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Published on: 01 Nov 2020 - Novel: A Forum on Fiction (Duke University Press)

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Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Christou, M. (2020). Kazuo Ishiguro's Non-Actors. *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 53(3), 360-382.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-8624552>

Published in:

Novel: A Forum on Fiction

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Kazuo Ishiguro's Non-Actors

Abstract: At center-stage in Kazuo Ishiguro's work is the figure of the non-actor: a character-type which confronts us time and again with scenarios in which action is devalued. This essay shows that, despite finding themselves in situations that mandate action, Ishiguro's characters opt instead for risk-averse and mechanical-like behaviors that are antonymous to change. This, however, is not a solely aesthetic phenomenon, and the essay examines the figure of the non-actor in Ishiguro's novels as part of a broader turn toward non-action. It does so by considering this figure in relation to a distinctly twentieth century context within which, as Hannah Arendt has it, human action came to be seen as more dangerous than ever before. Ishiguro's non-actors, I argue, can be seen as the legacy, but also as the mutations, of this understanding in our own era and the contemporary novel. This legacy, the essay demonstrates, reveals an under-examined aspect of the neoliberal mindset that dominates the post-Cold War world. Rather than promoting the worthiness of individual, self-serving action, Ishiguro's novels bring to the forefront something different, though no less pernicious: a wholesale devaluation of the individual's capacity to act.

The human being, Arendt observes, has been described as the speaking/rational animal (*zoon logon echon*), the political animal (*zoon politikon*), the fabricating animal (*homo faber*), and the laboring animal (*animal laborans*), but, in the twentieth century, she suggests, it becomes possible “for the first time in our history” to think of it primarily as *the acting animal* (62-63). Action, like all the other capabilities listed above, is an inherent human capacity for Arendt, but in the twentieth century it comes to assume center stage. Twentieth-century achievements like Ernest Rutherford's “splitting” of the atom, Arendt claims, show that the powers of the human capacity to act are significantly amplified, its consequences extending far beyond the human world, and so, she concludes, action can now be considered to be the most prominent and the most consequential of all other human capacities (60, 63).

Given Arendt's intellectual debt to Aristotle, her elevation of action to a position of prominence invites associations with the latter's famous declaration that the best literature constitutes “primarily” [*archi*] an imitation of action (*Poetics* 1450a38-39) – so much so that the characters, or “agents” [*prattontes*], are understood to be needed mainly in order to act [*prattein*] (1450b3-4). And if, as Aristotle has it, good literature ought to imitate only human beings who act, then this is a prescription that Arendt's reflections imbue with renewed, and even magnified, significance. Coming as it does from one of Aristotle's most prominent

disciples, the claim that action becomes the dominant human capacity in the twentieth century raises the question whether, in the literature of the period, we might accordingly expect to find an amplified adherence to Aristotle's dictum on the primacy of action.

Rather than characters who act, however, I here want to flag up a crucial preoccupation with the figure of the non-actor instead. Indeed, around the time when Arendt advances her argument about the centrality of action, in the 1950s,¹ we encounter characters like Arsene from Samuel Beckett's novel *Watt* (1953), who talks about the bliss of finding oneself "in a situation where to do nothing" constitutes "an act of the highest value" (33). In John Barth's *The Floating Opera* (1967), moreover, non-action is at center stage: the narrator here, Todd Andrews, tells the story of how one day decides to act, and then changes his mind. The action in question, as it transpires, is suicide, and Barth's novel turns out to be a rewriting of *Hamlet* – albeit one in which the protagonist manifests an attitude toward action that is fundamentally different to Hamlet's. Though the latter has been described as "the paradigmatic figure of the 'man of inaction'" (Wagner 24), he in fact betrays a belief in the *value* of acting: his hesitation to act is clearly the source of much inner torment throughout. Andrews's decision, by contrast, rests on the insight that action lacks "*intrinsic value*"; he decides to commit suicide because "*there's no final reason for living,*" as he puts it, but then changes his mind because, as he comes to assert, there is no value in opting for not living either (Barth 223, 228). In short, even if "doing nothing" does not exactly constitute "an act of the highest value" for Andrews as it does for Beckett's Arsene, it ultimately does emerge as the preferable option. The question concerning the value of action (or, to be precise, the lack thereof) is also at the heart of *The Floating Opera's* companion novel, *The End of the Road* (1967), where the central character and narrator, Jacob Horner, suddenly realizes that there is "no reason to do anything," and immediately becomes paralyzed on a bench for days, unable to perform even

¹ Portions of Arendt's essay were first published in *The Review of Politics* 20.4 (1958): 570-90.

the most minimal of actions (Barth 323). The trend continues, and appears to be intensified, in the twenty-first century, with novels like Ben Marcus's *Notable American Women* (2002) presenting us with a scenario in which everyday actions such as simple bodily movements are not just seen as lacking in value, but as having extortionately harmful consequences, while non-action features as something worth striving for. "[P]eople" are, for instance, said to be "slaughter[ing]" the sky "when they move," the theory being that if they were to "cease" the "world might begin to recover" (46). In fact, the "perfect world" is here conceptualized as one in which "nothing would have happened," and, indeed, the notable women of the title undertake "voluntary paralysis," vowing to abide by "ever-diminishing motion quota[s]" in pursuit of an ideal state of stillness and actionlessness (53, 65, 109).

Another remarkable example of this turn to non-action that straddles the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries is found in Kazuo Ishiguro's oeuvre, and it is on a selection of his novels that this essay focuses. Ishiguro's first novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), tell the stories of characters whose past actions turn out to be regrettable, while, in *When We Were Orphans* (2000), we have a protagonist who acts in the present in order to "fix" the past, but whose actions are delusional and are doomed to fail. In what follows, I examine *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *The Unconsoled* (1995), and *Never Let Me Go* (2005), where at center stage is the figure of the non-actor – a figure which, as the examples above suggest, constitutes a wider preoccupation in the literary imagination from the mid-twentieth century onwards, but whose presence would, at least at first glance, appear to be somewhat enigmatic in the light of Arendt's comments.

Jacques Rancière's work in the past two decades demonstrates that there has in fact been a broader revival of interest in the problem of action in literature – a problem which of course stretches further back. In *The Politics of Literature* (2006) and in *The Lost Thread* (2014), Rancière examines a departure from Aristotle's prescriptions – one that, as he says, begins in

the Romantic tradition, constitutes the principle that “brings the so-called realist novel into play,” and culminates in the “absolutization of style” in the aesthetics of the proto-modernist and modernist novel (*Politics of Literature* 15, 10). This departure, Rancière argues, signals a democratizing process evident not only in the shift away from the Aristotelian model of great actions performed by great men (“princes, generals, or orators”) toward “ordinary human beings” and the everyday (*Politics of Literature* 14, 11), but also in “fiction’s new proportions and disproportions,” as he puts it, whereby “description[s]” become more expansive than before, and are not subjugated to the “dynamics of action” (*Lost Thread* xxx). Rancière’s take on this is different from that of Georg Lukács, who, far from identifying a democratizing impulse, criticizes modernist literature for its emphasis on subjective interiority – an emphasis, he argues, which hinders the possibility of action in the external world. For Rancière, on the other hand, this is not a case of “dethroning ... action” (*Lost Thread* xxxiii), but of “demoli[shing]” the “hierarchies that had governed the invention of subjects [and] the composition of action” (*Politics of Literature* 10) – hierarchies, that is, which elevate certain *types* of action, and consequently divide “humanity [into] an elite of active beings and a multitude of passive ones” (*Lost Thread* xxxiii). Rancière, then, views this democratizing turn as consisting in a shift from one type of, or from one way of conceptualizing and composing, action to another, and not in a questioning of the value of action as such.

In examining the figure of the non-actor in Ishiguro’s work, this essay begins where Rancière stops, offering a glimpse into how the problem of action manifests itself in the contemporary novel. As we have seen, Rancière discovers in the modernist novel the culmination of a process whereby Aristotelian action is replaced by a reconfigured understanding of action. Richard Halpern too addresses this question in his recent study *Eclipse of Action* (2017), albeit from a different angle. Here, Halpern identifies an interplay between action [*praxis*] and production [*poiesis*], between doing and making, which, he says,

becomes “particularly transformative” with the advent of capitalism and of political economy (12). In promoting the idea that what really “matters” is production (which, unlike action, enables accumulation), capitalism and the discourse of political economy, Halpern argues, form a material and intellectual context where we witness “a relative ... devaluation of action” (7) – a devaluation which he traces in literature up until the mid-twentieth century. Notably, when Halpern briefly turns to the mid-twentieth century and beyond at the end of his book, he accepts that the model according to which action is “in the process of being eclipsed by production” seems to break down (242), and, indeed, the trend which I identify here is distinct from this model. Ishiguro’s novels present us with a devaluation of action that cannot be adequately captured by the shift from action to production under capitalism. In *The Remains of the Day*, *The Unconsoled*, and *Never Let Me Go*, this is a devaluation of action in its own right; the worthier alternative to action here is not, as is the case in Halpern’s study, something other than action (like production and accumulation), or, as is the case in Rancière’s studies, a more democratic reconfiguration of action. And neither is it a matter of devaluing action in the external world by focusing too much on an individual’s internal world, as is, according to Lukács’ criticisms, the case with modernist literature. Instead, the preferable alternative to action in Ishiguro’s novels is non-action.

And yet, far from contradicting Arendt’s diagnosis of the status of human action in the twentieth century, the understanding of action that emerges from these novels in fact betrays an affinity with it. A closer look at Arendt’s claims serves to indicate how this is so. In *The Human Condition* (1958), she writes that action is the human capacity that has “the closest connection with natality” – a concept which, stripped to its bare-bones, expresses the idea that a human birth bespeaks new beginnings, not so much because it introduces a new being to the world but “because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, [the capacity] of acting” (9). Through this association with natality, then, the capacity to

act is posited as an inherent quality that enables human beings to bring about something new to the world, effect change, or cause disruption – for better or worse. This, indeed, is precisely what underlies Arendt’s claims about action in *Between Past and Future*: namely, the *unpredictability* of the “better” or the “worse” which defines the consequences of human action. Here, Arendt says that no one can ever have “the wisdom of knowing what one does” (*Past and Future* 60) because, as she puts it elsewhere, “the results” of human action “can never be reliably predicted” (*Violence* 4). As we saw, Arendt suggests that the inevitably unpredictable consequences of human action become more expansive than ever before with Rutherford’s “splitting” of the atom in the early twentieth century – a claim that in fact resonates more loudly in the context of the time Arendt is writing this essay, the 1950s, by which point Rutherford’s discovery of the nucleus had been channeled into the development of nuclear weapons. Clearly, then, human action becomes not only the most prominent of all other human capacities but also, as Arendt points out, “the most dangerous” one (*Past and Future* 63). Against this backdrop of human action coming to be seen as extraordinarily risky, we witness a turn toward non-action, and Ishiguro’s novels, as we will see in what follows, can be understood as the legacy, and indeed as the mutation, of this broader turn in the contemporary novel.

It is just such a concern about the dangers and unpredictable consequences of action that defines much of the narrative in *The Remains of the Day*. As will become apparent by the end, this very hierarchy-conscious novel presents us with a certain demolition of hierarchies – a demolition, however, which does not add up to a process of the sort that Rancière identifies, whereby a shift from “great men” to “ordinary human beings,” or an emphasis on the mundane instead of the monumental, can be seen as amounting to a democratization of action. Rather, this is a demolition of hierarchies which ultimately bespeaks a wholesale devaluation of any individual’s (be they a “great” or a merely “ordinary” human being) capacity to act because

of the expansive risks that any action (be it monumental or merely mundane) entails. Even in scenarios where action is both contemplated and planned, as in *The Unconsoled*, there is a sense in which this is less a plan of action and more a strategy of non-action; what this plan aims to achieve, it seems, is not change, which would be disruptive and therefore potentially dangerous, but a prevention of the worsening of the problems being faced, and, as such, the preservation of the status quo. As for *Never Let Me Go*, the possibility of change is here hardly contemplated. More so than in *The Remains of the Day* and *The Unconsoled*, the central characters in this novel find themselves in a truly dire situation which would otherwise appear to mandate action; indeed, the strongest element of surprise is not that these characters turn out to be clones but that they never even think of acting to escape a system under which their organs are harvested until they die, or “complete.”

Even such a brief overview serves to point us toward one of the features shared by Ishiguro’s characters in these novels: namely, that they do not pursue their best interests. It is, in this sense, clear that these characters can, to different extents, be seen as complicit in the fact that their circumstances are far from ideal. Addressing the central problem of action in these novels with the sole aim of flagging up the characters’ complicity or their various delusions, however, as has been the case in much of the scholarship,² ends up leading us to view them as strange, or as outsiders, and puts us in danger of, in Nancy Armstrong’s words, either “patronizing” them or “losing patience” with them (451). Ishiguro, in fact, points out that he is “not sure” that his characters really “are outsiders as much as people say” (Matthews 115); and, indeed, a reading aimed at exposing their complicity or their delusions would end up bypassing the call for understanding that is at the heart of their narratives. All three novels, after all, confront us with first-person narrators who put us in the place of the “you” that they explicitly or implicitly address, and in so doing, as Armstrong argues via Émile Benveniste

² A notable exception here is Rebecca Walkowitz’s reading of *The Remains of the Day*, which I address below.

and Roberto Esposito, they issue a call for identification: as in a dialogue, the “you” can theoretically change places with – “can imaginatively become” – the “I” (454). The fact, however, that our circumstances differ significantly from the circumstances of a character like Kathy, Armstrong stresses, means that her attempt to communicate with us on the basis of an “I-you” relationship makes us all the more aware that the “I” that addresses us keeps “*sliding* from the first person . . . to a third person” with whom we cannot fully identify (454, emphasis added). As opposed to a complete separation, though, this *sliding* implies a process both of distancing and of affiliation, and this, I want to suggest, enables us to understand as well as to assess critically Ishiguro’s characters and their marked aversion to action. In what follows, then, rather than treating this devaluation of action merely as proof of a character’s complicity, or dismissing it as a peculiarity of sorts, as something “other” that cannot be comprehended, I seek to understand it instead.

There is, however, a sense in which such a preference for non-action in the literature of the late twentieth century and beyond is particularly difficult to understand. Indeed, if, as Lukács has it, modernist literature emphasizes subjective interiority to the extent that the possibility of action in the external, objective world all but disappears from the horizon, then this tendency would appear to have been reversed by the end of the century, in the post-Cold War world: a world marked by the entrenchment of neoliberalism, and, as such, by a persistent promotion of the worthiness of individual action in the pursuit of one’s interests. In S. M. Amadae’s words, “the close of the twentieth century” effectively coincides with the abandonment of the “no harm principle at the root of classical liberalism,” the hunt for individual gain “despite others” becoming the very principle that “animates the action of rational actors” (Amadae xvi). In light of this, it appears all the more significant that the protagonists of Ishiguro’s novels – novels published in the very era that Amadae is describing here – opt for non-action even when they would stand to gain more from acting. The apparent

strangeness of these characters could, then, be partly attributed to the fact that their behavior is clearly at odds with some of the key principles that define the context within which the novels appear, and within which we, their addressees, whose understanding they seek, find ourselves.

This state of being-at-odds with the present is also explored in various ways within the novels themselves. In *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*, for instance, the employment of the frame narrative brings to the forefront the notion of a past that, albeit far from ideal, the characters seem more at ease with than with the present, while *The Unconsoled* confronts us with a situation in which the narrator's past becomes merged, in strikingly literal ways, with the present of the story he relates – a present that is further complicated by the fact that the story is told in the past tense, the story's present thus also featuring as part of the past. In one way or another, then, the present circumstances of Ishiguro's protagonists remain inextricably bound to their pasts – pasts to which they repeatedly hearken back. Similarly, it is through such hearkening back that I attempt here to make sense of these characters. As my references to Arendt already suggest, I seek to examine their aversion to action in relation to a broader twentieth-century intellectual context within which human action comes to be seen as riskier than ever before: a context that speaks to, and helps reveal an underexplored aspect of, our present condition.

One of the most important manifestations of this broader intellectual development outside the realm of literature is game theory, which, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, in a world defined by the nuclear threat, was hugely impactful in promoting the principle of the fail-safe system, according to which rational methods of operation should seek to minimize risks. Crucially, the end of the Cold War and the de-escalation of nuclear tensions do not result in the abandonment of game theory; on the contrary, many thinkers identify significant affinities between fundamental game theoretic principles and the neoliberal ideologies that

prevail in the post-Cold War world. As we saw with Amadae, for instance, what defines the period from the end of the twentieth century onwards is the ruthless attempt to maximize individual gain despite others, which she flags up as one of the central elements of orthodox game theory. In Ishiguro's novels, though, we are confronted with a vision that is different from this: far from witnessing characters in such profit-maximizing pursuits, we are instead introduced to characters whose behaviors are geared toward risk aversion or manifest the spirit of non-action even if this contradicts their best interests. It is just such a mindset that they exhibit whenever they are, for example, seen to expand the significance of even the most minimal of actions; when they worry about the "catastrophic possibilities," as one of them puts it, that such actions could theoretically bring about (*Remains* 16-17); and when they refer to their employment of "strategies" or their devising of "plans" to avert possible risks or unspecified crises. Read as part of an intellectual constellation that includes Arendt's reflections on the status of human action in the twentieth century, as well as game theoretic principles of risk aversion, Ishiguro's non-actors serve to carve out an aspect of the post-Cold War era that is different from, though no less pernicious than, that encapsulated in the received neoliberal ideal of the hyper-individualistic, self-serving actor. These character-types reveal the persistence, expansion, and transformation of a legacy that posits the unpredictability of human action as particularly dangerous, and from which non-action (even against one's best interests) emerges as a rational imperative.

The Butler Didn't Do It

In *The Remains of the Day* (1989), the protagonist and narrator, Mr. Stevens, introduces himself in the 1950s, when he tells us of his life as a butler at Darlington Hall, gradually revealing that Lord Darlington, whom he had proudly served for many years, turns out to be a Nazi sympathizer. Even when Darlington's sympathies become explicit, though, Stevens just carries on; when Darlington dismisses two members of staff because they are Jewish, for

instance, Stevens fails to voice his opposition. As for his personal life – on matters that directly and immediately affect him – Stevens does not act here either; although he evidently has feelings for Miss Kenton, the housekeeper, he never confesses his love. At center stage in this novel, in short, is a man whose entire life is defined by non-action.

Crucially, this attitude does not seem to stem from a disbelief in the potential effectiveness of action; on the contrary, Stevens is time and again seen to magnify the importance of even minor actions. He begins his story, for example, by borrowing the language of the adventure narrative in telling us of an “expedition” that he is about to “undertake” (3), before it becomes clear that what he so meticulously prepares for is nothing more than a six-day holiday in the surrounding area. At one particularly striking point in his narrative, Stevens goes as far as to suggest that his polishing of the household silver before an important meeting at Darlington Hall “comprise[d] a contribution to the course of history” (147). As Rebecca Walkowitz says, Stevens ascribes to action an “unimaginable largeness,” extending the consequences of seemingly isolated actions both “beyond the individual” and “beyond the local” (218). As will become apparent in the course of my reading, it is this “largeness” that is at the heart of Stevens’s aversion to action; precisely because he believes that even seemingly minor actions can have expansive consequences, whenever he has a choice he opts for non-action instead.

Stevens’s tendency to magnify the importance of action is obvious in the way in which he structures his narrative, that is, as a list of anecdotes, which allows him to place marginal actions such as his polishing of the household silver alongside central ones, such as Darlington’s political decisions. In doing so, of course, Stevens does not simply extend the importance of the former but also diminishes that of the latter. In a sense, then, the structure of Stevens’s story instantiates something akin to what Rancière describes as “[f]iction’s new proportions and disproportions,” but the effects here are different to those that Rancière

extrapolates. Stevens's narrative has been seen not as indicative of a democratizing impulse (whereby a butler's tasks are elevated and placed alongside a lord's actions) but as an exercise in self-deception. Indeed, the actions whose significance Stevens diminishes – most notably, Darlington's dismissal of his Jewish staff – are actions that, in the present of the narrative, are seen as clearly mistaken, and so Stevens's way of telling his story has been read as an attempt to conceal from himself the complicity of his own non-action on these matters (Cooper 106-17). The fact, however, that Stevens appears to engage in such an attempt only retrospectively suggests that he does not immediately see his non-action as problematic, and so the question of why he does not act in the first place resurfaces.

Ishiguro seems to offer a hint as to what the answer might be in his recent Nobel lecture, where he says that *The Remains of the Day* is about a character who “has lived his life by the wrong values” (*My Twentieth Century* 19). In light of this, it would appear that it is neither ignorance nor lack of courage that prompts Stevens's non-action, but something deeper and broader: a set of values. Stevens's definition of the “great butler” is especially revealing in this respect; the aspiration to be a great butler, after all, is what directs his existence, and so his idea of what this consists of offers a glimpse into what he really values:

It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. . . . I tend to believe this is true. Continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race is capable of. Continentals – and by and large the Celts, as you will no doubt agree – are as a rule unable to control themselves in moments of strong emotion . . . and it is for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman. (*Remains* 44)

This passage shows just how much Stevens values consistency and “dependable” service (7); great butlers, he says, guarantee stability by behaving in the same way in every situation. This is why he looks down on the Continentals and the Celts, who, in his evidently essentialist/racist view, are prone to being emotional, and, as such, are liable to responding differently under different circumstances. Since emotions arise when one finds oneself in a

situation that somehow deviates from the norm, experiencing emotions means registering often subtle differences that can affect one's behavior, thus risking a disruption of stability. It is for this reason that emotional proclivity is anathema to Stevens, as are any other practices that inject a given situation with unpredictability.

Banter is one such practice that is of particular concern to Stevens. As he confesses, his suspicion that his new employer expects him to engage in banter fills him with anxiety: "How would one know for sure," he says, "that at any given moment a response of the bantering sort is expected?" (16) Since opportunities for banter arise unexpectedly, allowing no time for preparing what one might say, they give rise to what Stevens describes – without irony – as "catastrophic possibilit[ies]" (16-17). True to his conviction that a great butler ought to strive for consistency, then, Stevens devises a strategy that will enable him to banter in the least unpredictable way: whenever an "odd moment" arises, he tells us, he looks at his "immediate surroundings" and formulates three possible bantering comments (139). And, given that Stevens's surroundings remain unchanged – he has not left Darlington Hall for many years – this strategy comes down to building an archive of safe responses that he can retrieve whenever needed. For Stevens, it seems, to engage in banter spontaneously rather than by sticking to a fail-safe strategy is to be like those individuals who cannot "control themselves" – individuals whose actions are unpredictable and who, therefore, cannot be great butlers (43).

If, however, as both Stevens and Arendt have it, action bespeaks the possibility of change and has potentially expansive consequences, then all actions entail the unpredictable; indeed, for Arendt, this is so to the extent that "only the total abolition of action can ever hope to cope with unpredictability" (*Past and Future* 60). And if unpredictability is inextricable from human action, then Stevens's clear attempt to oust even the smallest possibility of the unpredictable effectively constitutes an attempt to banish action from the realm of the butler. We might, then, say that the long-standing cliché that "the butler did it" is here revised through

a butler who cannot be (rightly or wrongly) accused of doing “it,” but a butler who is fundamentally *averse* to doing or acting, and who opts instead for mechanical-like models of behavior that seek to do away with unpredictability. Stevens’s non-action, in short, does not stem from a failure to recognize how he might stand to gain from acting; his focus, in other words, is not on the potential gains of action but on its potentially unwelcome consequences, and so the capacity to act and bring about change is, for him, best left un-actualized, the continuity and stability ensured by non-action being his preferable alternative.

The Ideal of Non-Action

In his reading of Stevens, Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that this illiberal character unwittingly promotes liberal principles in that he is asking to be understood as an individual, on the basis of his own values: the values that he has chosen for himself and by which he has lived his life (313-16). Stevens’s values, though, are not as individual or idiosyncratic as Appiah seems to be suggesting; rather, his concern with stability, his aversion to the unpredictable, and his advocacy of emotionless, mechanical-like, and risk-free behaviors are all in alignment with a wider proclivity for models of operation that seek to marginalize human action. Such a proclivity is seen in the work of leading game theorists, which began rising to prominence around the time when Stevens tells his story, in the 1950s, and which, by the time the *Remains of the Day* was published, had become hugely influential. In *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944), the foundational text of game theory, John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern suggest that their “game” scenarios can evaluate in advance all the possible outcomes in a given situation, and can point out the most rational behavior in each case – a behavior which typically seeks to avert risks. Their aim, they say, is to provide “a complete set of rules of behavior in all conceivable scenarios” (33). The *raison d’être* of their theory, in this sense, is ultimately to oust unpredictability, and, in so doing, in effect to minimize or eliminate human action as defined by Arendt. Indeed, Arendt herself writes that

the “trouble” with game theoretic strategies is that, far from enhancing proper, thoughtful decision-making on the subject’s part, they in fact *preclude* it (*Violence* 6): they dictate behaviors “so thoroughly” that the player “never” really has to “make a decision” (Poundstone 48). In this sense, the human subject-as-agential-actor is essentially removed from the picture; the fallibility of such actors and the dangers entailed in any actions they might have otherwise carried out are replaced by behaviors whose outcomes are “known” and evaluated in advance – and, as such, behaviors which Arendt would regard as amounting to non-action.³

Though von Neumann proved his first game theoretic principle in a 1928 paper, and *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* was published in 1944, it was in the context of the nuclear threat, when anxieties about what Arendt describes as the magnified dangers of human action were amplified, that game theory became influential by capturing the “spirit” of the times and addressing such anxieties through its calculated, risk-averse models of operation. As Amadae observes, after the publication of game theory pioneer Thomas Schelling’s paper “The Reciprocal Fear of Surprise Attack” (1958), “defense analysts routinely viewed the nuclear arms race as a Prisoner’s Dilemma”; indeed, Amadae goes as far as to suggest that this debate rendered game theory so influential that its strategies came to shape “all purposive [behavior],” both “during and beyond the Cold War era” (79, 20). As we saw, the key characteristic of this “beyond” – that is, the post-Cold War, neoliberal era – for Amadae is the glorification of the individualistic pursuit of one’s interests despite others, and The Prisoner’s Dilemma, schematized in *figure 1* below, serves to demonstrate how game theory’s preemptive logic promotes such pursuits.⁴

³ As Arendt goes on to say, game theory’s devaluation of action is manifested not only in its replacement of human action with rigid models of operation that preclude thinking, but also in its disregard for the actual in favor of the potential. “The logical flaw in [game theory’s] constructions of future events,” she writes, is that “what first appears as a hypothesis . . . turns immediately, usually after a few paragraphs, into a ‘fact,’ which then gives birth to a whole string of non-facts, with the result that the speculative character of the whole enterprise is forgotten” (*Violence* 6-7).

⁴ *Fig. 1* is derived from the first matrix appearing in a note by A. W. Tucker – the very note which ultimately led to this scenario becoming known as The Prisoner’s Dilemma.

Player A		
	Player B	
	B: acts collaboratively	B: acts individualistically
A: acts collaboratively	0 years 0 years	- 4 years - 2 years
B: acts individualistically	- 2 year - 4 years	- 2 years - 2 years

Fig. 1. The Prisoner's Dilemma. The matrix shows losses depending on whether the prisoners act collaboratively (not betray each other) or individualistically (betray each other).

The matrix outlines the four possible outcomes emerging from a situation in which two people are being questioned separately about a joint law violation. As the table of payoffs shows, the ideal outcome would be to not admit to the violation (upper left corner): if each person trusts their partner to do the same, then the police will not obtain the confession needed to press charges, and so neither of the two will lose anything. Though ideal, this option entails the danger of being betrayed by one's partner, who, to avoid risking a full sentence, might decide to confess (upper left and lower right corners). From this perspective, pursuit of the ideal outcome is deemed irrational, just as, in the question of nuclear proliferation that rendered The Prisoner's Dilemma so influential, the mutually beneficial outcome of bilateral disarmament is ruled out because the emphasis is on avoiding the risk of unilateral defection. In short, The Prisoner's Dilemma in its different guises dictates that to behave rationally is to behave individualistically (lower right corner); although doing so means "bring[ing] about a collectively self-defeating outcome" (Heap and Varoufakis 37-38), the biggest risk (of receiving a full sentence) is at least averted.

The stakes are of course much higher in the case of risks like long prison sentences or indeed a nuclear war compared to the apparently "catastrophic possibilities" that Stevens tries to avert in *The Remains of the Day* (16-17). While the two are clearly not equivalent, and the novel is evidently not a meditation on the implications of game theory, the logic of calculated risk aversion is very much detectable in Stevens's behavior too. He does, after all, repeatedly

tell us of his methods for averting various risks throughout: when, for instance, he endeavors to avoid a potentially disruptive discussion about a misplaced ornament (60-61); or when he strives to think of ways of minimizing the embarrassment before an awkward conversation with Mr. Cardinal (92-94); or when he tries to calculate where to stand during a special occasion so as to allow the guests enough privacy while being sufficiently present to serve them (75-76). In all such occasions, Stevens seeks to identify all potential risks in advance, takes us through his different options, weighs their merits against their drawbacks, and arrives at “the best strategy” in each case (60). Most importantly, though, the logic of risk aversion is discernible in Stevens’s approach to what matters to him more than any of the above-mentioned incidents: his relationship with Miss Kenton. Indeed, we can go as far as to say that what we might think of as The Stevens-Kenton Dilemma (*figure 2*) presents us with a scenario that is structurally comparable to The Prisoner’s Dilemma.

Stevens		
	Kenton acts	Kenton does not act
Kenton		
Stevens acts	+1	- 2
	+1	-2
Stevens does not act	- 2	0
	-2	0

Fig. 2. The Stevens-Kenton Dilemma. The matrix indicates potential gains and losses for each “player” depending on whether they act/confess their feelings or not.

This “dilemma” concerns the question of why neither Stevens nor Kenton act on the feelings they evidently have for each other. Though the option of acting enables the ideal outcome in which Stevens and Kenton end up happy together (upper left corner), it also entails risks. Stevens might act, for instance, but Kenton might not reciprocate, and vice versa; in this case, the former would end up being unhappy while the latter would have to deal with the awkwardness of it all (upper right and lower left corners). Avoiding these risks means ruling

out the route to the only mutually beneficial outcome in favor of a suboptimal one: if neither Stevens nor Kenton acts on their feelings, then neither gains anything but at least neither risks losing either (lower right corner).

Stevens and Kenton's reluctance to act appears to suggest an outlook such as that emerging from *figure 1*, which places risk avoidance at the heart of rational behavior. This affinity suggests that Stevens's preoccupation with avoiding what he imagines to be "catastrophic possibilities," combined with his tendency to magnify the importance of even the most minor actions, can be read as part of a broader intellectual constellation in which human action features as particularly dangerous, and in which game theoretic models of behavior emerge as the antidote – these being models that, according to Arendt, preclude proper decision-making and, as such, amount to models of non-action. At the same time, we can see that The Stevens-Kenton dilemma presents us with a situation in which this legacy of non-action assumes both more literal and more expansive dimensions. Indeed, at no point does Stevens appear to debate whether to act on his feelings for Kenton or not; his non-action features less as something he properly decides on and more as something of a quasi-mechanical default. The logic of risk aversion here, moreover, emerges in the realm of romantic love – a realm that serves to bring to the forefront the fact that Stevens cannot be said, in any meaningful sense, to be pursuing his best interests.

Telling in this regard are Ishiguro's thoughts on a new novel in which, as he puts it, the characters would be "the casualties" of a "world-view" that encourages them to follow, rather than restrain, their various desires, and which therefore ends up leaving them with the feeling that they are always "missing out" on something (Shaffer and Ishiguro 14). Although Ishiguro is yet to publish such a novel populated with characters who pursue action on all fronts, his observation inevitably redirects attention to his existing, non-acting characters. If, as his comment suggests, the protagonists of his still-to-come novel would essentially conform to

the neoliberal vision of subjects-as-individual-actors who relentlessly pursue their interests and urges, then *The Remains of the Day* presents us with a different – and differently damaging – aspect of the contemporary moment. Here, action is seen as always potentially dangerous – and, as we have seen, this is so not in the realm of military strategies or prison sentencing calculations, but in the realm of the private and of romantic love – while non-action emerges as the preferable alternative even when this is against one’s best interests. The novel, then, serves to alert us to an overlooked aspect of the calculating, individualistic behaviors that, as Amadae has it, become established as the rational *modus operandi* in the post-Cold War, neoliberal era (xvi). Through Stevens and his preoccupation with risk aversion, we can see how, rather than being prompted unendingly to pursue self-serving action, one might be prompted to slip into the sphere of non-action instead.

Averting the Crisis; or, Carrying On

A logic at the heart of which is risk aversion and the spirit of non-action is also detectable in *The Unconsoled* (1995), which transports us to an unnamed European city that is “close to crisis” (99). To prevent the eruption of this crisis, a plan – or “schedule” – outlining the course of action to be taken is produced, and Mr. Ryder, a famous pianist, is tasked with carrying it out. It soon transpires, though, that Ryder is not aware of the exact contents of this schedule; it is as if he has been put into the impossible position of an actor who is to perform in accordance with a script to which he does not have access. Ryder, then, does not understand his role properly, but this is not to say that he is like those “lesser butlers” who, as Stevens puts it in *The Remains of the Day*, fail to “inhabit” their role “to the utmost” (43). For such individuals, Stevens says, the execution of their duties is “like playing some pantomime role,” or like putting up a “façade” underneath which there is an “actor” (43) – an agential subject that remains distinct from the role that is being performed. Unlike these “lesser butlers,” Ryder cannot be described as an agential actor – and neither can anyone else in this narrative. Agency

and action are here split, with the figure of the agent on the one hand being embodied in the absent, yet somehow all-pervading, schedule or “script” which dictates Ryder’s performance, and with the figure of the actor on the other being embodied in the character of Ryder himself.

The fact that the narrative is structured either around episodes in which Ryder becomes aware of things that he is expected to do, or episodes in which he is doing things that he does not seem to know he is doing until he catches himself in their midst, indicates that he operates in a non-agential and rather mechanical-like fashion. On the other hand, though, the fact that these episodes culminate in moments of realization suggests that Ryder’s behavior is unlike the seamlessly mechanical mode of operation that Stevens strives for in *The Remains of the Day*. In other words, the fact that Ryder keeps catching himself doing things means that the mechanicity of his behavior is momentarily interrupted by these realizations. Much of the scholarship concentrates on Ryder’s evident memory failures and trauma-induced emotional repression as a way of explaining these moments of sudden awareness (Quarrie 143), but what is more striking is that even such instances of lucidity fail to instigate agential action. This failure is rendered all the more conspicuous by the peculiar mode of narration employed in the novel, which suggests that Ryder is hovering between two oppositional states of being: he features as a first-person narrator who on the one hand is largely unaware of what is going on both with and around him, while on the other exhibiting signs of remarkable omniscience. He is, for example, time and again seen to access the personal experiences and opinions of other characters, in this way revealing an extraordinary capacity which puts him in a position to behave like an incredibly informed agential actor, but which he channels to the end of non-action instead. When, for instance, he accesses an apparently private conversation during which he learns that a journalist – who describes him, among other things, as “a difficult shit” (166) – plans to trick him into getting photographed in front of a controversial monument, he still goes along with this plan without so much as hesitating.

Ryder's *modus operandi*, in short, seems to consist not in acting but in just carrying on; as he says to Boris at one point, "I have to keep going on these trips" because "you can never tell when it's going to come along. I mean the very . . . important trip, the one that's very important, not just for me but for everyone, everyone in the whole world" (239). As far as Ryder is concerned, then, change will come about when it comes about; he does not, in other words, consider whether direct agential action would be necessary to bring it forth. This, indeed, is a narrative in which action is throughout synonymized with non-action. The inhabitants' strategy for dealing with the crisis, for instance, is meant to culminate with a final event in the form of a concert, but this ends up being a non-event in which Ryder does not perform his much anticipated piece – the very piece we assume is expected somehow to change things. And yet, the reaction to this outcome is not one of intense disappointment, and it does not indicate frustrated expectations either; the townspeople have, after all, stuck to the same plan for some time, periodically replacing one musician with another instead of trying a different tactic, as though meaningful change is not really what they are after. Their underlying conviction, it seems, is that the aversion of crises is paradoxically achieved not through change but through maintaining the status quo.

This sense of a paradox emerges on a formal level too, through the lack of distinction between the past that Ryder's narrative relates and the present in which the relating occurs. As Matthew Mead observes, the present *as* present is effectively absent from Ryder's narrative, the present tense appearing only in "remembered speech" (507). The very fact, of course, that this present (now past) *is* remembered necessarily implies the passage of time, but here this is a passage that suggests stasis rather than movement or progression from the past. This paradoxically static movement, moreover, assumes spatial dimensions throughout the novel, whenever Ryder travels, often for miles, from one building in the city to another only to find out that the buildings he enters upon his arrival are somehow adjacent to, or

contained within, the buildings that he has left behind, as though no distance has been covered despite all the travelling. Even in the final scene, when Ryder sets off for a new journey, his train in fact goes around the city in an endless loop. Just as Ryder is here on the move but goes nowhere, and just as the narrative suggests that time passes but in a passage which signals an entrapment in the past, so too the townspeople's strategy for dealing with the crisis effectively amounts to the continuation of the status quo, in what appears to be a plan of action which in fact amounts to non-action.

As such, this strategy is underpinned by a rationale akin to that promoted by Albert Wohlstetter in response to a different crisis: the crisis concerning the "delicate balance of terror." Indeed, the much-talked about crisis in *The Unconsoled* remains abstract throughout, in this way shifting the attention away from the specific content of the crisis to something that clearly matters more – namely, the logic with which it is approached. Just as Wohlstetter argues that the key to the deterrence of a nuclear war lies in a "sustained effort" to *maintain* (rather than abolish) the "balance of terror" (8), so too the sustained efforts of the townspeople in the novel are directed not at change, which would be disruptive, but at the preservation of the status quo. So it is that the crisis always remains imminent but the risk of full eruption does not materialize – and, notably, this is so not just in the novel's peculiar city, but also around the world. As Ryder says, "[t]he fact is, people need me. I arrive in a place and more often than not find terrible problems. Deep-seated, seemingly intractable problems, and people are so grateful that I have come" (37). Ryder, then, has apparently been ascribed, both locally and globally, the role of a "great man" capable of performing "great deeds," but the achievement of this mock-Aristotelian figure, it seems, is ultimately to keep the situation at a standstill; the "greatness" of Ryder's actions, in other words, consists precisely in that they amount to non-actions.

Crucially, though, the affinity between the seemingly global strategy employed in *The*

Unconsoled and Wohlstetter's own global crisis-aversion strategy does not suggest that the novel simply points toward the persistence of a logic such as that underpinning the latter: a logic according to which the preservation of stability, however "delicate" this may be, is preferable to the dangers of action and its promise of change. Rather, the novel also hints at the mutation of this legacy of non-action. As we saw, Arendt objects to the game theoretic strategies that rise to prominence from the mid-twentieth century onwards because they preclude proper decision-making, and in so doing effectively paint the human subject-as-agential-actor out of the picture. What *The Unconsoled* presents us with, by contrast, is the re-emergence of this previously vanishing subject: as though in conformity with the neoliberal glorification of the individual as an agential subject that is capable of, and responsible for, bringing about prosperity, at center stage in Ishiguro's novel is a character who features as a glorified savior figure – a great actor who is believed to be capable of singlehandedly dealing with the widespread crisis that plagues the city. At the same time, though, this ideal of the capable individual actor is severely compromised by the fact that Ryder's behavior is, as we have seen, largely determined by a "script" to which he does not have access but which he is nevertheless compelled to follow in a mechanical-like, non-agential fashion. *The Unconsoled* thus uncovers a paradox in post-Cold War ways of thinking subjectivity. On the one hand, the subject as the site of agential action seems to have once again reared its head through the neoliberal glorification of the individual. On the other hand, we still remain within the nexus of a predetermined, algorithmic pattern of non-action which gained prominence during the Cold War and has exploded in the era of the digital and of computer networks – an era in which, as Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker put it, to be an individual is to exist "inseparably from a set of [determined] possibilities and parameters," always functioning "within a topology of control" (40). In centralizing a character who occupies the paradoxical role of the non-acting actor, *The Unconsoled* captures and brings to the foreground this

fundamental paradox that defines our own era, in this way imbuing the figure of the non-actor with a thoroughly contemporary significance.

The Impossibility of Action

As in *The Unconsoled* so too in *Never Let Me Go* (2005) we are introduced to yet another world in which the status quo is maintained, this time in a narrative in which the future is either already the past at the time the story is being told, or appears to be always already mapped out – a narrative, then, in which action as a route to change seems to have been “impossibilized.” Here, Kathy H. gradually reveals that she is a cloned woman whose organs will be “donated” to non-cloned individuals one by one, until she “completes,” but she nevertheless keeps calm and goes along with this. Unlike Ryder, though, who betrays a belief that change could come about – when the “very important trip” comes along (239) – Kathy’s is a narrative in which the possibility of change is virtually non-existent.

The episode which gives the novel its title, in which Kathy shares her memory of dancing, with a pillow in her arms, to her favorite song – “Baby, baby, never let me go...” – suggests as much (70). Indeed, it contradicts those who, in addressing the key question of Kathy’s non-action, have either accused her of being complicit (Cooper 106-17), or have excused her for being the victim of a mechanism that keeps her compliant by leading her to “misapprehend social injustice as privilege” (Currie 161). In both cases, the implication is that Kathy *could* have acted – had she not been complicit or had she not been “duped.” The dancing scene, though, serves to undermine any such suggestion. Like her imagined woman in the song, Kathy too has been given to understand that she cannot have babies but, in misinterpreting the song’s refrain, she reluctantly allows herself to imagine that this could potentially be proved wrong (70). The outcome of this anticipation, of course, is by this time already known; the future that Kathy “remembers envisaging” in this narrative of *recollected* or *retrospective anticipation*, as Mark Currie notes, is now the past (Currie 155). Crucially, though, Kathy

says that she had realized “even at the time” that her interpretation of the refrain “didn’t fit with the rest of the lyrics,” and, by extension, that any anticipations for an alternative future that this interpretation gave rise to would not become reality (*Never Let Me Go* 70). The importance of Kathy’s retrospection, then, lies in something more than in merely knowing what “did and did not” happen in the end (Currie 155); Kathy also knows what *could* or *could not have* happened. As a cloned being produced solely to make organ donations, her biological makeup does not include the reproductive function, and so any action that she might have taken could not have changed this. We are, then, once again confronted with a turn toward non-action that offers a different vision to the neoliberal orthodoxy of the individual as a credible agent of change; while we might will Kathy to act, this is a situation in which the possibility of alternatives – even in the form of hypothetical “could haves” – is foreclosed.

This is consolidated and accentuated at the end of the novel, when Kathy and Tommy learn that Hailsham, the school they attended, was in fact an experiment designed to prove that cloned beings have “souls,” and that the harvesting of their organs should stop (255). As Miss Emily reveals, though, people were not willing to go “back to the dark days” of “their own children, their spouses, their parents . . . [dying] from cancer,” from “motor neurone disease,” from “heart disease” (257-58). Hailsham, then, fails, and what makes this failure all the more resounding is that it is not confined to the past. It is not just that Hailsham is testimony to an alternative “could have” for Kathy and the other clones having already been attempted and rejected, but also that this rejection dooms to failure any alternative imaginable “could be” for the next generation of clones too. Project Hailsham, in other words, has shown that people view the benefits of the system as outweighing its “uncomfortable” costs, and, therefore, that they see no reason to “reverse” the process (257).

The system does, indeed, appear to secure a “net gain”: with each clone making an average of three organ donations, the sacrifice of *one* individual enables the prolonged life of

approximately *three* others. Clearly, however, this net gain does not point to “Adam Smith scenarios” such as those that Halpern explores in *Eclipse of Action*. While Smith’s liberal capitalist system allegedly benefits (even if unevenly) the entirety of a given population, this is a situation where the gains of non-cloned individuals explicitly and directly translate as the cloned individuals’ losses. In other words, what we have here is a clear conflict-of-interest scenario which exhibits key affinities with a game theoretic brand of rationality; this type of calculation of payoffs is, indeed, in line with the infamous logic that military strategist and game theorist Herman Kahn outlines in *On Thermonuclear War* (1960). Here, Kahn departs from the key Prisoner’s Dilemma principle of opting for a mutually suboptimal outcome which averts risks. Instead, he notoriously argues for the launch of a nuclear attack on the USSR despite the “awful” losses that the USA would suffer as a result of the ensuing retaliation; there are, he claims by way of defending this position, “degrees of awfulness” (say, tens of millions of dead rather than hundreds of millions) that are manageable (19-20). In advancing this argument, Kahn shifts the emphasis away from the interests of the individual subject in favor of an ultra-rational system within which overall benefits are seen as outweighing overall costs.

Such a logic is traceable in *Never Let Me Go* too: just as causing the death of a sizeable part of the population is, for Kahn, an acceptable cost for a victory that would be enjoyed by others, so for the people to whom Miss Emily refers the procedural murder of the clones through the harvesting of their organs is the “less awful” option. Albeit partially set in the Cold War period, then, *Never Let Me Go* enables us to witness this brutal logic as it operates not in the context of military strategizing but in the workings of an otherwise peaceful society. In this context, the novel explores a situation in which the individual’s interests are trampled within a system based on ultra-rational calculations, and in so doing presents us with a vision that helps illuminate the condition of the human subject in our own era – the era that proclaims

to place the individual at center stage. In *Never Let Me Go*, the individual is literally expendable, and is left without the capacity to act and effect structural change, just as, in societies based on a mixture of unfettered market forces and algorithmic control, individuals are seemingly reduced to numbers or pieces of data, and are stripped of individual and collective agency.⁵ It is this dramatization of individuals that find themselves in the throes of a brutal but ultra-rational system that makes *Never Let Me Go* resonate at once with the contemporary world and its foundations.

Crucially, change here is not only undesirable for those who benefit from the system but also unimaginable for those who do not. As the rumor about the “deferrals” suggests, the only imaginable alternative for the clones is never one of a real escape but merely one of temporary relief, and this, as it turns out, is only a myth. Most importantly, however, even in a hypothetical scenario in which Kathy as an individual, or as part of a group of individuals, were to act – say, if they were to escape – then the outcome of their action could not be envisaged as a change in the system itself. As the failure of Project Hailsham suggests, the novel dramatizes a conflict-of-interest situation which, as in a game theoretic scenario, would have led the opposing “player” – the non-cloned population – to respond in a way that would minimize their losses: namely, by producing more clones for organ harvesting. Kathy’s narrative, in this sense, is not just a narrative of *recollected* or *retrospective anticipation*, whereby past alternatives (or “could haves”) have already been closed off, but also, as Currie suggests, a narrative of *anticipated retrospection* (161), whereby what is still the future (or a “could be”) in the narrative present can be looked at *as if* in retrospect, *as though* it has occurred. Although Currie argues that this renders visible a paradox that is latent in “any novel” – “the paradox of a future that already exists” by virtue of the novel having already

⁵ For a similar point on the link between market forces, algorithmic control, and a lack of agency or “the power to act” see Paul Mason, *Clear Bright Future: A Radical Defence of the Human Being* (xii, 186-89).

been written (162) – *Never Let Me Go* is a novel of anticipated retrospection in an another sense too: namely, in that it forecloses speculation not just on what could happen differently in the narrative future that has already been written, but also on possible alternatives in an entirely hypothetical future. So it is that, even in the speculative event of future action – whereby Kathy and the other clones escape – the plausible outcome, as we saw, would be the re-establishment of the same system via the production of more clones to replace the escapees. As in a game theoretic universe, then, we are here able to extrapolate, and outline in advance, the outcomes of such alternative scenarios as though they have already occurred. And so, although non-action is clearly against Kathy’s best interests as an individual, the capacity to act and bring forth structural change is radically devalued – not just in the past and in the present but also in a hypothetical future. As such, this is ultimately a narrative in which the only “rational” option seems to be to keep calm and carry on: the option, that is, of non-action.

“The Likes of You and Me”

Though *The Remains of the Day*, *The Unconsoled*, and *Never Let Me Go* all centralize non-action, each also features instances in which action does surface – not as a capacity to which everybody can lay claim, but as one which only a certain category of people ought to exercise. In *The Unconsoled*, it is only characters like Ryder – and unlike the townspeople – that are seen as capable of occupying the role of the actor (however paradoxical this role turns out to be here), and, indeed, such a divide between actors and non-actors is also present, and articulated as such, in *The Remains of the Day*. In addressing a “you” whom he presumes to be a butler too, for instance, Stevens says that “the great affairs of the nation” are “beyond the understanding of those such as you and me,” and should therefore be left to “those great gentlemen at the hub of this world,” who can be trusted to carry out the actions that matter (209, 257). Rather than reviving the Aristotelian model of the “great men” of action, however, this divide ultimately serves further to undermine the worthiness of the capacity to act as such.

This is perhaps most obvious in *Never Let Me Go*, where Miss Emily and Madam not only fail to achieve change, but, as we have seen, they also condemn to failure future acts of resistance in advance, effectively rendering redundant the very figure of the actor itself. As for *The Remains of the Day*, gentlemen like Darlington, who, according to Stevens, can supposedly be trusted to perform the right actions, in fact get it very wrong.

Significant in this regard is Stevens's argument that Darlington could not have known that his actions would, "with the passage of time," "tur[n] out" to be "misguided" (211). All actions, Stevens implies, can have unpredictable consequences outside the control of the actors who perform them, and so he refrains not only from condemning Darlington but also from praising Reginald Cardinal, who, in opposing Darlington, finds himself on the right side of history. The implication that not even those who are "at the hub of this world" can grasp the ramifications of their actions contradicts Stevens's own assertion that "the great gentlemen" know better than "the likes of you and me" (257, 211). This, however, is not to be mistaken for a democratic demolition of hierarchies such as those identified by Rancière. What emerges from Stevens's analysis is not the idea that ordinary people are as well-placed to perform the right actions as the aristocracy is, but, rather, that nobody is fit to do so.

It is precisely this point that Mr. Lewis's crucial "toast [t]o professionalism" hammers home (107). Lewis, the American delegate at one of Darlington's dinner parties, describes the host and his guests as "gentlemen amateurs" who are "well-meaning" but have "no idea what sort of place the world is becoming" (106). While, in one of the novel's most poignant scenes, these gentlemen discredit the notion of democratic action by "proving" that ordinary people like Stevens are unfit to participate in decisions of global economic and military significance, Lewis says that they themselves are not fit for such a task either. "The days when you could act out of your noble instincts," he tells them, "are over," and he asks them to stop meddling "in matters they don't understand" (107). And if at the heart of the matter is the ability to

“understand,” which in this instance refers to the ability to determine accurately the best course of action in a given situation, then Lewis is here effectively anticipating one of his country’s most influential contributions to world affairs in the twentieth century. “You here in Europe need *professionals* to run your affairs,” he asserts (107, emphasis added), and indeed it is the strategies of just such intellectual professionals – the game theorists – that the US government came to fund, employ, and promote in the following decades, effectively enabling them to run world affairs. In looking ahead to “the sort of place the world is becoming,” Lewis anticipates the technocratic tendencies that these professionals helped to establish during the Cold War – tendencies which, by the time *The Remains of the Day* was published, were not confined to nuclear strategies and foreign affairs but were also extended to the realm of economics and to politics at large.⁶ This episode in the novel thus provides a kind of concretization of the intellectual legacy of non-action, which filters down into the era of neoliberalism: the system of technocracy *par excellence*.⁷ In the technocratic societies that Lewis heralds, acting on one’s emotions, “noble instincts,” or indeed principles is deemed to be inappropriate, and is replaced by risk-minimizing strategies devised by experts. Agential action, in this sense, is radically devalued – and professionally so – regardless of whether the agent is a “great gentleman” or one of Stevens’s “likes.”

Conclusion: The Irrational Rationality of Non-Action

In this reading of Ishiguro, I have suggested that the key issue of non-action in his work can be seen as part of a broader turn against action, which, in much of the literary imagination of the mid-twentieth century onwards, manifests itself through the centralization of the figure of the non-actor. In Ishiguro’s work, this figure serves to offer a glimpse into some of the ways in which the question of action illuminates the condition of the individual in the contemporary

⁶ Amadae’s *Prisoners of Reason* (2015) constitutes a full-length study on this.

⁷ As David Harvey points out, “Neoliberals tend to favor governance by experts and elites” (66). On this point see also Arthur MacEwan, 172.

world. Indeed, this preoccupation with the capacity to act, as we have seen, goes beyond the literary realm, pointing to a wider intellectual constellation in which non-action features as a rational imperative. In forming part of such a constellation, the mechanical-like, non-agential, risk-averse, and change-thwarting behaviors of Ishiguro's protagonists, as I have sought to demonstrate, point to a legacy of non-action which becomes consolidated with the rise of game theory in the mid-twentieth century, and which persists, in different guises, in our own era. In fact, the complex temporalities that define these novels flag up the importance of the past, prompting us to look back to it in our effort to understand these apparently peculiar characters. Ryder's perpetually *past* present in *The Unconsoled* (whereby the present tense in his narrative is consigned to the past), as well as his perpetually *present* past (whereby his past literally appears within his present) constitutes an example of this. As for *Never Let Me Go*, while the device of the frame narrative does distinguish the present from the past, it does so without giving a sense of a clean break from it. Rather, as both a narrative of anticipated retrospection and a narrative of retrospective anticipation, this novel poignantly suggests that any visions Kathy may have, or have had, of an open future – and, therefore, a future that can potentially turn out to be different from the one that has already been mapped out in the past – are illusory. Complex temporalities are also at work in *The Remains of the Day*, where Stevens remembers, in the present of his narrative, incidents like Lewis's toast to professionalism, which anticipates a technocratic Cold War future that is already materializing when Stevens tells his story in the 1950s, and which is firmly established, in a much more widespread mutation, by the time the novel is published. In amalgamating the past with the present, such temporalities support the tracing of affinities between these post-Cold War narratives and wider tendencies that begin rising to prominence from the mid-twentieth century. In so doing, they prevent us from treating the behaviors of Ishiguro's protagonists as mere peculiarities or idiosyncrasies, enabling us instead to understand them as mutations of a

logic which, as we saw with Arendt, posits human action as dangerously unpredictable, and which, as the rise of game theory shows, promotes models of behavior that amount to non-action. In this way, Ishiguro's non-actors serve to foreground aspects of the contemporary condition of the subject which are often obscured by the orthodoxy of the individual as an agent of action and change.

It is, after all, toward the existence of a broader condition or wider system of values that Ishiguro's narrators point by explicitly or implicitly addressing themselves to individuals whom they assume to be their "likes." Such an assumption serves partly to "de-strange" or "de-other" these characters by implying that their outlook, including their attitudes toward action, is aligned with values that are shared by others: at the very least, by the "you" that they address. That the role of this "you" comes to be occupied by us of course complicates matters, since we are unlikely to be their "likes": butlers, clones, or famous musicians/saviors. And yet, had we not failed to "inhabit," as Stevens might say, the role of the "you" that they ascribe to us, full identification would have still been thwarted. Notably, Ishiguro's narrators are often at pains to maintain their distance from the communities that they otherwise identify with. Like many other clones, for instance, Kathy is a "carer," but she is keen to say from the very beginning that she has reason to believe that she is an exceptionally good one. Similarly, Ryder – who is aware that his role as a musician/savior has also been ascribed to others – lets it be known that his own services (unlike, say, Brodsky's) are required not just in the novel's city but around the world too. In the same vein, while Stevens sees himself as part of a community of butlers, he repeatedly seeks to establish that he is not of the "lesser" variety. Therefore, when these characters assume that we, their addressees, are to be included among their "likes," this inclusion is also an exclusion that keeps us at a distance from them. In other words, the process of *de*-othering that characterizes all three of these novels is complemented by a simultaneous process of *re*-othering. And so, on the one hand, we are forced to

understand Kathy's non-action on the grounds that the system under which she operates rules out the possibility of its abolition, and in doing so diminishes the worthiness of individual action as means to achieving lasting change. But if Kathy's attitude of keeping calm and carrying on is, in this sense, rational, then its irrational element does not escape us either: though she could not have abolished the system in its entirety, she could have at least pursued her own best interests by attempting to escape with Tommy. Likewise, although we can recognize the rationality of risk aversion in Stevens's failure to act on his feelings for Kenton, we are nevertheless distant enough from him to discern that his theoretically rational behavior in practice translates as an irrational and entirely avoidable prohibition on, as Ishiguro puts it, "being loved by the one woman he cares for" (*My Twentieth Century* 19). Similarly, the townspeople's strange strategy in *The Unconsoled* is on the one hand "de-stranged" by the fact that it ultimately meets its objective of preventing a catastrophic eruption of "the crisis," but if this success renders the strategy rational, it is clear that at its core lies an irrationality that serves to "re-strange" it: success here amounts not to resolving the crisis but to keeping the situation at a standstill by *preserving* the possibility of the very outcome whose actualization it aims to prevent.

It is this oscillation between *de*-othering or *de*-stranging and *re*-othering or *re*-stranging that enables us to engage properly with Ishiguro's non-actors, prompting us both to understand and to assess critically their attitudes. In being distanced from them, we are in a position from which we can recognize that the values by which they have lived their lives, to echo Ishiguro's Nobel lecture, are the wrong ones. On the other hand, though, in being prevented from treating them as radically "other," and in viewing the figure of the non-actor as part of a wider intellectual legacy which evidently continues on in different mutations and inflections in our own era, we are left to wonder whether we in fact have a little more in common with them than we might like to think.

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