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A JAPANESE NOVELIST'S TALE OF BULLYING AND NIETZSCHE

In Mieko Kawakami's "Heaven," everyday dilemmas provide a forum for examining fundamental questions of power and morality.

By Merve Emre

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Mieko Kawakami dissolves Nietzschean ideas into the confusion of adolescence. Illustration by
Angie Wang

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In an age of voice-driven fiction, the phrase “novel of ideas” has an unavoidably dusty ring. It summons the drowsy cadence of the philosopher, the tedious rehearsal of concepts on loan from antiquated sources. Knowing this, there is an admirable brazenness to the way that the Japanese novelist Mieko Kawakami describes “Heaven” (Europa), her novel of ideas, newly translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd: “Gaining inspiration from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the work takes up the theme of bullying in middle school and addresses the ultimate question of good and evil,” she has written on her Web site. It is as if she were determined to alert us to the mismatch between the well-worn preoccupations of young-adult fiction and her grand philosophical objectives; as if she wanted us to question her ability—anyone’s ability—to draw the two together. One wonders if Kawakami, enthralled by Zarathustra’s mountainside howlings about the death of God and the will to power, searched for a timely hook on which to hang these out-of-fashion ideas. And one sees the pitfalls before the possibilities. Certainly, there’s a risk that the novel will deliver puffed-up platitudes about the inherent cruelty and sympathy of children. Or that it will revel in nihilism, allowing sadistic teen-agers to do harm not just with impunity but with their author’s admiration.

Yet Kawakami is interested neither in demonstrating what makes people good nor in delighting in their antisocial perversities. Rather, her project is, like Nietzsche’s, a genealogical one. Her novels trace how terms of moral value evolve—how “good” and “evil,” or “pain” and “pleasure,” get affixed to ordinary interactions: becoming friends or becoming enemies, fighting or

refusing to fight, falling in love or falling into indifference. Her plots offer not a moral education according to the precepts of God but an exploration of how our language of morality is grounded in the shifting power among human beings. Kawakami never evangelizes, never wags a finger. She simply sets first-person narrations of suffering alongside stumbling dialogues, attempts to make that suffering intelligible to others.

The fourteen-year-old narrator of “Heaven” has no proper name, but his classmates call him Eyes, on account of his lazy right eye. His world is “flat and lacking depth.” All people and objects come bearing their own “blurry double,” and, for all his anxious squinting and blinking, he can never be sure whether he is “touching the right thing, or touching it the right way.” Descriptions of settings and of physical appearances are willfully, almost comically bland, bereft of the colors and the outlines that give realist fiction its sense of solidity. “My eyes took in the scenery like a postcard, but when I blinked, it slipped from view, replaced by a new scene,” the narrator says. His eye marks him as a target for bullying by other boys, led by Ninomiya—handsome, popular, and at the top of his class—and his quieter sidekick, Momose. They force the narrator to ingest chalk and toilet water; they imprison him in a locker; and, in the novel’s most throat-tightening scene, they devise a game called “human soccer,” with his head stuffed inside a ball, his gaze no longer wall-eyed but utterly blind.

The eye was Nietzsche’s preferred metaphor for the shifting nature of moral truth. “There are many kinds of eyes,” he wrote. “Even the sphinx has eyes—and consequently there are many kinds of ‘truths,’ and consequently there is no truth.” The narrator’s eyes function as an ingenious conceptual device—the novel would not work if the narrator were deaf or paralyzed—giving Kawakami a rationale for refusing to describe period details or local haunts. We know that “Heaven” takes place somewhere in Japan, and that the Japanese word for bullying, *ijime*, points to a subtle and brutalizing practice of classroom harassment that national legislation sought to address after

several student suicides. We know, too, that the year is 1991—hence no cell phones, no e-mail, no cyberbullying. But all this presents itself as ambient knowledge, inessential to the archetypal drama that will unfold between strong and weak children, in a town that could be anywhere or nowhere.

More than any particular place, then, it is the narrator's body that supplies the setting for the drama of "Heaven." He is supremely mistrustful of it, attuned to every crick and cramp, forever measuring his pulse or noting the clench in his stomach when his bullies appear. His body marks the limits of all he can describe, and all the reader can know, a world of recesses and cavities mapped in choked little sentences, sharp spasms of the psyche: "I could hear my heart throbbing in my ears"; "It felt like my heart wanted out of my chest"; "I could hear my heart pulsing in my throat." Imprisoned and helpless, his failures of sight and speech and touch must be overcome so he can extend himself into the world.

“I need companions,” Zarathustra exclaims, on descending from the mountain where he has lived for ten years by himself. “I need living companions, who will follow me because they want to follow themselves—and to the place where I will.” One day, the narrator finds a note in his pencil case that reads, “We should be friends.” The writer is a girl named Kojima, who is bullied by the other girls for having dirty hair and cheap clothes and a dark spot under her nose. The notes that she and the narrator begin to exchange, which structure the first part of the novel, are full of teen-age banality. They address homework and weather and contain none of the coy intimations of epistolary fiction. Yet it is not long before the words traced by Kojima's hands—the Japanese word for “letter,” *tegami*, comprises the characters for “hand” and “paper”—start to usher in the benevolent, nearly physical presence of the writer. Reading her letters, which he hides in the slipcase of his dictionary, the narrator sees “a little pair of rectangles casting a warm light at me through the darkness. I almost felt like I could reach out and touch it. Then I started thinking about how I hoped the notes I wrote

Kojima brought her comfort when she was hurting.” Writing, the quasi-magical circuit that connects minds to hands to eyes, gathers an extraordinary aesthetic and ethical (and, to a certain degree, erotic) power. It sets the mind free. The childish notes become as momentous as the letters that make up Goethe’s “The Sorrows of Young Werther,” one of Nietzsche’s favorite novels.

“I love only what a person has written with his blood,” Zarathustra instructs his followers. “Write with blood and you will find that blood is spirit.” Kawakami takes the command very seriously, if not literally. The blood spilled furnishes not only the reason for the correspondence between the narrator and Kojima but also the spirit of the novel’s philosophical inquiry, initiating the friends into deep, sustained thinking about the world of middle school, their inferior position in it, and the responsibility they bear for each other. “When they bullied me and beat me up, why couldn’t I do anything but obey them?” the narrator asks. “What does it mean to obey? Why was I scared? Why? What does it mean to be scared?” The rhetorical question, Kawakami’s preferred device for showing thought leaping into action, can court faux profundity. But it also implies an earnest demand that the narrator—and, alongside him, the reader—connect his experience of a mental state (“Why was I scared?”) to an interpretation (“What does it mean to be scared?”). This process of putting pressure on meaning, twisting words this way and that, is how thinking works and how theories are made. During the most optimistic moments in “Heaven,” it is a shared process.

“I couldn’t stop thinking” emerges as a refrain for the narrator and Kojima, who start meeting to discuss what it means to be bullied. They utter it not as a complaint but as the compulsion that draws them to each other—the desire to impart clarity and depth to their suffering, the need to create a world apart from the world in which they cannot see or stand up straight. When Kojima writes to the narrator to say that she wants to show him Heaven, he is surprised to find himself in an art museum. Heaven, Kojima reveals, is her

name for “a painting of two lovers eating cake in a room with a red carpet and a table”; two lovers who have survived “something really, really sad” but now perceive the world in perfect harmony. It is a bad omen that the narrator and Kojima never get to see the painting, having grown thirsty and tired of walking and feeling overwhelmed by being in such close proximity. Their failure to secure total understanding of each other will soon push them apart and deeper into themselves.

“I was always quite a philosophical child, asking odd questions and in a hurry to grow up,” Kawakami has said of her upbringing, in Osaka. Her family was working-class and her father largely absent. At fourteen, the same age as the characters in “Heaven,” she got a part-time job at a fan factory, to supplement the family’s income. In her twenties, she worked as a bar hostess and a bookstore clerk while pursuing a career as a singer-songwriter and taking correspondence courses in philosophy. A blog that she started to promote her singing career, “Critique of Pure Sadness,” displays a wry fascination with Kant, and is cut with streetwise Osaka slang and unsparing discussions of sex. She studied Nietzsche’s writings with Hitoshi Nagai, a philosopher at Nihon University who had a particular interest in *ressentiment*—the persistent hatred that impoverished, powerless people felt toward their noble oppressors. According to Nietzsche, *ressentiment* motivated the rise of “evil” as a concept, allowing the oppressed to condemn their enemies, and of “good,” as the concept that could valorize their suffering.

Traces of Kawakami’s life and education are scattered throughout her novel “Breasts and Eggs,” which received international acclaim when it was published in English, last year. The book concerns two sisters from a working-class family: the older a bar hostess desperate for breast augmentation, the younger a writer who contemplates whether to have a child with a sperm donor—really, an ethical decision about whether to will

another life into existence, thus condemning it to inconceivable pain and death. Here, as in “Heaven,” questions of harm and compassion are anchored in dispossession: the vulnerability of a person’s body to the political, economic, and social demands of others. “Does it hurt to be you?” one character asks. “Does it hurt to be me? What’s it mean to hurt, anyway?” Contemporary dilemmas like plastic surgery and reproductive technology bait us into asking older questions.

The Nietzschean literary tradition has largely retreated in the past half century. It reaches back to the dazzling novels of ideas of Robert Musil, Thomas Mann, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and, on the other side of the world, to the fiction of Yukio Mishima and Natsume Sōseki, who helped an acquaintance translate “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” into Japanese and worked the novel’s themes into his 1906 satirical novel, “I Am a Cat.” Each man (Nietzschean novelists are almost all men) found himself mesmerized by Nietzsche’s vehement rejection of “slave morality”—the “good” values of compassion and selflessness, which Nietzsche believed were merely a way for the dispossessed to rationalize their suffering. The clearing away of such Christian values left the modern world vulnerable to nihilism, “the luxury of destruction, disaggregation, and negation,” Nietzsche acknowledged. But it also summoned artists to a new challenge, daring them to pose scandalous questions about the nature of power and about more just ways to relate to other people. If the challenge was met, art could bring a “disconcerting beauty and affirmation to light”—the beauty perceived by “the tortured person who frees himself from his torture.”

Freeing himself from torture is the narrator’s dearest wish in “Heaven,” and his exchanges with Kojima begin to wrest a beautiful, affirming, and private existence from their public experiences of bullying. The novel’s dreamlike expression of their fledgling ideas has an artistic value that flies in the face of critics like Northrop Frye, who believed that an “interest in ideas and theoretical statements is alien to the genius of the novel proper, where the

technical problem is to dissolve all theory into personal relationships.” But “Heaven” also models a rigorous and elegant process of inquiry that can transcend its pared-down fictional world. It agitates against the enduring idea that the best novels concern themselves with the singular minds and manners of people, offering no resources for the political and moral demands of “real life.” The narrator’s persecutor Ninomiya energetically parrots this argument:

No doubt Kawakami knows that the risk of ruining someone’s day increases when a novel not only imagines other people’s lives but has those people voice other people’s ideas. Perhaps the cleverest feature of “Heaven” is that one could read it—indeed, one could learn from it—without knowing the first thing about Nietzsche’s philosophy. Its ideas are as concrete and as wounding as the blows the narrator cannot deflect. Through his eyes, as Nietzsche writes of learning new ideas, we learn “to *see*—accustoming the eye to calmness, to patience, to letting things come up to it; postponing judgment, learning to go around and grasp each individual case from all sides.”

Letters in a novel allow for the emergence of ideas, and also for the expression of an ideal self, a “fictitious narrative” about a person who exists only on the “other side of life,” as Céline puts it in “Journey to the End of the Night.” But, midway through Kawakami’s novel, the letters disappear. They are replaced with dialogues, long exchanges between the narrator, who has grown increasingly talkative, and other characters. The shift from an epistolary narrative to a more dramatic staging of conversation slyly replicates the evolution of the novel as a form. But it also shows us how the idea of Heaven, the possibility of perfect correspondence between people, becomes corrupted when we see people try to live by their ideas.

Among the forms of “moralistic mendaciousness” that Nietzsche attacked, none repulsed him more than the “ascetic ideal,” the pursuit of “poverty,

humility, chastity.” Asceticism was “the *harmful* ideal *par excellence*,” for it justified suffering, turning it into a ritualized practice. In Nietzsche’s writing, the aristocratic priests with their “quack-cures” preached asceticism to channel the *ressentiment* of the dispossessed away from revolt. Asceticism enters “Heaven” through Kojima. We learn that the cheap clothes and humble appearance that mark her for suffering—“my signs,” she calls them—are, unlike the narrator’s eye, entirely self-willed. She has a rich stepfather, whom she despises; her poverty is affected, in solidarity with her biological father, who is virtually destitute and incapable of doing anything about it. Desperate to internalize his “beautiful weakness” as her own, she becomes obsessed with purity and self-abnegation. The narrator watches as she adds new “signs”: she stops eating and bathes less and less, turning into an uncanny, priestly figure, half saint, half monster. She is distraught when the narrator considers corrective surgery for his eye, arguing that he must learn to submit to his bullying:

We’re not just obeying, not anymore. We’re letting it happen. We know exactly what’s going on. We see it, and we let it happen. I don’t think that’s weakness at all. It’s more like strength.

Kojima’s preaching is parried by the bully Momose, the raging spirit of Nietzschean nihilism, ready to dismiss everything Kojima says as “total bullshit.” Good and bad, he tells the narrator, are values determined by the powerful. There is “no beautiful world where everyone thinks the same way,” no God or higher authority to redeem suffering as meaningful:

It’s just that some people can do things, and others can’t. There are things that they want to do and things that they don’t. Everyone has their own likes and dislikes. It couldn’t be any simpler. People do what they can get away with.

Blunt statements like these may come off as juvenile, but a certain immaturity is latent in Kawakami’s source material. “Altered is Zarathustra; a child has Zarathustra become,” Nietzsche writes approvingly, of the

prophet's manner of thought and speech. Like a child, he can think about ideas with divine frankness and unguarded simplicity. Untutored in self-deception, undisciplined by lifelong coercion and punishment in what Nietzsche calls "the morality of custom," the child remains open to many different meanings of being good. Like the narrator's eye, the figure of the child is a brilliant device, allowing Kawakami to get away with dissolving elemental ideas into the confusion of adolescent relationships.

Caught, like the narrator, between the duelling voices of Kojima and Momose, we ask the same questions he does: Will turning the other cheek mean submitting to oppression forever? Can we sympathize with another person's joy or pain? Is unity against a common enemy possible? The children in "Heaven" do not resolve these debates so much as reinvigorate their contradictions. In the novel's climax, the bullies make Kojima and the narrator strip and try to force them to have sex. For a delirious moment, Kojima and Momose seem to merge before the narrator's eyes: "Their voices hummed together, and their faces mixed so that I couldn't tell them apart." Creation and destruction, meaning and meaninglessness, come together in a moment of terrible revelation. The narrator must choose whose ideas to believe; only his choice will give those ideas any meaning.

The benefit of seeing double is that the narrator can hold two contradictory ideas in his head at once. If there is something deluded about Kojima's asceticism, something showy and fake about her "signs," there is also something glorious about her commitment to them. The darkness drains from her appearance; she begins to glow. "It felt as if she had made this shield herself," the narrator thinks. Her ethics may be suspect, but even Nietzsche would not have denied their effectiveness. On the playground, her "ineffable strength" forges a delicate alliance between her and the narrator, who kneel weeping in each other's arms as a golden rain descends: "Light bounded from the puddles, reflecting the sun even as the rain grew harder. . . . Kojima's skin glistened white in the sunlight."

Kojima is taken away, and the narrator never sees her again. He decides to have his eye fixed. (Why it was not fixed earlier is the hidden nerve of the novel, and its true twist.) The moment he removes the bandage from his eye prompts the most gorgeous passage in “Heaven”:

In the cold December air, all the leaves, thousands upon thousands of them, flashed against the sky, drenched in gold. Every leaf rang with its own light, and all the light poured into me without end. I inhaled and surrendered to the flow. The distance between one second and the next felt stretched out by the hands of some enormous being. I forgot to breathe, forgot to blink, and I let myself sink into the fragrant black bark of the trees.

The narrator’s newfound capacity to slow time and catch light marks the birth of a new artistic vision—one that he, and only he, has willed into existence. Yet the beauty is bittersweet; one mourns the absence of Kojima, who made his choice possible. The light the narrator sees at the end is, for all its majesty, only the afterimage of utopia lost. Like the halos that dance before our eyes when we retreat from sunshine into darkness, the glow of the leaves remains a private phenomenon, impossible for anyone other than the narrator to perceive. There is splendor here, but no solace. “Everything was beautiful,” he tells us. “Not that there was anyone to share it with, anyone to tell. Just the beauty.”

Are things better or worse for the narrator? “Just a load of bull,” Ninomiya would scoff at such a question. He is not wrong. In novels, as in life, few things are more annoying than irresolution, the need to keep our thought moving rather than lay it to rest. This is the real magic of “Heaven,” which shows us how to think about morality as an ongoing, dramatic activity. It can be maddening and ruinous and isolating. But it can also be shared, enlivened through writing and conversation, and momentarily redeemed through unheroic acts of solidarity, which come more naturally to the children in “Heaven” than to most grownups here on earth. ♦

An earlier version of this article referred to material that was cut from the

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*Merve Emre is a contributing writer at *The New Yorker* and is a writer-in-residence at Wesleyan University.*