

Possibles and Possibilities: The Aesthetics of Speculation in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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Kazuo Ishiguro's preferred narrative style is the first-person account, often bearing direct addresses to an unspecified reader. Interestingly, he does not seem eager to explore the possibilities of a fleshed-out voice allowed by such a style. One only needs to think of a novel like *Lolita* or *True History of the Kelly Gang* to realise the variety and richness of idiom, inflections, rhythms and affects that a highly individualised voice can contribute to the texture of the narrative. As Philip Hensher notes however, Ishiguro's "voice is studiously anonymous, unfailingly formal and polite, even under the most dramatic circumstances" (n. pag). Yet, despite its even-toned opacity, and perhaps because of it, Ishiguro's style is recognisable in its own right, and one feature which makes it appear so remarkably regular is its foregrounding of recollection as an everyday process. Let us consider the following passage, taken from his novel, *The Remains of the Day*:

But now that I think further about it, I am not sure Miss Kenton spoke to me quite so boldly that day. We did, of course, over the years of working closely together come to have some very frank exchanges, but the afternoon I am recalling was still early in our relationship and I cannot see even Miss Kenton having been so forward... (62-3)

In this passage and throughout this novel, the narrator unabashedly pauses to clarify himself and go over minute, frequently tedious, details while pursuing the halting trail of memory. Such attempts at authentic recollection abound in most of his other works as well. The following passage is from one of his earlier novels, *An Artist of the Floating World*:

These, of course, may not have been the precise words I used that afternoon at the Tamagawa temple; for I have had cause to recount this particular scene many times before,

and it is inevitable that with repeated telling, such accounts begin to take on a life of their own. (72)

Unlike the narrator of *The Remains of the Day*, who is a simple-minded and cautious character, the narrator of *An Artist of the Floating World* is no humble figure, and his narrative is peppered with resounding declarations of his own success. However, he too is bound by his duty as a narrator (and by his guilt) to test his memory and acknowledge its limitations. Ishiguro's first-person narratives are therefore presented not as seamless tales but as memoirs made vulnerable by their reliance on memory. In each case, the narrative owes its very existence to the act of recollection but consequently, the struggle to remember, to make meaning of memory, and to use memory against its own deceptions, are absorbed into the aesthetic fabric of the novel. A significant portion of the narrative is therefore invested in speculation. However, it is only in the case of *Never Let Me Go* that Ishiguro actually delves into the genre of speculative fiction. In this article, I am interested in exploring how Ishiguro draws upon the inherent content and structure of speculative fiction, but also allows speculation to permeate his novel to an extent that is not necessitated by genre. What emerges in his novel is a peculiar association of speculative fiction's anticipatory forces and the plot's specific tendencies towards speculation mired in deflation and stasis. Finally, it is in the context of this rather violent pairing that I discuss the fractured nature of the "possible" as it appears in *Never Let Me Go*. The following sections therefore deal with broad questions of genre, whereas later sections discuss the text and its aesthetic, political and philosophical implications in some detail.

Speculative Fiction and Science Fiction

At this early stage of the article, I would like to state that my use of the term speculative fiction incorporates a vast array of genres and subgenres with various overlaps between them. For me, the thread uniting all speculative fiction is the fact that it is set in conditions which do not have an equivalent in reality. Margaret Atwood caused a stir in the science fiction community by defining speculative fiction as the legacy of Jules Verne—"things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books" (*In Other Worlds* n. pag)—and science fiction as "those books that descend from HG Wells's *The War of*

the Worlds, which treats of an invasion by tentacled Martians shot to Earth in metal canisters – things that could not possibly happen” (*In Other Worlds* n. pag). Even by this narrower definition, *Never Let Me Go* would qualify as speculative fiction. *Never Let Me Go* re-imagines the not too distant past—England in the 1990s, to be precise—as a brutally self-serving age in which clones are reared for the sole purpose of donating organs to “natural born” human beings. I argue that this novel corresponds to Atwood’s vision of speculative fiction because the large-scale cloning industry conceived in this novel is not only possible but also founded on a technology that already exists.¹ However, I do not wish to follow Atwood’s distinction for a number of reasons. For one, Atwood herself lays this binary to rest. Her comment on the difference between science fiction and speculative fiction, taken from the introduction to her book *In Other Worlds*, is not the first instance of her distinction. The first time Atwood stated her views on the genre divide in a significant way was in the essay collection *Moving Targets*, which propelled her into a highly publicised debate with Ursula Le Guin on this very issue. In the introduction to *In Other Worlds*, (a book dedicated to Ursula Le Guin), she takes a retrospective look at her old definitions in order to move on from them to a more developed position. Shortly after clarifying what she had originally meant, she comes to the following conclusion:

In a public discussion with Ursula Le Guin in the fall of 2010, however, I found that what she means by “science fiction” is speculative fiction about things that really could happen, whereas things that really could not happen she classifies under “fantasy.” ... In short, what Le Guin means by “science fiction” is what I mean by “speculative fiction”, and what she means by “fantasy” would include some of what I mean by “science fiction.” So that clears it all up, more or less. When it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefended, and things slip back and forth across them with insouciance. (n. pag)

In fact, terms like “science fiction” and “speculative fiction” were being used fluidly long before Atwood takes them up. As early as 1986, Brian Aldiss makes the following comment in his introduction to *Trillion Year Spree*, an anthology subtitled ‘The History of Science Fiction’:

There is no such entity as science fiction. We have only the work of many men and women which, for convenience, we can group together under the label 'science fiction'. Many

dislike that label; many glory in it... We bow to the fact that much of what passes for science fiction these days is nearer fantasy. SF can, after all, be imagined to stand for science fantasy, as it can for speculative fiction (for those who are attached to that term). (Aldiss 23)

If science fiction is the most convenient umbrella term for Aldiss, then speculative fiction appears as the wider, overarching category in an anthology from 2008—*The Del Rey Book of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Sixteen Original Works by Speculative Fiction's Finest Voices*. The Atwood-Le Guin debate therefore was not the first indicator of burgeoning generic titles in relation to the hazily delineated field of science fiction; nor did it create a permanent rift through the centre of this literary terrain.

P.L. Thomas, who is interested in exploring the tensions and slippages involved in assigning and accepting genres, speaks frequently of “SF *and* [emphasis mine] speculative fiction” (*Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction* n. pag), implying that there is both a distinction and a parity between the two. However, he does not believe in clearly enunciating the difference, and points toward Atwood’s conflicted relationship with genre as an indicator of the complexity of genre. Taking an expansive view of the relationships that various writers and critics share with science fiction as genre, P.L. Thomas chooses to read the related debates as a rich and heady affair, as opposed to a murky tangle of polarised groups and indeterminate criteria. The absence of even one crystal-clear, uniformly satisfying generic label is for him a cause for celebration. This enthusiasm prompts him to read both Atwood’s distinction and her softened approach to it through the same distant lens, thus seeing both as an indicator of complexity. However, her early distinction cannot be seen as a marker of complexity in the same way that her reconciliation with Le Guin can. It is true that by resisting the dominance of the “science fiction” label, Atwood communicates a need for a more graded approach, and shows a perhaps fruitful restlessness about adhering to a term since its inception. In that sense, she is fighting rigidity. However, her distinction between science fiction and speculative fiction is based on highly specific parameters. What she identifies as the core of science fiction (imagining the impossible or the very remotely possible) may, for someone else, not be central to the philosophy or tradition of science fiction at all. In fact, the subtitle for *In Other Worlds* is “SF and the Human Imagination,” indicating the persistent connection between the SF label and imagined worlds, even in her own mind. In this

book, Atwood discusses a wide range of texts without bothering to classify them as science fiction or speculative fiction, using loose phrases such as “SF and related topics” (n. pag) without betraying any anxiety. In fact, she devotes an entire subsection to *Never Let Me Go*, acknowledging the elusive status of genre in Ishiguro’s oeuvre. She writes, “Ishiguro likes to experiment with literary hybrids, and to hijack popular forms for his own ends, and to set his novels against tenebrous historical backdrops... An Ishiguro novel is never about what it pretends to be about, and *Never Let Me Go* is true to form.” (n. pag).

With the publication of his latest novel, *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro has entered into a debate about the “fantasy” genre. Like Atwood’s dissociation of her work from science fiction, Ishiguro’s refusal to call *The Buried Giant* a work of fantasy, has drawn the ire of several writers and critics. Discussing the controversy with Neil Gaiman, Ishiguro advocates caution when it comes to classification. He says:

Is it possible that what we think of as genre boundaries are things that have been invented fairly recently by the publishing industry? I can see there’s a case for saying there are certain patterns, and you can divide up stories according to these patterns, perhaps usefully. But I get worried when readers and writers take these boundaries too seriously, and think that something strange happens when you cross them, and that you should think very carefully before doing so. (Gaiman and Ishiguro n.pag)

Interestingly, Ishiguro is comfortable with Gaiman’s use of the science fiction tag for *Never Let Me Go*, and recalls that the science fiction community had no major quarrels with that novel. However, he also reveals that the premise of *Never Let Me Go* was based on a simple human question—“how can I get young people to go through the experience of old people, how can I contrive this situation?” (Gaiman and Ishiguro n.pag) It was only after attempting and failing to develop the premise in a realist mode that Ishiguro turned to science fiction. Ishiguro did not therefore set out to write in a particular genre. Rather, science fiction proved to be the best vehicle for an idea which predated his choice of genre and thus existed outside the structure of science fiction. Ishiguro makes a nuanced point when he says “we have to distinguish between something that’s part of the essence of the genre and things that are merely characteristic of it” (Gaiman and Ishiguro n.pag). This distinction is often no easy task, and becomes further

complicated when we think of genre as something an author stumbles upon in the quest for a fitting form.

Therefore, to return to my original point, speculative fiction is the only title that I wish to apply to *Never Let Me Go*, since the title is expansive and to some extent self-explanatory. However, since I have no qualms about seeing science fiction as a part of, and often standing in for speculative fiction, my analysis of Ishiguro is informed by critical discussions of science fiction. Most importantly, the idea of speculation itself lies at the heart of this novel—a point I will go on to discuss in greater detail.

Speculative Fiction and Memoir

Through all the varying perspectives on speculative fiction, one idea remains consistent—that speculative fiction deals with imagined worlds. Naturally, most texts written in this genre are infused with markers of the fictional world, alerting and accustoming the reader to this world's novelty. World-building, as this is often called, has become something of an aesthetic convention. *Never Let Me Go* however is curiously lacking in details that give the sense of a scientifically advanced world. In this novel, Ishiguro speaks of no scientific invention apart from the giant leap made in cloning technology. At this point of course, it would be useful to consider the period in which the novel is set—the 1990s, at least six years before the novel's own time. Ishiguro's project seems to be one of imagining what the world could have been, and also what it could be if certain fascist tendencies were exacerbated. Futuristic aesthetics is therefore not fundamental to his vision. This in itself is not a rarity, as certain strands of modern speculative fiction are less interested in the facets of a new technological era, and more concerned with exploring culture, relationships and emotion. In Maureen McHugh's story 'Frankenstein's Daughter,' (2005) for example, Cara the solitary clone figure is the only evidence of a leap from our present reality. Asthmatic, overgrown and mentally slow, Cara comes across more as a failure and a transgression, rather than a scientific breakthrough. The story, which offers no insights into Cara's mind, is steeped in the entirely human frustrations of her family while Cara's troubling, unyielding presence looms over the family drama. *Never Let Me Go* is similarly invested in the identity of clones rather than the details of a world which makes cloning possible. However, the striking feature of this novel is that difference is not made

explicit by the mental and physical structure of the clones themselves (apart from fleeting references to their infertility).

In *Never Let Me Go*, we do not come across multiple copies of the same person, either as a group or in succession. Nor do we get an opportunity to see the place they occupy in human society. The few guardians in charge of them are indeed human, but they exist within the closeted institution of Hailsham, a school devoted to giving clones a meaningful childhood, and to which the narrator Kathy belonged. Indeed, through most of the novel, the clones appear as a community of fully functional individuals with well-defined personas, engaging in all too familiar activities—quarrels, pranks, excursions, love affairs. Hence, Keith McDonald writes of *Never Let Me Go* as a “speculative memoir” that makes use of elements and trajectories integral to autobiography. McDonald does not restrict the term “autobiography” to nonfiction, but speaks instead of an autobiographical mode that allows “the recounting of experience... as a means of a creating a rapport between reader and writer across a broad spectrum of literary genres” (75). However, he points out that,

[...] because of the aspects of reality that mirror but adjust our own world in the mode of Science Fiction... [the autobiographical conceits] cannot be fully realized. The result is an autobiography drained of its usual depth and acknowledgment of a fuller life outside of the textual boundaries, but fixated instead on what little experience the protagonist holds. (78)

Even before the theme of organ donation is fully revealed, the narrator’s school experiences carry an unspecified weight that estranges her memories from the stock images of childhood or the personal angst recalled in conventional autobiography. According to MacDonald, it is this particular tension between autobiography and science fiction that gives rise to the enigma of *Never Let Me Go*. It must be mentioned here that this is by no mean the typical offspring of science fiction and memoir. The first-person narrative has been adapted to suit a dizzying range of artistic purposes without necessarily subverting reader expectations of autobiographical conventions. There are science fiction memoirs that from the very beginning are steeped in details of an imagined world. One example is Gene Wolfe’s *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, where within the first few pages, the narrator introduces his tutor Mr. Million, who “would enter the room in perfect silence, his wide wheels gliding across the uneven floor while David pretended

sleep” (n. pag.). Therefore in *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro makes the choice to set up expectations of a realist coming-of-age account, with emphases on schooling, everyday life, rites of passage and other related tropes. As we find out, the coming of age in this case is far from fulfilling, as it hails the nightmarish chapter of organ donation in the lives of the clones.² The shadow of this ruthlessly determined fate looms over the entire narrative, occasionally jarring the reader in moments of greater intensity, but for the most part suffusing the familiar with a barely palpable sense of danger.

In this context, speculation plays a specialised role within the narrative in a way that goes beyond the demands of speculative fiction. This is not to say that the demands of genre are limited, and hence transcended (which would imply a hierarchy). Simply stated, what links *Never Let Me Go* to other works of speculative fiction is that it considers the possibility of an imagined world, and dwells on what such a world would entail and reveal about our present selves. However, as we shall see, speculation in this novel is central to the lives of its characters, the narrator’s consciousness and consequently Ishiguro’s aesthetic strategy, and this heightened significance of speculation is specific to the plot of *Never Let Me Go*.

The Aesthetics of Speculation in *Never Let Me Go*

As I discussed at the very beginning, speculation is a consistent element in the voice of Ishiguro’s first-person narrator. In both the novels that were mentioned—*An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*—speculation is a positive process that enables the stubborn and prejudiced narrator to confront, and eventually transform, himself to some extent. In *Never Let Me Go*, the irreversible plight of the clones robs memory of its generative power. However, as the narrator attempts to recall her childhood, we are flooded with a mass of innocuous speculations that lulls us into a state of peaceful curiosity about the immediate paraphernalia of her life. Such speculation is primarily twofold. One, which is at the outermost limit of the narrative, is employed to sift out the false grains of memory and revise old perceptions. The following passage is typical of this technique:

It’s even possible I began to realise, right back then, the nature of her worries and frustrations. But that’s probably going too far; chances are, at the time, I noticed all

these things without knowing what on earth to make of them. And if these incidents now seem full of significance and all of a piece, it's probably because I'm looking at them in the light of what came later... (*Never* 77)

Another kind of speculation comprises minor confusions that the narrator has experienced in the past and now invokes in their old form through recollection—"After days of this I started to think more solidly. If the pencil case hadn't come from Geraldine, where had it come from?" (*Never* 58). The last quotation is a perfect example of the thoroughly ordinary nature of many of the narrator's musings. Yet, it is precisely the constant act of speculation that opens up cracks in the banal rhythms of the clones' existence and alerts us to their sinister fate. This leads us to a third strand of speculation which cannot be delinked from the first two, though it is of far deeper import—the speculation through which the characters interrogate the peculiar trappings of their existence. It is a tool through which the clones try in various ways to cope with the terrible significance of their special identity and thus make meaning of their lives. Although they never seriously challenge the role that has been imposed upon them, their urge to pursue certain questions throughout their lives is as close to a struggle as they achieve. As is often the case, it is the constrained and utilitarian nature of their lives that necessitates the questions. In the remainder of this section, I explore the birth of these questions, and their disruptive value as well as the pathos of their ineffectuality. By doing so, I also want to convey how speculation acts as a double-edged aesthetic strategy, creating a world that is beckoningly familiar on the surface, and yet never sits comfortably on the reader.

In *Never Let Me Go*, much of the surmise is sparked by two characters. One is Tommy, Kathy's friend and eventual love interest, and the other is Miss Lucy, one of the guardians at Hailsham. Both come across as misfits early on in the novel. Tommy is in some ways a typical problem child to begin with, given to temper tantrums, talented at sports but unable to produce the works of art rigorously demanded by Hailsham. Miss Lucy is the only guardian who betrays a sense of discontent regarding Hailsham's ethos. The two drift towards each other, as Hailsham's failure to seamlessly incorporate Tommy strengthens Miss Lucy's convictions about the deficiencies of Hailsham's system. In one of the early episodes in the novel, Tommy tells Kathy about an exchange with Miss Lucy about his problems. Tommy reports that ostensibly, Miss Lucy's purpose was to reassure him that lack of creativity was not as damning as others at

Hailsham would have it, but there were powerful undercurrents to her words, as all the while she was ‘*shaking*’ [sic] (28) in fury. There was also a particular statement she had made which left Tommy, and now Kathy, puzzled:

‘There’s something else,’ he went on. ‘Something else she said I can’t quite figure out. I was going to ask you about it. She said we weren’t being taught enough, something like that.’

‘Taught enough? You mean she thinks we should be studying even harder than we are?’

‘No, I don’t think she meant that. What she was talking about was, you know, about *us*. What’s going to happen to us one day. Donations and all that.’

‘But we have been taught about all that,’ I said. ‘I wonder what she meant. Does she think there are things we haven’t been told yet?’ (29)

This conversation marks a turning point for young Kathy, as from this moment onwards, she begins to notice a series of similarly perplexing comments made by Miss Lucy. What comes through in the above exchange is the fact that Kathy and her peer group already know about the scheme of organ donations, but there is something dangerously incomplete about their education. Not long after this, a classroom conversation about smoking leads Miss Lucy to the precipice of an explanation, but no one has the courage to prompt her further. Kathy, as narrator, reflects upon the episode:

So why had we stayed silent that day? I suppose it was because even at that age – we were nine or ten – we knew just enough to make us wary of that whole territory. It’s hard now to remember just how much we knew by then. We certainly knew – though not in any deep sense – that we were different from our guardians, and also from the normal people outside; we perhaps even knew that a long way down the line there were donations waiting for us. But we didn’t really know what that meant. If we were keen to avoid certain topics, it was probably more because it *embarrassed* us. [sic] (69)

It is this condition of half-knowledge that dominates the students’ existence. Their knowledge expands as they grow older, but it is always obfuscated to some extent, and hence

heavy with implication while lacking the solidity of truth. Their curiosity to know more, coupled with a sense of foreboding, makes them evade detailed discussion even as they speculate on the strictures and obligations that make up the outer surface of their lives. In this context, I would focus on two recurring textual elements—rumour and role-playing—which I believe are symptomatic of this epistemological uncertainty. Both these elements create a façade of normalcy by virtue of their commonplace nature, but contain excesses and disfigurements that contribute in a significant way to this novel’s atmosphere of uneasy speculation.

To move on to the first element—a result of the indeterminate speculation which pervades *Never Let Me Go* is an abundance of rumour. Rumour is a standard ingredient of school narratives, but the science fiction premise of this novel puts a sombre twist on this frivolous theme. Arguably the most significant of the rumours that circulate in Hailsham is about the Gallery. The first mention of the Gallery occurs in the discussion between Tommy and Kathy about Tommy’s conversation with Miss Lucy. Tommy associates Miss Lucy’s behaviour “with a lot of other things that are puzzling... Like why Madame comes and takes away... [their] best pictures” (30). “It’s for the Gallery,” Kathy responds. Hailsham, as we know by now, demands a hyper rate of artistic production from its students. Madame, an enigmatic outsider with a stake in Hailsham, visits the school a few times per year and carries away a selection of the artwork without any explanation. This activity has given birth to the notion of The Gallery, a “hazy realm” (32) lacking in coordinates or form, and imbued with great aspirational value for it is believed to store the students’ best work. The narrator says:

The gallery Tommy and I were discussing was something we’d all of us grown up with. Everyone talked about it as though it existed though in truth none of us knew for sure that it did. I’m sure I was pretty typical in not being able to remember how or when I’d first heard about it. Certainly, it hadn’t been from the guardians... and there was an unspoken rule that we should never even raise the subject in their presence. (31)

Retrospectively, Kathy wonders, “But did we really believe in the Gallery? Today, I’m not sure” (32). The other major rumour that surfaces in the world of *Never Let Me Go* is that couples can get deferrals for their donations if they can prove that they are in love. This belief is perhaps the most juvenile of all, but at the same time the most heartbreaking in the desire it belies. Moreover,

it fuses with the rumour about the Gallery when Tommy arrives at the notion that their artwork was taken away so that Madame could get a glimpse into their souls and assess the authenticity of their love. The speculation around this carries an intense emotional charge, as well as dark comic power, much like the minutely detailed animals that Tommy starts drawing in the hope of impressing Madame someday and winning a deferral.

The absence of clearly specified truths, in combination with a binding future, also seems to prod the characters into a continuous state of play. Make-belief forms an important part of schoolchildren's games, and in fact, this imaginative impulse is part of what feeds rumour. Trying to compensate for their foreshortened and predictable lives, the clones of *Never Let Me Go* stretch the notion of make-belief to its limit. Hailsham is witness to numerous voluntary suspensions of skepticism, ranging from conspiracy theories about the safety of a favourite guardian to the partially self-parodic belief about Norfolk as a place where lost objects resurface. Such games are a part of adolescence and teenage life, but in this novel, they are a bit too elaborate for comfort. The idea that some guardians were under threat, for example, is linked to a full-fledged system of "secret guards" (48), which involves spying, identifying suspects and traitors—none of which actually has any impact on their environment but is still practised with great intensity. This leads us to the second element of this discussion—role-playing or performance. Most disturbing is the implication that without the relief of these performances, a number of things—the pleasure of everyday life, even sanity—would be left hanging in the balance. This becomes more apparent when the students move from Hailsham to the Cottages, an intermediate setting between school and the world of organ donation. By this stage, they are beyond the age of childish ruses, and have already been exposed to Miss Lucy's outburst, in which her usual mode of euphemistic warning gave way to a blunt statement of facts:

None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets as I heard some of you planning the other day. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do. (80)

However, Kathy recalls, "there was surprisingly little discussion about what she'd said" (81). Far from being jolted into disenchantment by Miss Lucy's words, the students think of the outburst

as an excess on Miss Lucy's part. Their upgrade to the Cottages only seems to compound the seriousness with which they make a performance of their lives. However, the atmosphere at the Cottages is markedly different from that at Hailsham. For one, there is a distinction between Kathy's peer group and the older lot, called "the veterans," who were already present when the former moved to the Cottages. The studiously sophisticated attitude of the veterans sets the standard at the Cottages and dispels the possibility of giggles and hushed whispers that had been so much a part of Hailsham days. It is the performance of adulthood that the veterans put into play and which the younger group from Hailsham attempts to copy. Hence, sex here is treated in a rather "functional" (125) way, conversation at breakfast revolves around canonical works of literature, and couples part with casual fraternal gestures. Looking back upon the past, Kathy points out that it was always Ruth, her best friend and Tommy's girlfriend at the time, who was most invested in enacting these codes of conduct. However, she admits that they all indulged in these games to some degree. For every character, these performances are a way of simultaneously evading the impending real and creating a sense of immediate reality to fill the void. Although the clones do raise doubts about their situation, their questions do not ultimately rupture the reassuring façade of their performances. While recounting her experiences, Kathy not only uses her present judgement to acknowledge the fragility of these performances, but also conveys to the reader their faint, unspoken self-awareness at the time of performance itself. The following passage is her comment on the system of secret guards:

In this way we built up a list of people we knew to be in on our plot — guardians and students whom we declared our sworn enemies. And yet, all the time, I think we must have had an idea of how precarious the foundations of our fantasy were, because we always avoided any confrontation. (51)

Kathy's voice provides a detached counterpoint to the intensity of the young clones' imaginations, justifying any incredulity the reader may feel at their overblown games. However, Kathy does not openly discuss any *cause* for the excess of performance in their lives, and this excess is likely to generate discomfort and unresolved speculation in the reader.

Interestingly, the performative element in this novel transcends the lives of the clones. One of the most unsettling episodes in *Never Let Me Go* takes place towards the end of the book

when Tommy and Kathy, now lovers, visit Madame hoping to convince her of their love. There is an eerily simulated quality about the setting in which this conversation takes place. After putting Tommy and Kathy through an extensive wait, Madame takes her position between sliding doors, with a stretch of darkness behind her. Kathy recalls:

There was something odd about her manner, like she hadn't really invited us to sit down... Tommy, afterwards, said he thought she was about to burst into song, and that those curtains behind her would open, and that instead of the street and the flat grassy expanse leading to the seafront, there'd be this big stage set like the ones we'd had at Hailsham, with even a chorus line to back her up. (246)

Though Tommy's description is comic, the atmosphere is palpably tense, and the theatricality of the situation is intensified by Madame's curiously stilted, yet exaggerated way of speaking. As the conversation proceeds, Kathy begins to suspect the reason behind Madame's manner, and eventually proves to be correct. "... [T]he vague idea I'd had before became something more substantial. 'Do I go too far?' And now: 'Do we continue?' I realised, that with a little chill, that these questions had never been for me, or for Tommy, but for someone else – someone listening behind us in the darkened half of the room" (249). This someone proves to be Miss Emily, once their headmistress at Hailsham, now disfigured by age and on a wheelchair.

Miss Emily's presence at this juncture is crucial to the plot of *Never Let Me Go*, as she clarifies a number of the novel's ambiguities. However, there is no clear reason for the staged secrecy leading up to her appearance. Its purpose seems to be to evoke a sense of surveillance, of the uncanny and the artificial. These are qualities that haunt the entire novel, making the text itself a source of confusion, on top of the questions that actually belong to the narrative. The fate of the students is revealed quite early on in the novel, and it is as specific and predetermined a fate, as it can be. Yet, Kathy's narrative engages with the bare fact of organ donation only through a shroud of mystery and a maze of circumlocutions. The shadow cast over the narrative by the imminent destruction is as subtle and disorienting as Miss Emily's unseen presence during Madame's speech.

At this point, it might be useful to go back to a rather loaded term—"surveillance"—used just a few sentences earlier. The political connotations of the word are unmistakable, and may

well suggest the possibility of an embedded political commentary in Ishiguro's text. If that is the case, then the politics is certainly not one of straightforward satire, for 1990s Britain, though certainly dependent on surveillance, is not the archetypal police state. Moreover, there is usually a strain of reformatory urgency in satire whereas Ishiguro's book is almost a decade older than the period it depicts. In fact, *Never Let Me Go* is only one instance of Ishiguro's interest in the post-second World War age. Both *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* explore this age, and actually belong to it. In both these novels, the post-war period appears more as a time of change than a time burdened with the legacy of war. In *The Remains of the Day*, the narrator, Stevens, is a straight-laced English butler who had loyally served an English Lord in the inter-war period, and is now employed by a wealthy American. Stevens's recollections about his previous service force him to confront some harsh truths and finally prompt him to accept the value of bantering—a practice he had always dismissed as American, new-age and frivolous. A similar trajectory is evident in *An Artist of the Floating World*. In this novel, the narrator, Ono, is an aged painter who had achieved great fame for his nationalist art in fascist Japan. Falling into disrepute in a post-World War II society, Ono gradually comes to acknowledge excesses in his past vision, and reconciles himself in some measure to the new spirit of Japan. Admittedly, this new spirit too is infused with American values, but these values are not celebrated in themselves. Rather, what is celebrated in both novels is the ability to move on, however marginally, from ossified pride to acceptance of past mistakes and new beginnings.

It is precisely the impossibility of such change that informs the basic premise of *Never Let Me Go*. I suspect that *Never Let Me Go* conjures a situation in which the unyielding, limiting power of fascism has reigned supreme. The extent to which the clones are deprived and controlled points to something more extreme than the insidious fascism of neoliberal democracy. At the same time, the world of *Never Let Me Go* cannot be seen simply as the logical extension of classic fascist rule because the practice of organ harvesting exists within a human society which appears no different from contemporary democracy. Moreover, it must be remembered that towards the end of the novel, we learn of a revolt by these humans against the perceived superiority of the clones. The clones therefore become the victim of an anti-eugenics paranoia, which complicates the political terrain considerably. It is thus extremely difficult to salvage a reliable indicator of Ishiguro's political leanings from his works. What we can say for sure is that rigidity and its capacity for tyranny repels him, and against this he posits the redemptive power

of individual introspection. This faith in the individual would be highly problematic had Ishiguro not taken care to delineate the stumbling blocks of egotism, delusion and weakness in detail. In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro goes so far as to produce a crisis of faith by exposing the mind and body's helplessness against modern science and radically utilitarian ethics. If there is a link between the novel and Ishiguro's contemporary reality, then I believe that link might be located most effectively in the field of scientific and technological advancements.

Thus it is primarily in the 21st century, when he takes up science fiction that Ishiguro confronts the issues of biopolitics and posthumanism, and for once, is unable to grant power to sheer thought. Yet, the value of thinking and feeling are not reduced in this novel. If anything, the characters' speculation against all odds eventually achieves near-tragic dimensions, despite being the source of much anxiety. Speculation in this novel is therefore both alienating and emotionally alluring.

The Limits of Possibility

In a *New Yorker* review of Ishiguro's latest novel, James Wood begins with praise in the guise of mockery:

Kazuo Ishiguro writes a prose of provoking equilibrium—sea-level flat, with unseen fathoms below. He avoids ornament or surplus, and seems to welcome cliché, platitude, episodes as bland as milk, an atmosphere of oddly vacated calm whose mild persistence comes to seem teasingly or menacingly unreal. His previous novel, “Never Let Me Go” (2005), contained passages that appeared to have been entered in a competition called The Ten Most Boring Fictional Scenes. It began with dizzying dullness: “My name is Kathy H. I’m thirty-one years old, and I’ve been a carer now for eleven years.” (Wood n. pag)

Wood's review is eloquent and insightful, but there is perhaps something about this first sentence that he disregards. The opening sentence of *Never Let Me Go* may be devoid of style or flavour, but it is not unremarkable, for the use of the word “carer” is not entirely inconspicuous. “Carer” is self-explanatory, yet intriguing due to the lack of context, for it begs the question—who does Kathy care for? Moreover, it appears that being a carer is central to Kathy's identity, much like a

profession, which is a slightly more loaded use of the term than usual, and not as conventionally established as, say, “nurse.” Even if these aberrations escape notice, “donor,” which soon follows “carer,” is a word that sits less easily on the reader without a specified context, for what can possibly make someone a full-time donor? Here too, we do not know the object that is being donated. Similarly, “guardian,” “veteran,” “deferral” all appear through the text in a strangely dislocated form, intelligible but never entirely satisfactory in their first appearance. This is how Ishiguro makes the familiar strange. Perhaps the most disturbing instance of this is the use of the word “completed” for the death caused by a donation, sinister precisely because of its euphemistic quality.

Wood writes, that,

“Never Let Me Go” achieves great and moving speculative power, not because of what it has to say about the dilemma of cloning but because of what it has to say about ordinary life’s unwelcome resemblance to the dilemma of cloning... The resignation of these children, who become aware of their fabricated function, is horrifying; most of the time, they seem sapped of rebellion. Ishiguro’s pithless, neutered prose is mimetically effective. It enacts a meek acceptance that finally may be our own, too. The children of Hailsham endure short, determined, and thus “pointless” lives; but are our lives—though generally longer—less pointless or less determined?

The question is a valid one, and part of the novel’s speculative power does indeed come from its resemblance of the children’s lives to our own. In his conversation with Gaiman, Ishiguro asks, “If I sense that a writer is just weaving some sort of self-referential alternative world, that will not tell me anything emotionally or intellectually about the one I live in, I would lose patience and say, “I can’t be bothered to go there; why do I want to go there?” (n. pag) Keith McDonald too, writes that “... [t]he world we are presented with is disturbingly similar to our own, and crucially, the practice of harvesting has become a largely unspoken but widely recognised fact of life, drawing parallels with the everyday human injustices witnessed in contemporary culture” (76). However, I believe that the novel’s impact lies in what eludes and complicates the resemblance, rather than what is captured of it. *Never Let Me Go* may appear to deviate more from science fiction or speculative fiction than it belongs to the genre. However, it is important

to keep in mind that Ishiguro does spin his text from the substance of the genre, and his intention is not merely to hold up a mirror to human society. Atwood writes that *Never Let Me Go* “[...] is a brilliantly executed book by a master craftsman who has chosen a difficult subject: ourselves, seen through a glass, darkly” (*In Other Worlds* n. pag). The reflection in the glass is dark because it reveals the horrors *latent* in present-day society. This potentiality necessarily raises the question of possibility. In *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, Csicsery-Ronay Jr. writes, “the sense of the present in this present/future dichotomy is saturated with future-orientation: anticipations, anxieties, hopes, promises, and plans, in individual minds and in the audience’s collective consciousness” (79). In the case of *Never Let Me Go*, the re-imagined past performs the same role as the imagined future does in forward-looking works of fiction. They both unfold in the present and they are both likely to evoke questions of possibility in the reader’s mind. The imaginative leap taken in asking if something is possible, or what would happen if something was made possible, is what distinguishes speculative fiction from pure satire or allegory (though allegory is the very term Wood uses for the novel in his review). As we have seen throughout this article, the magnetic force of possibility in *Never Let Me Go* works not only on the reader, for even within the narrative, the characters reflect on the possibility and plausibility of many things specific to their situation, such as the Gallery, or their freedom. It is worth noting that the term used by the characters for the person they think they were cloned from, is “possible.” In one episode, Ruth embarks on an expedition to track down her possible, and in accordance with the bleak plot of the novel, the venture is ultimately disappointing. What makes this episode compelling, however, is the strength of Ruth’s anticipation and the tension between familiarity and remoteness as her possible presents consecutive pictures of uncanny resemblance, and dissonance. Similarly and on a larger scale, what Ishiguro does through his entire novel is create a multilayered aesthetic of speculation that invites a disconcerting identification, only to deflect that sense of identification through an equally disconcerting strangeness. Simultaneously runs the flow and ebb of hope—hope regularly inspired by possibility, relentlessly drained out by a fixed fate, but captured in its short-lived radiance by the nets of speculation.

Notes:

¹ It is difficult to determine the extent to which a novel's social theme—in this case, the harvesting of clones for organ donation—has an impact on this classification. As Atwood herself has said, whether an imagined future appears plausible and imminent has much to do with the direction in which society is heading—its practices, desires and anxieties. However, it is easier to pass a verdict on whether something is technologically feasible, than it is to say the same for a fictional social model. Dystopias are always exaggerated, and yet almost always seem frighteningly believable. Moreover, it is possible for a writer to pair the scientifically impossible with a believable but hypothetical social structure. I suppose it can safely be argued that whereas technology is the most concrete basis for determining possibility, the decision to let a particular technological condition flourish carries an implicit social commentary.

² Kathy, the narrator, seems to be an exception in that she has had an exceptionally long term as a carer for the clones who have started donating their organs.

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