decency, professionalism, and asexuality" that seem to block Stevens from his desire are actually what he desires. "It is useless to search in Stevens for some hidden love that could not come out because of the rigid ritual he engaged himself in—all of his love is in the rituals. Inasmuch as it can be said that he loves Miss Kenton, he loves her from the perspective of submission to the codes of their profession" (185).<sup>11</sup> What Salecl perceives in Remains of the Day is the historically emergent eroticizing of expertise and of the social bonds for which expertise stands. In other words, the erotically unconsummated affection between the butler and Miss Kenton, a relationship between colleagues that will not lead to marriage and children, exemplifies a characteristic professional affectivity, an affectivity that substitutes recruitment for reproduction and that has come to assume a larger and larger place in our lives, in our narratives, and not coincidentally in the fashioning of global or transnational subjects.

The idea that the butler may have been right to love Miss Kenton in and for the working collegiality they shared, rather than wrong not to have followed her out of the workplace and into the founding of a normal heterosexual family, receives support from an unexpected quarter. Ishiguro does not deny the possibility that, historically speaking, Lord Darlington was right—that "a freezing of German reparation payments" in 1923, as he proposed at his conference,

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<sup>11</sup> Renata Salecl, "I Can't Love You Unless I Give You Up," in Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek, eds., Gaze and Voice as Love Objects (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996), 179-207. "For that reason, it would be a mistake to depict Stevens as the only culprit for the nonrealization of the love affair . . . On the one hand [Miss Kenton] wants Stevens to change, to reveal his love for her, but on the other hand, she loves him only for what he actually is—a functionary who tries by all available means to avoid his desire" (185).

might indeed have stopped the Second World War from happening.<sup>12</sup> In terms of the novel's apparent moral clarity, this is a disturbing hypothesis, yet it was maintained in the 1920s by figures as respectable as John Maynard Keynes and by many subsequent historians. It is so disturbing that the film version avoids the idea entirely by pushing the conference forward into the 1930s, when the Nazis were already in power and there can no longer be any question that Lord Darlington is making a grave error. And if Darlington was *not* making an error, if the stakes at Darlington Hall in 1923 were indeed as large as the Second World War, then it is much harder to argue that the butler's extreme, almost inhuman devotion to his professional duty at this conference was a self-evident piece of self-delusion.<sup>13</sup> So both the anti-professionalism and the anti-cosmopolitanism of the novel are thrown into some doubt.

Here I switch back to The Unconsoled. As reviewers were quick to point out, there is a strong continuity between the butler of The Remains of the Day and The Unconsoled's hotel porter, who appears on the novel's second page and introduces us to its characteristic play with

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<sup>12</sup> This hypothesis is vigorously debated in Niall Ferguson, The Pity of War: Explaining World War I (NY: Basic Books, 1999), 395-432. Ferguson ultimately rejects the idea, pressed forcefully by figures like John Maynard Keynes, that "the burden of reparations on Germany doomed Europe to a new war" (439); for him, responsibility for the rise of Nazism falls more heavily on the Versailles treaty's assumption that "disarmament could suffice to eradicate militarism" and on its "invocation of the principle of 'self-determination'" (439). According to Ferguson, "Keynes was manipulated by his German friends" (408). He was "too trusting" (410). Still, the intriguing parallels between Keynes and Ishiguro's Lord Darlington clearly work in the latter's favor, especially considering how widespread Ferguson shows the reaction in Britain to be against the perceived harshness of the reparations (397).

<sup>13</sup> As it happens, Keynes was also a proponent of professionalism in international affairs. The speech in which "Keynes's influence on the reparation issue reached its zenith," in August 1922, when he urged an abandonment of national revenge in the interest of world peace, also contained a prediction that "the day of scientific, administrative and executive skill was at hand" (405-06).

time and space. Riding up in the elevator minutes after his arrival in this anonymous Central European city, Ryder innocently asks the elderly porter why he doesn't put the bags down. The porter, whose name turns out to be Gustav, responds to this as if it were a genuine question, launching into a leisurely, roundabout speech about the professional history and standards of hotel porters. Time passes. The ride takes on the feel of a casual evening among friends. It is suddenly difficult to distinguish the elevator from a living room (a new character is discovered standing in the corner). Pages and pages go by, all the while the elevator is still supposedly rising, and the porter is still holding the bags.<sup>14</sup> Years before, Gustav says, he has overheard a chance remark to the effect that carrying bags would mean not having a care in the world. He has connected that remark to others (times and places of the remarks supplied in unnecessary detail) suggesting that being a porter is something that requires no special skill, something anyone could do. And he has concluded that porters must assert the dignity and difficulty of their vocation— for example, by never resting on the job. So no, he won't put the bags down. The notion of professional standards as horrifyingly rigorous, and even ultimately fatal, even though they are also arbitrary and unnecessary, supports Pico Iyer's description of the porter as "Stevens the butler in a new disguise."<sup>15</sup>

One of a series of locals who obstruct the global hero's progress through his visit by politely demanding small but increasingly burdensome favors for themselves or their loved ones, Gustav wants Ryder to use his upcoming speech to say a word on behalf of porters. From Ryder's point of view, these demands become nightmarishly irritating. The porter who takes portering too seriously is clearly offered as a comic parallel to the overserious professionalism of Ryder himself, a musician who is so rarely at home that when he gets there—the idea that this

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<sup>14</sup> In Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything (NY: Pantheon, 1999), James Gleick takes the elevator-- "short-range vertical transportation, as the industry calls it" (23)-- as an icon of contemporary time pressure.

<sup>15</sup> Pico Iyer, "The Butler Didn't Do It, Again," Times Literary Supplement April 28, 1995, p. 22.

foreign city may after all *be* his home is one of the novel's darkest and longest-running jokes—it looks like just another stop, some of the faces and places vaguely familiar, others not, on his endless tour of concerts and lectures. Perhaps Gustav's daughter, with whom the porter asks him to undertake a sort of diplomatic mission, is actually his own wife? Surely he has seen her somewhere before?

At the end of the novel, Gustav's death will cement this side of the plot. It is immediately after his death-- brought on, it is suggested, by voluntary overwork-- that Ryder is expelled from his perhaps-family by his perhaps-wife. The expulsion is aimed both at his professionalism and at his cosmopolitanism. He is "outside of our grief," Sophie says, just as he was always "outside of our love," "Leave him be, Boris. Let him go around the world, giving out his expertise and wisdom" (532).

Like Gustav, it seems, Ryder is killing himself for his job while not addressing the real emotional needs of his loved ones, or even his own. As Iyer puts it: "in honoring little obligations, [he] has missed out on the biggest ones . . . he has cheated himself out of a life" (22). Professionalism, or belief in the redemptive value of our work, is thus (to quote Michael Wood) one of "the stories we tell ourselves to keep other stories away" (18).<sup>16</sup> It is a delusion, as we see again in the anti-climactic ending, where Ryder never gets either to lecture or even to play. When he finally gets on stage, after so many distractions and interruptions, there's no audience left, and even the seats have been removed from the auditorium. Yet the fact that he hasn't performed isn't even noticed by the community, which has somehow re-formed itself happily around the night's other, no doubt locally more significant events. So all his sacrifice of the personal has been for nothing.

If so, the moral again seems disappointingly simplistic. Louis Menand writes that Ishiguro's "single insight into the human condition is that people need love but continually spoil

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Wood, "Sleepless Nights," New York Review of Books, Dec 21, 1995, 17-18.

their chances of getting it, a piece of wisdom slightly below the level of Dr. Joyce Brothers.”<sup>17</sup>

With respect to professionalism, this wisdom is worse than merely advice-column dumb.

Contrasting the family’s real emotional needs to the empty show of professional performance is a piece of ideological privatism that excludes from the real such things as the need for respect and connection to the larger community. It makes the real into the private, the public into the false.

This moral seems strangely out of sync with a novel of such formidable scale and virtuosity. But I would suggest that it is in fact overturned by the very premise of metaphysical harriedness that is the novel’s real center. Consider: If this *is* Ryder’s home after all, then he is *right* to listen respectfully to the endless disquisition of Gustav on porters, if for no other reason than because this is not an anonymous porter he will never see again; Gustav is his wife’s father. If the man carrying your bags turns out to have a daughter who turns out possibly to be your wife, then any stranger may turn out to be a member of your family, and should thus be treated as such. Any porter deserves the kind of patient, respectful, even utopian attention that hotel guests are not in the habit of extending to hotel personnel.

From this quasi-folktale perspective, the novel’s metaphysical fireworks take on an unexpected ethical dimension. Ryder’s long-suffering desire to please, though interrupted by fits of hysterical petulance when he realizes he has no time to practice the piano or decide what he’s going to say in his speech, would not be a reprehensible passivity, a professional deformation resulting from too much time on the road. Rather, it would belong to a stretching of the human sensibility to accommodate the unaccustomed rhythms and ranges of sympathy that are demanded of us all in the oft-described age of global flows. The traveler’s strained, fragile politeness would be properly seen as a stressed-out, lugubrious version of what we all feel, travelers or not, to the extent that we are stretched and stressed by the larger and larger circles of our interdependence. It’s would be a figure for one phase in the long-term project of refashioning ethics to suit our transnational condition.

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<sup>17</sup> Louis Menand, “Anxious in Dreamland,” New York Times Book Review Oct 15, 1995, 7.

This may seem like too public and political a vocabulary for a novel so manifestly concerned with the bitter blockage of intimate feeling. Yet the pains Ishiguro takes to set the novel's pattern of emotional demands and withdrawals in a context of sanitized foreignness, a foreignness that specifies no nationalities and thus can offend no one, and indeed may not be foreign at all, yet around which the perhaps-visitor so persistently defines his role— all this assertion and withdrawal of foreignness suggests that work-related blockage of emotion in the intimacy of the family is also a figure for blockage of emotion on a transnational scale. The most precise way to say this, borrowing a phrase from the dissertation-in-progress of Katherine Stanton, is perhaps to call The Unconsoled a “European Union” novel. Its hero wavers between cruel emotional withdrawal, especially at moments when consolation is called for, and helpless entrapment in nightmarish proximity to seemingly distant figures, like the porter who suddenly makes absurdly disproportionate claims on his time and attention. Both the claims and the wavering are characteristic of a moment when, with the borders of Europe in the long and sometimes bloody process of being redrawn, the usual guidelines have disappeared that once helped us separate off (for better or worse) legitimate from illegitimate claims. We have become even less clear than we used to be as to who we must let in and who we must not or shall not let in, and on what grounds. We are unclear as to where the First World ends and the Third or (as in this novel) the Second begins. We are more confused than we have ever been as to when and where and whether to release our sympathy, or our bombers— when and where and whether a particular set of atrocities is close enough to demand so-called humanitarian intervention, or not.<sup>18</sup> It's the moment of Kosovo, which is to say the moment when we are equally unsure about

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<sup>18</sup>. The situation of the putatively world-renowned musician and expert makes him a useful figure, at the level of manners where the novel is most comfortable, not just for Ishiguro's own book tours, but for the vast differential in cultural and economic power separating metropolis and periphery, whether that periphery belongs to the Third World or (as here) the former Second. Of course, this is not just a fact about Europe, where Ishiguro's Britishness seems to echo Britain's

what was done on our behalf in Kosovo and about what was not done in Chechnya, or in any number of other places. It's the moment when the exhaustion that comes of daily harriedness melts indistinguishably into what we have learned to call "compassion fatigue."

The phrase "compassion fatigue" could have served as Ishiguro's subtitle. But less because he accepts this concept, I think, than because he obsessively questions it. Are we sure there exists such a thing? In her recent book of that name, Susan Moeller argues that "Compassion fatigue is not an unavoidable consequence of covering the news," but only "an unavoidable consequence of the way the news is now covered" (2).<sup>19</sup> Her fatigue trope often seems to undercut this argument, suggesting an exhaustion that follows inevitably from the objective limits on disposable time, attention, and (perhaps) sympathy. Moeller writes: "we can't respond to every appeal. And so we've come to believe that we don't care" (9). "The big complaint that [newspapers] hear from readers is 'I don't have time' (30). And yet the trope too is undercut by the "oft-cited passage in Jonathan Kozol's book on poverty in urban America, Amazing Grace," where (as Moeller paraphrases) "a mother with AIDS is told about compassion fatigue among the well-to-do. She says to Kozol, 'I don't understand what they have done to get so tired.'<sup>20</sup> When she quotes this passage, Moeller returns to her argument that without the flaws

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peculiar reluctance to be either in or out. It's also characteristic of the 90s troubles over humanitarian internationalism in what's been called the age of human rights.

<sup>19</sup> Susan D. Moeller, Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death (NY and London: Routledge, 1999). "The most insidious of the reasons for minimalist reporting is the constant restriction of time and space. The world cannot really be covered in the 21 or 22 minutes of news broadcast in the networks' evening programs or in the hundred odd pages of the newsweeklies or even in the thick wad of newsprint of the Sunday *New York Times*. Given newshole constraints, the stories most likely to disappear from news programs and newspapers are continuing international stories" (29).

<sup>20</sup> Moeller comments: "They haven't *done* anything. But as they sit passively in front of their

in media coverage, and with some better outlet in action, we would *not* be “so tired.” If our tiredness is a relative rather than an absolute condition, then the harriedness in The Unconsoled could also be seen as a temporal metaphor representing a dilemma that is not itself wholly or even primarily temporal: the dilemma of conflicting and uncertain demands for sympathy and solidarity. The problem would not at bottom have to do with the scarcity of time. The feeling of overload that many of us experience in a temporal mode, as a fact about time and not having enough of it, would have as its real referent the uncertainty of borders and the social units and solidarities, the nations and the cities, they more or less roughly delineate.<sup>21</sup> The real problem would be a matter of the polis and its principles, the institutions and available modes of action by which we define or delimit our belonging.

The notion of a natural limit to compassion, an emotional exhaustion as absolutely predictable as the limits on the energy of human muscles or the 24-hour limit to the day, should I think be understood as one of the more successful ideological spin-offs of the myth of globalization. Globalization is a myth because, or to the extent that, it presents a real but partial and contingent phenomenon (capitalism’s global integration is much more pronounced at the level of finance, for example, than in production or even trade) as if it were total, natural, and inevitable, beyond human intervention.<sup>22</sup> The slippage from capitalism to global capitalism is a way of slipping those responsible across the border into an unspecifiable elsewhere where their decision-making will no longer seem accessible to our powers of oversight and contestation, where they can no longer be held accountable. By the same logic, it seems useless to complain

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TV sets, they’ve been barraged with redundant images” (43).

<sup>21</sup> What we experience as lack of time, like the expression “not having time for something,” would be a sort of pragmatic euphemism (if I did have time I might be more open to it) for a rejection that really happens on principle.

<sup>22</sup> In The End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy

(Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), J.K. Gibson-Graham has seized on the “penetration” metaphor to illustrate the shortcomings of the globalization concept.

that there are only 24 hours in the day; we may wish it had more, but that's the way things are. And thus the problems of the planet will have to keep. For now, there's dinner to be cooked, bedtime stories to be read, the garbage to be taken out. The day itself becomes your enemy, and the fact that so little remains of it. The logic is so compelling that it's hard to remember that, as with globalization, we are dealing with a mixture of reality and trope.

By identifying Ryder with the global and Sophie and Boris with the local, one might conclude that Ishiguro is denouncing the destructive effects of globalization (in the form of over-work) on the intimate sphere of the family. But such a reading would have to ignore all the ostentatious play with time and space, all the deliberate uncertainties that make the novel so distinctive—first and foremost, of course, the uncertainty as to whether the unnamed city is indeed foreign or on the contrary Ryder's home, which he now looks at as an alien. By intensifying the time bind to the breaking point, in other words, Ishiguro also gestures beyond it. All of the imaginative energy of the novel's premise does not, after all, go toward reinforcing our desperate sense of a zero-sum relation between one person's demands and another's, compassion here and compassion there. Ishiguro messes with the objective limits of time and space, making them pliant to emotional moods. In doing so, he also messes with the zero-sum game of everyday common sense: the family should not be sacrificed to over-work, known domestic needs should never be ignored in favor of the far-off, ultimately unknowable demands of people in other countries, where we have no real business getting involved. The Unconsoled creates the atmosphere of a prolonged anxiety dream, a hallucinatory exaggeration of the daily time bind. But it also jokes ambiguously about the plenitude of additional commitments that it would be possible to take on, and the importance one's works and days might then assume, if only the usual limits of time and space did not apply. It magnifies the *freedom* to over-commit oneself to which we pay indirect tribute when we take someone's declaration of busy-ness not as a degrading confession of external constraint but as a boast. It allows us to ask what life would be like if, while taking care of a child (perhaps your own?), you could agree to be interviewed, leave the child in a café in front of some pastry for a few minutes, find yourself suddenly driving out in

the country, interfering (however ignorantly) in the host nation's symbolic politics, play a concert that lightens the mood of an aged composer engaged in burying his beloved dog, and return to find the child still there in the corner, not angry, though the pastry is finished. Like the darkly funny premise that everyone in this unnamed city looks to music to determine what direction the city should take, so too the premise of time/space compression also includes a utopian foretaste of unearthly temporal abundance.<sup>23</sup> Death is also the test that Benedict Anderson applies to cosmopolitanism. According to Anderson, the success of nationalism results from its ability to offer the solace for death that religion once offered. In offering the

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<sup>23</sup>. More might be said both about the professionalism of Ryder's music, the trans-national expertise that gets him invited in the first place and that one might argue is never quite discredited by the subsequent events, and about the Porter's Dance— a dance in which the porters act out their heroic ability to keep bags in the air— as a local or national parallel to music in this sense, as a seemingly arbitrary and yet valuably community-forming genre of expertise. More might also have to be said about the death of Gustav, which seems to result from the Porter's Dance and is a sort of limit case for professionalism, much as the death of Stevens' butler father in Remains of the Day was a test or limit case for professionalism there. If professionalism uses competence as grounds for social inclusion, it reaches its limits at the moment of mortal incompetence, for example the moment when the professional becomes too old or infirm to perform his or her duties properly, when he or she no longer fits by virtue of competence and now must fit, if at all, according to some more capacious principle. The obvious examples from Remains of the Day are the moments when Stevens' father trips and drops a tray and can no longer stop a drop of snot from falling from his nose. But it should not simply be assumed that no more capacious principle is compatible with professionalism, which means being too "busy" to deal with moments and matters of ultimate importance, putting off ultimates in the name of an ultimate purposelessness.

individual a continuity of the self in time as well as space, it offers a practical form of immortality. The implication is that just as the profession cannot compete affectively with the family, so genuine consolation cannot be found beyond the nation, where feeling is less intense. But Anderson's own argument works against this conclusion. Anderson says the erotic form of American nationalism is the homosocial buddy plot. But buddy plots are now both heterosexual and trans-national. That is, they point, however provisionally, at professional bonding that is also trans-national bonding.

The utopian glimmerings that shine intermittently through the novel's darkness are located in particular in two typically urban vehicles. The novel begins with a ride on an elevator, and it ends with a ride on a tram. As James Gleick shows in his book Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything, elevators have become an icon of modern impatience. "Anger at elevators rises within seconds, experience shows. A good waiting time is in the neighborhood of fifteen seconds. Sometime around forty seconds, people start to get visibly upset... Once on board, our antsiness only intensifies as we wait for the door to close. How long? *Door dwell*, as the engineers call it, tends to be set at two to four seconds. For some, that is a long time. And not just Americans" (27).<sup>24</sup> People tend to exaggerate wildly the amount of time they spend waiting either for or in an elevator. A few extra seconds get translated as "I waited ten minutes" or "it seemed like hours." As Gleick says, in elevators we "abandon our basic ability to measure short intervals of time" (27-28). And yet this disturbance of our time sense is only the other side of the historical role of the elevator, which made possible the city's vertical expansion on a scale that might once seemed limited to science-fiction, and with it a comparable multiplication of human possibilities for contact within the once inviolable limits of the 24-hour span. In effect,

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<sup>24</sup> James Gleick, Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything (NY: Pantheon, 1999). The quotation continues: "If you travel in Asia at all, you will notice that the DOOR CLOSE button in elevators is the one with the paint worn off," says [the director of technology at Otis Elevator]. "It gets used more than any other button."

the elevator gave us more hours in the day. So the transcendence of the habitual limits of time in Ishiguro's opening elevator ride is not a simple sadistic joke on our professionalism and our impatience. It's also a way of refreshing our sense of the city's historical achievements and continuing utopian energy.<sup>25</sup>

The same utopian note is also struck, just as incongruously, in the final scene on the tram. The protagonist's perhaps-wife and child have just gotten off, abandoning him. It's early in the morning; he's in shock. But a fellow passenger speaks to him, reminding him that things are not so bad; at the other end of the car, a hearty breakfast is being served. He gets up, hungry and already imagining further rides... Eating bacon and eggs balanced on your knees among a crowd of people on their way to work may leave us unconsolated for the loss of a family, or even a perhaps-family. But there is something genuinely utopian, I think, about the way breakfast, to many the most intimate meal of the day, spills out of its privacy into the public world of mass transit, sweetening thereby the shared submission to the rhythms of the commute and quite

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<sup>25</sup> In his brilliant new novel The Intuitionist, the African-American novelist Colson Whitehead imagines a genius of elevator theory who, in a book entitled Theoretical Elevators, imagines an elevator that waits— waits for speech to happen, for the circuit of communication to be completed:

You are standing on a train platform. A fear of missing the train, a slavery to time, has provided ten minutes before the train leaves. There is so much you have never said to your companion and so little time to articulate it...The conductor paces up and down the platform and wonders why you do not speak. You are a blight on his platform and timetable. Speak, find the words, the train is warming towards departure... The train is always leaving and you have not found your words.

Remember the train, and that thing between you and your words. An elevator is a train. The perfect train terminates in Heaven. The perfect elevator waits while its human freight tries to grab through the muck and find the words (86-87)

Colson Whitehead, The Intuitionist (NY: Anchor, 1999).

explicitly taking over some of the emotional functions of the family.<sup>26</sup>

If Ishiguro is indeed infusing the urban symbols of the tram and the elevator with something approaching consolation, then you might conclude that he's being nostalgic about an old and even perhaps outmoded image of the city. Perhaps, but his nostalgia is also critical in a complex and constructive sense: critical not just of modern overwork but also of any *critique* of overwork that would send us back to the family, to the suburbs, to privacy. Ishiguro's vision of the city would belong, in other words, to a necessary re-invention of the public at the level of personal experience. This effort to reinvent the public, undercutting the gendered divide between work and family, is equally necessary at the urban level and at the trans-national level, and the two are not merely parallel to each other. Cynthia Enloe has famously remarked that the personal is the international. The pertinence of this remark to the personal dilemma of work versus family is what I take Ishiguro to have demonstrated by means of his strangely imagined local/global space, both urban and cosmopolitan, neither foreign nor domestic. I take him to be suggesting that in order to cohabit with less indecency in a world of immigrants, refugees, and strangers, the largely invisible world that carries our bags or hands us bags to carry, that mysteriously delivers the morning tea, coffee, chocolate, and sugar out of which we fashion the beginning of our day, we need a broader civility, and the civility of the city can be a daily model and training site for this more inclusive version.<sup>27</sup> At any rate, it would have to aim in a

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<sup>26</sup> There is an analogy here with the equally sudden addition to the butler's conversational repertoire of "banter," which mixes work and play, the responsible and the erotic, at the end of Remains of the Day.

<sup>27</sup> This argument demands more attention to the feminist politics of time. If feminists can easily agree on the need for greater gender equality in the time spent on housekeeping and childrearing, the next step is less obvious. What about the absolute time the family puts into those tasks? Must it also be reduced? And if so, how? One solution— the one encouraged these days, and adopted by those who can afford it— is to commodify more and more tasks, paying others to do

different direction than E. P. Thompson's classic essay "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism." In that essay Thompson describes women's work "with the children and in the home" as "necessary and inevitable, rather than . . . an external imposition. This remains true to this day," he goes on, "and, despite school times and television times, the rhythms of women's work in the home are not wholly attuned to the measurement of the clock. The mother of young children has an imperfect sense of time and attends to other human tides. She has not yet altogether moved out of the conventions of 'pre-industrial' society." As Carol Watts points out,

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or produce, either inside or outside the home, what was once done or produced inside the home. A second, not incompatible solution is more government-supported institutions like day care, which are often seen as more of an "intrusion" into the family than cash payment, though cash payment decreases the total time the family must invest in its maintenance only by increasing the need for earned income. A third solution is for both men and for women to wean themselves away from the work ethic and the assumption that work outside the home is more meaningful, thus freeing up a larger proportion of total time for the family. To this I have no objection (on the contrary), but I add the observation that it would entail transforming not just the workplace but also the family. Indeed, it would transform the family so drastically as to blur the line between the family and the workplace, with its (relative) sexual equality, its increasing openness of sexual roles, and its ambiguous mixture of intimacy and distance. Consider for example Judith Stacey's account of the "postmodern family": "a truly democratic gender and kinship order, one that does not favor male authority, heterosexuality, a particular division of labor, or a singular household or parenting arrangement [has become] thinkable for the first time in history" (258). [Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late-Twentieth-Century America (Berkeley: U of California, 1998 [1990]).] In other words, such a family might be said to aim at something very like the erotic collegiality that, according to Renata Salecl, draws the butler and housekeeper together in Remains of the Day.

this is nothing worth returning to. Indeed, it comes very close to justifying Ryder's complaint about Sophie's "small world" view of both space and time. Watts is quoting from Thompson's Customs in Common (381). Carol Watts, "Time and the Working Mother: Kristeva's 'Women's Time' Revisited," Radical Philosophy, 91 (Sept/Oct 1998), p. 15 [6-17].

Notes