

Disposable children in Robert Walser, Kazuo Ishiguro and the TV miniseries *Sharp Objects*

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Abstract: Traumatized children’s “compliance” with their tormentors and aggressors was described by psychoanalyst Ferenczi as a trauma-based self-disappearance into the perpetrator figure. Abusive totalitarian relationships (Ferenczi’s “identification with the aggressor”) point to a genocidal streak within “civilization” itself. Conjoining Ferenczian and Lacanian theory, I argue that silent collusion with the abuse and extermination of children is a devastating form of betrayal that is featured in Robert Walser’s *Jakob von Gunten*, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, and Jean-Marc Vallée’s miniseries *Sharp Objects* (adapted from Gillian Flynn’s novel).

Keywords: child abuse; compliance; self-disappearance; Robert Walser; Kazuo Ishiguro; Sharp Objects.



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Introduction

A state of simultaneous knowing and not-knowing has characterized much of the Western world's self-awareness about how it treated children in the 20th and 21st centuries. Atrocities in state institutions in Communist Romania, engendered by Ceausescu's natalist policies, religious orphanages and schools in Ireland, children concentration camps in Nazi Germany (Moringen, Uckermark, Łódź), the *Kinderheime* in postwar Germany, East and West (Diakonie Freistatt, Nickersberg, Torgau) have repeatedly been exposed, only for the majority of them to then retreat again into a state of paralysis regarding reforms. Still, child abandonment, abuse, neglect, exploitation, and murder, rampant in the last two centuries alone, have formed entire literary and TV genres, in high and low culture – such as serial murder thrillers (Harris's *Hannibal Lecter* series, for example), TV crime series (such as *The Fall*, *Happy Valley*, *Sharp Objects*), and feature films, in particular German (Haneke's *Das weiße Band* [*The White Ribbon*], Petzold's *Barbara* and *Die innere Sicherheit* [*Homeland Security*]). Works like these track the glacially slow coming-to-consciousness of a trauma at the heart of Western civilization, namely its often-criminal relationship to its children.

The seminal work on the topic of child abuse is the work of psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi, closest to and then betrayed by Freud and the International Psychoanalytic Association in 1932. In general, the problem of child abuse seems somehow to have fallen outside of the work of “progress” within civilization. It is a little piece of barbarism that continues to live quite sumptuously within its hidden recesses.

In his seminal essay, “Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child” (1932), decried by Freud and the 12th International Psycho-Analytical Congress in Wiesbaden in 1932 as heretical, Sándor Ferenczi described the psychological responses of children to assaults they have suffered – physical, sexual, emotional, or verbal – from trusted adults. Following the shock (Ferenczi calls it *Erschütterung*, literally a catastrophic shaking up, a concussing, of psychic contents) of the trusted adult's assault, subjectivity may “lie[s] in ruins” (Pelaez 1221). Often children, at this point still psychically underdeveloped, will react by identifying with the aggressor in order not to be the victim:

The weak and undeveloped personality reacts to sudden unpleasure not by defence, but by anxiety-ridden identification and by introjection of the menacing person or aggressor. Only with the help of this hypothesis can I understand why my patients refused so obstinately to follow my advice to react to unjust or unkind treatment with pain or with hatred and defence. One part of their personalities, possibly the nucleus, got stuck in its development at a level where it was unable to use the alloplastic way of reaction but could only react in an autoplasic way by a kind of mimicry. (Ferenczi, “Confusion of Tongues” 227)

Traumatized children's psychological defensive maneuvers tend to be mimetic; the best-known form is “identification with the aggressor,” which leaves behind marked “psychic scarring” (as Ferenczi calls it) that takes the shape of an unstable sense of the child's self-presence, along with a stance of total compliance. In the wake of the

traumatic psychic shattering that is a consequence of child abuse, identification with the aggressor transforms the psyche into a ghost of itself by making it assimilate and become invisible in the image of the abuser, just as their former selves – their egos and personalities – survive only in the form of perfect “automata” (“Confusion of Tongues” 227). Many such children, faced with an unbearable confusion between a parental “love,” which they do not understand – and for which they are not equipped, thus unleashing life-and-death anxieties within them – and the loving support for life they need, will commit preemptive psychological suicide; they will, in other words, fuse themselves with the aggressor, thereby undoing the aggressor/victim binary, in order to survive. Thus, the child dissociates away from the aggression and from its own victimization and victimhood. For identification with the aggressor to occur, the child must both project itself onto the aggressor and introject him; once this happens, guilt for the aggression is located within the child itself. This state is the “confusion” Ferenczi names. The child becomes an automaton, and it also sources the aggression it suffers within itself.

Mimetic defensive measures such as identifying with the aggressor imply a hurried dispensing with the child’s own sense of self, its own separateness, its own cognitive agency, and thus really its own life. Desperate to survive, the child subject turns to “disappearing” itself – the self that suffers combined with the self that “knows” – and to bring a stoppage to thought and perception themselves. From then on, it becomes entranced by the extraordinary nature of its bond with adults. The “fleeting psychosis,” as Pelaez calls it (1220), that is, the break with reality constituted by removing aggression from the external world and, confusingly, into the child’s own inner world, is followed by a trance state that paralyzes thought. What we see in effect is a silent compliance and collusion with violence against the child, even on the part of the child itself; thus, Ferenczi’s theory may help us understand the ongoing inhibitions – produced by adult guilt, pathological child compliance, and consequently redoubled adult silence – against admissions of reality and culpability in these relationships.

By turning to Ferenczi’s concept of “identification with the aggressor,” my discussion of two novels and one TV miniseries will reveal the unconscious mechanisms that abused children as well as abused populations in totalitarian conditions use to survive. The traumatogenic and pathological compliance on the part of victims that Ferenczi illuminates has, in our time, morphed into a trashing of personhood and life itself. I will suggest that the small- and large-scale psychic mechanisms that produce this traumatic (self-) “trashing” are a compulsive reaction to extreme extraction techniques perpetrated by abusive regimes against populations. I develop my understanding of this traumatically acquired compulsion to “self-trash” by annexing the Lacanian concept of the *passage à l’acte* to my argument. Ferenczi had already predicted violent physical self-disappearance in 1932, though he focused more on cognitive self-disappearance. The three texts under examination are Robert Walser’s novel *Jakob von Gunten*, Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go*, and the TV miniseries *Sharp Objects*.

Literature Review

Walser’s novel is mostly read as a modernist reversal of the German *Bildungsroman*

(coming-of-age) genre. By 1909, after the classical period, Enlightenment, and secularization, the Bildungsroman protagonist grows up in a rapidly transforming world, forcing the genre to shift radically. Critics see the prototypical *Bildungsroman* protagonist's final accommodation and obedience to the order of things transformed into a stance of disobedience and disharmony in the modern period. Pfeifer (2022), for instance, proposes a reverse genre for *Jakob von Gunten*: an "orphan novel," arguing that Walser's reversal enables Jakob to reach self-determination in the modern world precisely through *disobedience*. Fuchs (2020), by contrast, reads the novel as signaling the broader end of the Bildungsroman: far from realizing himself through mastery and success, Walser's Jakob aims to perform servility. Jakob's reversed ambitions, achieved through disobedience, paradoxically produce a darker, more aggrandized, omnipotent ego and fundamentally alter subjectivity itself. The literature offers variations on these themes; Prado (2025), for instance, links Jakob's disobedience to his laughter (away from language and rationality) and, eventually, to his homoerotic relationship with the Direktor of the Institute Benjamenta. While Prado's reading aligns with mine in showing interest in the novel's progress toward the cessation of speech and thoughtful deliberation, I read those symptoms differently; in fact, I believe the homoerotic energy that certainly floods the text non-verbally at the end may be more traumatic.

Swerving away from a narrative of Jakob's emancipation of either sort, Ahmadian and Hanif (2018) focus on Jakob's identity crisis, his questioning the very possibility of authentic identity; drawing on existentialist and Marxist theories, they see him as so alienated and dominated on the personal and socio-economic levels that the very possibility of self-realization is unmasked as a bourgeois fantasy. Jakob's going silent means succumbing to rising social forces that seek only to dominate. Some critics who follow a similar path also refer to Walser's own schizophrenia (diagnosed later but likely already existing in 1909). Jakob's struggle with his own feelings of "nothingness," and his aim to let it bloom within him, draws critics to define it. Frederick (2013), for example, reads Jakob's famous aspiration to become a big, beautiful "zero" as a campaign to empty out the self; he illuminates what that may mean through Kleist's "Über das Marionettentheater." Famously, according to the speaker in Kleist's piece, access to the absolute must pass through the stage of being a puppet. Perhaps this is a traumatic experience; we can't really say. In any case, in both Kleist and Walser, we see a self-suspending itself in an attempt to reach the absolute. Not easily found in the scholarship, and I seek to compensate for this, is viewing Jakob's psyche emptying itself out as a sort of psychic suicide resulting from an abusive scenario. Even the plentiful discussions of Walser's representation of silence do not do so. The closest argument is Plug (2006)'s focus on the strange, amorphous guilt that, he claims, pervades the text and that Jakob somehow semi-consciously carries for the larger guilty collective. In my opinion, this reading does not go far enough in recognizing guilt-infused affect as a final form of self-destruction. Finally, an approach that does explore well the psychology of self-disappearance, without making recourse to Ferenczian and/or Lacanian theory, however, is Ruprecht (2010)'s reading of the novel together with Sebald's story of Ambros Adelwarth in *Die Ausgewanderten* [*The Emigrants*], the story of the protagonist's guilt-induced masochistic self-relinquishing into a destructive mental

institution, a deliberate choice to regress, repeat, and wipe out the self. Vinokour (2024) takes this direction one step further by referring to this sort of male masochism in the early part of the 20th century as a manifestation of the cultural manufacturing of consent to Nazi domination. Thus, the literature tends to focus on undeserved compliance, but it is not always persuasively theorized; I hope this article closes this gap by connecting the novel to the “identification with the aggressor” phenomenon.

The literature on Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* is extensive, so I will focus mainly on the trends closest to my own reading. Despite the novel’s searing depiction of catastrophic, self-destructive compliance, critics have paid little attention to Ferenczi’s concept of “identification with the aggressor” in this context. Nor has scholarship engaged much with the unobtrusive but all-important theme of trash in the novel. Lacking also are readings that recognize in the metaphorical depiction of child abuse hidden within the literal depiction of clone abuse a broader critique of forms of barbarism within present-day “civilization” that society simultaneously sees and doesn’t see. Instead, the victims in the novel respond to their own slow torture and murder with silent compliance and collaboration.

Rizq (2014)’s psychoanalytic perspective, which I came across late in my writing, comes close to my own approach; it reads the novel in terms of both the creation and the destruction of “personhood.” Personhood, Rizq argues, ideally comes into being through unconscious acts of memory and identification, but it is destroyed – extracted and annihilated – in abusive relationships. Like most other psychoanalytic approaches to the novel, Rizq focuses on the theme of loss – a foundational concept in psychoanalysis – and her orientation is primarily Laplanchian, which itself builds on Ferenczi’s work. She does observe the importance of the “rubbish” trope in the novel but does not make it central to her reading. Instead, she links it to the clones’ unconscious processes of constructing their own identities through the “plagiarized fragments” (526), a term she, in turn, borrows from Apter (2011) to describe the identity available to them. She articulates the similarity between observing these acts in the characters and a psychoanalyst’s experiences with patients who have in their past been forced into psychic self-suspension as children and have had to make do with subsequently constructed “robotic” personalities. While Rizq’s work is brilliant, I do see an opportunity here to suggest that Ishiguro’s novel is also “post-psychoanalytic”: loss is one thing, trash is another; loss has meaning, trash does not. With loss, there is hope for compensation, while trash is a rushed, final state. Trash, moreover, is the result of a *jouissant* and final consumption. This gap in the literature is what my article seeks to fill.

“Cloning” is, of course, a major theme in the novel, and bioethical commentaries make up a large share of the literature. Some of this work connects with Benjaminian readings: several critics turn to Walter Benjamin’s seminal work on modernity, reproduction, technology, and loss of aura to illuminate the novel’s significance. Storrow considers how mechanical reproduction corrodes “human dignity,” but also how narrative reproduction can help recover from trauma. Benjamin’s “Work of Art” essay (1968) suggests that the modern art object’s loss of “aura,” driven by advances in a society’s technology, may lead to cheap, nostalgic replacements. Wojciech Drazg (2014)’s work also offers an excellent context for thinking about such issues, including the fabrication of

cheap, nostalgic objects, an important element of Ishiguro's novel.

There has been a tremendous amount of scholarly interest in the "posthuman" theme of the novel and in the traumatic nature of the transformations science and technology have brought: radical changes in social structure, imbalances in power, in (bio-)capital, wealth, health, and life itself. Some of this work takes a Marxist turn, such as Benia and Dagamseh (2025)'s approach. Bowyer (2014)'s Heideggerian approach is also of interest; this trend still has room for further development.

The main trend in political readings of *Never Let Me Go* focuses on the modality of being in a world shaped entirely by mechanisms of extraction. Here, Ishiguro is read through the lens of capitalism and biopolitics, alongside the specters of race and gene fetishism (see Alcala, Banerjee, Wen, Marks). Wieland offers an interesting critique of neoliberalism as a culture of narcissistic delusion; her reading provides an additional way to recognize "totalitarian" abuse on the individual as well as the collective levels.

Missing, then, in the literature so far mentioned is analysis of the shocking and unarticulated nature of the victims' acquiescence to their own destruction in psychoanalytic terms. The thoughtlessness of and the rapidity with which the decisive actions the clones take to self-destruct are key to the work's relevance to us today: the ways in which individuals as well as specific populations throw themselves away, or the abandon with which their exploiters will think nothing of throwing away entire populations as trash after having extracted their lifeblood.

There has been surprisingly little critical work on *Sharp Objects*. Generally, critics treat the miniseries as "Gothic horror." This misreading may be motivated by the very trend that I examine: it may have at least a little bit to do with the 'knowing, but not knowing,' 'seeing, but not seeing,' that pervades the culture when it comes to child abuse.

The texts

I have chosen three texts as exemplars of the uncanny relationship Western civilization sometimes bears to its children. Institutionalized childhood forms an entire subgenre of the *Bildungsroman* (coming-of-age) genre: the *Internatsroman* (boarding school novel). Among its famous representatives is the less well-known "diary" of the fictional youth Jakob von Gunten in the eponymously titled 1909 novel by the Swiss writer Robert Walser. I discuss it here only briefly, and for the tone it sets. It gives voice to an institutionalized childhood *par excellence*: Jakob von Gunten, technically of noble birth, enrolls in the Institut Benjamenta for servants, thereby relinquishing his privilege in a gesture of total self-effacement; this catapults him into an enigmatic hyperconscious passivity and into radical compliance with this institute for servants. In the end, despite his irony and contentiousness, Jakob decides to fuse his entire personhood with that of the Institute's director and disappear with him into "die Wüste [the desert]" (83). Just as the entire novel hardly moves from the spot – Jakob is never employed by anyone as a servant, and he is learning perfect dissolution of self – Jakob explicitly announces his aim at the start: to become a perfect "Null" (zero): "Aber das Eine weiß ich bestimmt: Ich werde eine reizende, kugelrunde Null im späteren Leben sein" ("But one thing I know for sure: I will become a charming perfectly round zero when I grow up" [my translation])

(Walser 2). In the end, he will disappear into, and together with, Director Benjamenta as they pack up in unison and, hand in hand, head for the indistinct, flat monotony of “the desert.” Adult and child, possible perpetrator and victim, in an extreme version of mutual preservation, fuse together into nothingness.

While *Jakob von Gunten* does not feature direct child abuse, I refer to it, however briefly, because of Jakob’s deep agreement with his own effacement and disappearance before life has even begun for him; he seems to fold himself away along the lines of Ferenczi’s “identification with the aggressor.” With this reversed direction, Walser undid the fabric of the lofty tradition of the German *Bildungsroman*.

We see a structurally similar institutionalized childhood in Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*. I will discuss it in relation to the 2018 American TV mini-series *Sharp Objects*, directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, as both works carry images of children’s bodies crisscrossed with scars, somehow internalizing and agreeing with their own shocking disappearances.

In a fast forward to one of the last images in Ishiguro’s novel, the 2010 film adaptation of *Never Let Me Go* (Romanek 2010) actually begins with the image of a scarred child’s body: Kathy, the “carer,” is witnessing her love and charge Tommy’s last organ “donation,” the one that he will likely not survive, meaning that he will “complete” (die) in the euphemistic jargon of this world, and together with her we catch a glimpse of his body covered in the scars left behind by his previous surgical “donations.” When Kathy ceases being a “carer,” her body too will be harvested for vital organs in the most economically efficient way possible: a case of Heidegger’s understanding of technological *Verwahrlosung* (lethal neglect) (“The Argument” 6), if there ever was one. The couple and their friend Ruth, who dies before Tommy does, and whose life and unusable bodily remains have already been disposed of as so much medical waste, are clones brought into being for the purpose of providing the privileged elites with an expanded life span. The so-called “recovery centers”¹ where the donations take place are really sites for the radical *Verwahrlosung* of clones. As narrator, Kathy informs readers about the nature of these children’s lives only indirectly. Children like Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, who are clones, are obviously parentless, and other clones envy them for being raised and educated at Hailsham, their relatively privileged home and school. We are told Hailsham stands out from other such institutions because it fosters its children’s mental and emotional development by actively encouraging their social relationships, intellectual pursuits, and artistic expression. They are also taught to care for their bodies: this includes prohibitions against smoking, encouragement of sexual expression but also intensive training in avoiding STDs, and so on. One teacher, Miss Lucy, worries about the children’s apparent ignorance of their destinies. She says, “you’ve been told and not told. You’ve been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some of you are quite happy to leave it that way” (81). She thus conceives of the children as living in a

¹ A vicious play on words: while the clones are ostensibly being helped to “recover” from the increasingly more devastating surgeries they undergo, society “recovers” its investment: the organs.

“zone of indistinction” (Agamben 19) in between nature (their bodies, souls, and minds) and law (their bodies’ social function), a “grey zone” (Levi) between life and murder-suicide, exacerbated by their passivity and unthinkingness in response to their confused and confusing internalizations of who they are. In effect, inhabiting this zone, having been “told and not told,” leads the children to will-lessly collaborate on their own early, slow, and pain-riddled extinction. Fittingly, especially in view of my invocation of Agamben and Levi, Miss Lucy also remarks that the fence around Hailsham is not “electrified,” saying that’s a good thing because “you get terrible accidents sometimes” (78). She thus associates, and then disassociates, Hailsham and Auschwitz.

The term “grey zone” famously comes from Primo Levi, who coined it to describe the Muselmann and the Häftling, “the drowned and the saved” (*If This Is a Man* 99), at Auschwitz. In this context, he gently probes the moral status of Häftlinge forced to collaborate with the perpetrators to survive. The *Sonderkommando*, those inmates who led the many thousands of newly arrived transports from the ramp to the “undressing room” and to the gas chambers, extracted gold from their teeth, cut their corpses’ hair for industrial use, and finally burnt their bodies and stored their ashes as fertilizer and winter ice treatment, was clearly thrown into an unbearable grey zone, as were, famously, the Jewish councils that were forced to compile the lists of deportees, deciding who would be deported when, etc. While the *Sonderkommando* is an extreme example of a grey zone, in *If This Is a Man*, Levi describes a handful of specific Häftlinge he knew who, in their own ways, disappeared into the perpetrator’s image, throwing the rest away. In a short essay, “Story of a Coin” (from *Moments of Reprieve*), Levi recounts finding a coin from the Łódź Ghetto long after Auschwitz; the coin, bearing the head of Chaim Rumkowski, the ghetto’s self-proclaimed king, had somehow survived hidden in his belongings. Levi writes: “It is typical of regimes in which all power rains down from above and no criticism can rise from below, to weaken and confound people’s capacity of judgment, to create a vast zone of gray consciences that stands between the great men of evil and the pure victims. This is the zone in which Rumkowski must be placed” (*Moments* 171). Rumkowski represents the human compulsion to survive that we find among inhabitants of this grey zone: collaborators who seem not to see their own complicity and live in a space of inertia and reduced thoughtfulness that we all know, at least a little. To the extent that Kathy, the narrator of Ishiguro’s novel, chooses to become a “carer” before embarking on her own career as an organ “donor,” she, like the *Sonderkommando* and the Jewish councils, could be seen as collaborating with the system. Despite – or because of? – her life-long love for Tommy and Ruth, she is able to shepherd them through their pain and toward their gradual extinction, thus feeding the system.

Like P. K. Dick’s famous androids (1968), used as slaves, Ishiguro’s clones tend steadfastly toward inertia; they remain compliant and masochistic regarding their fate. When, as youths, they graduate from Hailsham, this school and institute that normalizes the horror of their lives and deaths, they go to live at “the Cottages,” in groups of friends, where there is no supervision at all, and where they cement their status as their own guardians, as preservers of their own deaths. There, they eventually seem compelled to choose between becoming a “donor” immediately or acting as a “carer” first, a sort of *Sonderkommando* worker (in other words, a double masochism), and enter their roles

without complaint. Moments of hope suggest an exception might be made, such as when Kathy and Tommy briefly entertain the rumor that clones seen as truly in love may be granted a postponement of their donor status, but those moments dissolve quickly.

The image of the scarred child's body appears again in the underrecognized HBO miniseries *Sharp Objects* (2018). Camille Preaker (Amy Adams), a crime reporter with a history of alcoholism and self-harm and recently discharged from psychiatric care, returns to her family home in Missouri to report on the disturbing murders of two young girls whose dead bodies were staged like dolls and had had their teeth extracted. Camille's mother, Adora Crellin (Patricia Clarkson), is a wealthy socialite who has built, through her public persona and wealth, the status of a guardian of Confederate history. Her most prized possession is a brilliantly white, ivory-tiled master bedroom floor. It is blindingly white. The room may be accessed only barefoot, making it a sort of holy site. When Camille arrives home to begin her reporting assignment, we immediately witness Adora's verbal attacks on Camille. Camille, whose internal gaze we follow, powerfully experiences a lasting Ferenczian *Erschütterung* (shock, psychic concussion). It is as if throughout Camille's life Adora's pernicious words had been thrown all over Camille's body – both in the past, when the words were first spoken, and in the present in which the words continue forever to echo. In a devastating way, this is the case both psychically and physically, metaphorically and literally, as Camille's body is covered in words carved into her skin, which we see only briefly, in one short, shocking shot. From the very start of the series, as the viewer's gaze is aligned with Camille's external and internal gazes, we see how PTSD manifests: short associational flashbacks constantly interrupt Camille's perception of what goes on around her, and most of these flashbacks feature Adora's words. Thus, the "sharp objects" are both the objects Camille picks up and uses to cut into her skin and, more metaphorically, Adora's words. One wonders why Camille moves back home instead of staying at the motel, since Adora's carefully chosen, soft-spoken words are devastatingly cruel. When we catch that brief glimpse of Camille's adult body, we recognize some of the words Adora threw at child Camille, words we heard in lightning-fast flashbacks. Crucially, the words are masochistically preserved but also trashed by Camille: that is, ejected from the psyche onto the body, in a way that reminds one of the rhetoric with which Ishiguro's clones' bodies are trashed as soon as the last vital organ is extracted, the one without which their life comes to an end. The child's body seems to be trash, and in *Sharp Objects* the child's body has become the trashcan for the abusive adult.

Again, given the stakes, one wonders why Camille stays in her mother's home. Eventually she will even regress back to the painful childhood that emerges more and more clearly for the viewer. In the present, we see her identifying with her younger sister Marian, who died when they were children. We find out much later that she died at the hands of Adora's Munchausen (factitious disorder) by proxy. Camille will allow Adora to put her to bed and to slowly poison her with "medicine" in the same way she had poisoned Marian. Camille is trying to protect her younger half-sister, Amma (Eliza Scanlen), from Adora's solicitous murderousness, but even that invites scrutiny, since Camille barely knows Amma. Amma even turns out to have murdered the two young

girls out of envy: Adora had begun to direct her “care” at them outside of the house. In other words, Adora and Amma both murder, even as Amma has also been Adora’s Munchausen proxy and refuses to lose that status. Amma, and, to an extent, Camille, can both be said to collaborate in Adora’s domination of them.

The intricacy of the mother-daughter bond, the mix of murderous and suicidal impulses and acts, these lethal mimetic, identificatory entanglements – that even Camille escapes only when she realizes that Amma is the present-day murderer and this realization catapults her out of the maternal bed and ends her inertia – is symbolically represented by a doll house that Amma has been constructing for years and which, like the ivory tiles, is located in Adora’s bedroom. Mimicking the mimetic mother-daughter relationship, it is a detailed replica of the Crellin estate and thus includes Adora’s resplendent ivory floor. It is when Camille realizes that Amma has replicated the ivory floor with the murdered girls’ teeth (“ivories”) that she is able to detach from her mimetic masochism and compliance with Adora’s desires. Just as Adora’s love of her younger daughters and other girls their age manifests as a mix of devoted care and murderousness, Amma and Camille themselves are entirely wrapped up in extreme ambivalence: Camille is essentially committing suicide at the hands of her mother’s devoted care; Amma demands her mother’s murderous care of her so much that she kills the girls whom she fears might replace her. Psychologically, she is completely fixated on mimetic identification with Adora, as shown by her extracting the girls’ teeth for the ivory-tiled floor replica in her dollhouse. Amma represents perfectly the child that has given up thinking in order to survive; she seeks out a totalitarian mimetic and murderous fusion with Adora (how perfect both of their naming, by the way), and thematizes a regressive toothlessness, thoughtlessness, speechlessness, the name “Amma” also suggesting a babbling infant’s fixation on the milky breast...

DISCUSSION

Extraction and trash

Ishiguro’s Hailsham, the institution so revered by the narrator and her friends, symbolizes and reveals on the tortured bodies of the child-donors, the barbarism at the heart of the civilization that is unfolding before our eyes today: Hailsham as an institution seems to confirm that whatever the power elites want, they get, no matter what horrors these desires create.

The ivory floor in *Sharp Objects* metaphorizes not only the Crellin mansion, built and maintained with slave labor, but also the colonial extraction of ivory from Africa. This same logic of extraction ties it to *Never Let Me Go*, where the children are made for that basic purpose: to have their vital organs extracted to extend the lives of the rich and preserve their wealth. The extraction principle works more subtly as well: even before they begin the “donation” process, the Hailsham children are pressured to produce art and poetry which is then extracted, supposedly to be exhibited in human society as some sort of interesting “outsider art,” and is conserved for that purpose: for human society to confirm its own humanism. In other words, even their “souls,” if they exist, are exploited.

Ferenczi revealed the totalitarianism at work in abusive adult-child relationships where the drive to survive in the child's psyche aims at extraction of its own personhood. When Camille realizes that Amma has replicated the ivory floor in her doll house with the teeth of two murdered girls, we see how totalitarian relationships between parents and children overlap with the violent racist Confederate history and culture insofar as the doll house replicates the Crellin mansion and estate. In Camille's seeming drive to masochistically reenact her sister Marian's murder at the hands of Adora by getting in bed and compliantly being poisoned, she hopes both to protect Amma from her mother but also, tragically, still to gain her mother's goodwill if not her love. When Camille gets in bed, she is doing several things simultaneously: on the one hand, she relinquishes her active investigative role as a reporter on her own and her town's histories, thus letting go of that, albeit numb (rendered numb via her constant consumption of alcohol), observer self or "wise baby" ("Dream" 70) fragment Ferenczi claims can sometimes survive a child's original traumatization. Instead, an entrancing trauma bond sets in, extrication from which is very difficult. Once in bed, she offers no counter-cathexis, no counterpoint or counter-theme, to Adora's domination. Temporarily she enters into a state of silent entrancement, a potentially permanent state of hypnosis, typical, according to Ferenczi, of the abused child which tries to undo the suffered aggression psychically by coming to believe that, if it is being attacked, the attacker is herself; in other words, that it's coming from inside:

Through the identification, or let us say, introjection of the aggressor, [the aggressor] disappears as part of the external reality and becomes intra- instead of extra-psychic; the intra-psychic is then subjected, in a dream-like state as is the traumatic trance, to the primary process, i.e. according to the pleasure principle; it can be modified or changed by the use of positive or negative hallucinations. In any case, the attack as a rigid external reality ceases to exist, and in the traumatic trance the child succeeds in maintaining the previous situation of tenderness. (Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues" 227)

The current survivors of their mother's murderous love are constantly on the brink of being swallowed up again by the lethal whiteness of "mother's milk" as well as by the whiteness of the ivory, that metaphorical inner sanctum of the slave confederacy and its unbridled extraction of free labor. Once Camille is back to drinking mother's milk, the suggestion is that she will no longer report on and thus oppose the seeming genocidal appropriation and extraction to which she and her sisters have been subjected and that still continues to thrive, both within this particular family and the broader Southern society and culture.

Passage to the act

What is this trend toward disposability, trashiness, the "waste" in *Never Let Me Go* and the continuing treatment of Camille as trash to be taken out in *Sharp Objects*, this rapid consumption and unthinking, easy disposal of life itself? The common denominator

is throwing oneself onto the trash heap, letting oneself be thrown away, or throwing another away by proxy, in a way that somehow seems acceptable today and is generally met with indifference. The phenomenon Lacan described as *passage à l'acte*, "passage to the act" (*Seminar X: Anxiety* 114ff), can help us understand what is going on here. The concept describes a sort of catastrophic leap an individual might take out of, and away from, symbolic structures.² The concept sits at the border between Lacan and Ferenczi. It binds Ferenczi's catastrophe of the abused child's emptied-out psyche, its former personhood thrown out, to this Lacanian concept of a subject "dropping" out of the symbolic order: "This is what leads her [the subject being triggered into a *passage à l'acte*] to feel definitively identified with *a* and, by the same token, rejected, evacuated, from the [symbolic] stage. And only the being dropped, the letting oneself drop, can realize this" (111).

Lacan's *passage to the act* is essentially a Ferenczian-Lacanian concept for a specific process: first psychic self-disappearance, then a leap off the stage of the symbolic. Ferenczi's catastrophe of the abused child's emptied-out psyche is aligned with a sudden moment of "supreme embarrassment," marked by an impulsive *act* that rapidly fills the gap left behind by the cessation of language, followed by a catastrophic falling out of symbolic networks. The process of "trashing" unfolds this way: 1) a radical mortification or trauma followed by an abrupt and catastrophic failure of speech, always latently or openly present after trauma; 2) some form of falling off the stage (of history? of social significance? of visibility?), 3) a necessarily resulting abolition of the social bond; and 4) an act of throwing oneself away physically. Examples are the end of Walser's *Jakob von Gunten*, when Jakob simply disappears himself with Benjamenta and the text goes abruptly silent, or a suicidal throwing-oneself-out-the-window, as Lacan notes, and other rash and sudden suicidal falls, a sequence of events and acts that frequently ends in death.

The *passage to the act* examples Lacan provides are very helpful for understanding this catastrophic throwing away: first, the example from a Freudian case history, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" (1920). The precipitating context is the ("homosexual") woman walking with her female companion and by chance encountering the disapproving gaze of her father, who is also out walking: in a split-second act, the woman throws herself over a parapet and onto the railway tracks. By suddenly jumping in this suicidal way, she "lets herself drop" (110), as Lacan puts it.

The subject engaged in a *passage to the act*, Lacan goes on to say, throws herself away as *objet (petit) a*.³ What is the *objet a*? It is the object the subject imagines (fantasizes) herself to be that lives in a network of relations in which objects, including herself, relate to one another on the level of desire. Lacan continues: "The ... [letting oneself drop] is essential to any sudden moment at which the subject is brought into relation with what he is as [*objet*] *a*" (*The Seminar: Anxiety* 110). However, the subject who drops out senses that, as *objet a*, he is excluded ("the subject comes back to the state of fundamental exclusion he feels himself to be in" [110]). It is crucial to see this moment as an exclusion leading to a catastrophic failure of the symbolic and of the social bond for

² In other words, the world of language, law, and society.

³ For the sake of brevity, I will reduce "*objet (petit) a*" to "*objet a*." They are identical.

that subject, because the social bond cannot persist without the fantasy of the *objet a*. Lacan goes on:

The scene unfolds very rapidly. The loved one, for whom this adventure is doubtless but a somewhat lowly entertainment, who clearly starts to get a bit fed up with all this and doesn't want to expose herself to any great difficulties, says to the young woman that this has gone on long enough, that they are going to leave it at that, and for her to stop lavishly sending her flowers every day and following her around on her heels. With that, the young woman flings herself straight off a bridge. (109)

Anything that might have formed the woman's intention in bringing her relationship into an approving gaze of the father is hereby abolished in a moment of "supreme embarrassment" (111): everything in her intention suddenly loses all its value and is instantly discarded in an abrupt, violent gesture, and she "lets herself drop" (110). "It is not for nothing," he goes on,

that the melancholic subject has such a propensity to fling himself out of the window, which he always does at such disconcerting speed, in a shot. Indeed, [i]nasmuch as it calls to mind the limit between the stage and the world, the window indicates for us what is meant by this act – in some way, the subject comes back to the state of the fundamental exclusion he feels himself to be in. (110)

The subject swept up in a *passage to the act* falls catastrophically out of both symbolic structures and social bond – even out of the frame of subjectivity itself. *Passage to the act* means an instantaneous, catastrophic extraction from the social bond, as it opens up and then compels the subject, no longer a subject, to throw itself away. What is thrown away is the very mechanism for the emergence of the social bond itself: the *objet a*, the "cause-of-desire" that all subjects project onto and disseminate across the external world, enabling the subject to attach to objects in the world and others to itself. This precious *objet a* is trashed.

Nullification of sacrifice

Where does *objet a* go? In the texts in question, it sometimes seems to be sacrificed. Amma and Camille in *Sharp Objects*, as well as the Hailsham young adults, may want to believe that they deliver themselves up for sacrifice for the sake of the continued functioning of society, that their sacrifice continues to make meaning and society possible as they uphold society's parameters, rules, and laws at their own expense. For them there is still, or they want there to be, a difference between sacrifice and simple murder-consumption, as sacrifice is still preferable to instantaneous erasure. In reality, however, *objet a* is not engaged in a sacrificial drive or act, because it is no longer really there to be sacrificed; it has already lost, it has been trashed as soon as it failed to be recognized. It is trashed and instantaneously forgotten. With the failure of the sacrifice fantasy – and therefore also of the social bond itself – the *objet a* yanks itself out of the networks of

meaning (including language and subjectivity themselves) that formerly gave it its place, leaves behind a crumbling scenario, and before thinking can even begin, flushes itself down the toilet. In fact, it follows exactly the famous itinerary of Georg Bendemann at the end of Kafka's "The Judgment": out the door, down the stairs, out onto the bridge, over the parapet.

But what does that mean in terms of everyday life? To be sure, the *objet a* is permanently elusive and does not exist as such an entity; it exists in fantasy, but this fantasy is what gets thrown out. In Jakob von Gunten's language, we might say there is a desertification (and desertion) of fantasy. Looking at the beginning and the end of *Never Let Me Go* may help the text explain itself in relation to an *objet a* that no longer works. When we are first introduced to Kathy as narrator, in the context of describing her present-day interactions with the "donors" she "cares" for, and before we have an inkling of what is to follow, she notices that fantasies about the mythical Hailsham have a positive effect on non-Hailsham "donors'" psyches while they relentlessly suffer in view of their last "donations." The myth depicts Hailsham as a beautiful, imposing structure surrounded by cultivated grounds that symbolize civilization and humanistic education. In particular, the "sports pavilions" of the Hailsham campus feature prominently in these memories/fantasies, and Kathy also searches for them as she crisscrosses the countryside, driving from one "donor" to the next as they gradually "complete" (die). Wherever she is, she repeatedly searches for a sign of Hailsham, spotting illusory "sports pavilion" after "sports pavilion." Typically, within the homogeneous countryside, such representative structures are set off against open fields – contained and limited vs. uncontained and limitless. This contrast also describes the clones' psychic economy. The sports pavilion is a distinct fantasy space, whereas open fields tear it apart, especially when the narrative links the fields to Tommy's fits of rage and his inability to contain them through fantasy (he can't draw; he screams). The sports pavilion also sets the scene for the novel's first narrated event, taking us back to the children's childhood at Hailsham. The Hailsham children tease Tommy for not being picked by either soccer team, even though he is an excellent player, with the collective aim of triggering one of his infamous screaming fits. Toward the end of the novel, after Kathy and Tommy have been turned down for a "deferral," rumored among clones to exist if a couple could prove to be "really" in love, Tommy gets out of the car in the middle of the countryside in the dark to scream across empty fields. These uncontained screams contrast with a second "containment" trope: the fence. Psychic "fencing" – that is, the production of fantasy, including the fantasied *objet a* – grounds and keeps in place the mechanism of desire, which throughout the novel is always about to be liquidated. The first appearance of a fence in the novel is the putative electrified fence, which represents the lie of humanism and its murderous subservience to technological efficiency and wealth, which disables fantasy. Moreover, the electrified fence is associated with Auschwitz, where life and death drives are reduced to throwing "bare life" (Agamben) onto the trash heap.

The cruelty of the literalization, and therefore liquidation, of fantasy is made clear in the novel's Norfolk theme. The *objet a* as fantasy enables human psyches to transform primal loss into an economy of desire. These children's stark reality is that they have lost everything from the start. Not knowing the truth about their lives, the Hailsham children,

lied to, use their education to construct the deceptive hope that loss is recoverable. In a geography lesson, they learn about English geography and the city of Norfolk, which, their teacher says, is somewhere up “in a lost corner” (53) and few people ever visit. The idea of Norfolk as a “lost-and-found” location where all that is lost gathers (like the “lost corner” at Hailsham, the school’s lost-and-found), comes to act for them as a sort of “quilting point” (Lacan, *Seminar III: Psychoses* 262), a guarantee for some sort of return on their sacrifice. When the young adults travel to Norfolk because their friends report spotting a “possible” (someone who might be the original non-clone specimen) for Ruth, the hope that Norfolk might be the way into the network of desire for clones is completely dashed. Tommy finds a replacement for Kathy’s tape with the song “Never Let Me Go” that she lost, a song that represents her fundamental fantasy about herself, but this reemergence is simply a mechanical replication, not a developing fantasy. When the three friends crawl under a partially broken fence to see an old, stranded boat in the middle of a forest, Tommy mentions Norfolk, linking the fence trope to the theme of feared loss without recovery and the liquidation of fantasy. The final mention of a fence occurs at the end, and it insists on the clones’ final *and* original status as trash. The entire paragraph underlies my argument as it explicitly depicts Kathy, standing in some place close to Norfolk, consciously attempting to produce a fantasy (a sure sign that the fantasy no longer exists), her fundamental fantasy of Tommy, and then consciously ending it in order to merge into the smooth one-way traffic that alone is open to her in this murderous society: “The fantasy never got beyond that – I didn’t let it – ... I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be” (Ishiguro 288). The spot where she is standing comments:

I found I was standing before acres of ploughed earth. There was a fence keeping me from stepping into the field, with two lines of barbed wire ... All along the fence, especially along the lower line of wire, all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled. ... Up in the branches of the trees, too, I could see, flapping about, torn plastic sheeting and bits of old carrier bags...(287)

Instead of a psyche shaped by sacrifice, the novel ends with its simple trashing.

In *Sharp Objects* we see plenty of fantasies of sacrifice: Millie Calhoun’s grotesque self-sacrifice, for example, and children’s self-sacrifice for their parents, which Adora demands (treat her master bedroom like a holy shrine and mimic it in every detail). It is exposed as simple murder by the abused child, now grown up, when she becomes conscious of the extreme mimetic principle at work in Amma’s killing of the girls. Moreover, the extraction of teeth links the murders to Auschwitz, which parallels the electrified fence in Ishiguro’s novel linking Hailsham to Auschwitz. While *Never Let Me Go* unmasks explicit anonymous mass murder, mass murder in *Sharp Objects* is tucked away in the ivory floor, just as serial murder takes place in the theoretically unending chain of victimized little girls. In both works, sacrifice as castration, the inauguration of the split subject as negotiator into the social order, has been transformed into a perverted assembly line of uncomprehending self- and other destruction.

Conclusion: Munchausen by proxy and psychopathy

Also lying at the source of the complex familial totalitarianism in *Sharp Objects* is Adora's mental disorder: Munchausen by proxy. What is the significance of this strange disorder, aside from explaining her murderous behavior? In his book *What Evil Means to Us* (1997), C. Fred Alford proposes that "evil" emerges from catastrophic regressions to the most primitive forms of psychic experience. He writes, "[e]vil is a hot relationship to warm a cold heart" (119). "The evildoer seeks vitalizing contact with the autistic-contiguous [the most primitive, raw sensory-based] dimension of experience," but with a crucial caveat: he does so "while avoiding its price" (10). There are "a thousand ways evil aims to sacrifice the soul of another" (10) – though one might disagree that in contemporary times we are even any more capable of sacrifice.

Alford defines the psychopath as the one who does not attempt to mitigate the "too much," the traumatic (missed) encounter with the real (Lacan, *Seminar XI: Four Fundamental* 53) in himself, no doubt the effect of abuse suffered, by killing off a part of himself, his own psyche. Instead, the psychopath, in his own mind, stands out from the rest by acting out and inviting in the "too much," by living the dreadful *jouissance* in a way he believes no one else can. He becomes the one who shows the world what it is to be superhuman, to be real, to invite death. Alford circumscribes the *jouissance* experience with the word "dread": the phenomenon of "dread" initially attempts to contain pure vitality, a "too much"; in part, it filters this into a dread anxiety that accompanies intense pleasure (and pain). *Jouissance* is extreme, life and death themselves: pure, timeless, limitless sensation. The psychopath knows how to access unfiltered pure experience and pure life without being flooded and annihilated by it: "The language [of the autistic-contiguous position] is mimesis, living out one's ineffable experiences in and on the body of another" (Alford 13) – arguably a form of Munchausen by proxy. Alford calls this psychopathic drive the hunt for a "whiff of the death camps" (Alford 120). The psychopath is determined to find, no matter what the cost, an absolute transgression of limits, and this can emerge from within the totalitarian bond he forges with his victim. Here the world is reduced to "pain and power" (Alford 104): "All evil has the quality of psychopathy, becoming the monster so as not to be the victim, becoming dread so as not to live it. The cost is ... life itself" (100). But the psychopath is not willing to die; instead, his victim will die for him. "The mad one cuts himself, the criminal another" (101); on the one hand, Camille; on the other, Adora; and, even more clearly, Amma.

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