



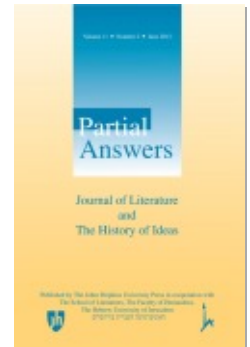
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Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas, Volume 6, Number 1, January 2008, pp. 163-180 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/pan.2008.0009](https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.2008.0009)



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Reader Response and the Recycling of Topoi in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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All conditioning aims at that: making people like their inescapable social destiny.

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (11)

It is a statement about structure rather than a value judgment to say that Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 *Never Let Me Go* casts a spell over the reader — more than his Booker-prize winning culturally-psychological *The Remains of the Day* or his semi-oneiric *When We Were Orphans* and Kafkaesque *The Unconsoled*. The binding fascination that characterizes the first-time reading of *Never Let Me Go* is, to a large extent, parallel to the experience of the novel's characters. The peculiarly contemporary ethical implications of the reader's non-vicarious re-enactment of the cognitive part of the characters' experience are, we propose to demonstrate, intertwined with the ethical implications of the way in which the novel reshapes the topoi of dystopian fiction.¹

I

Never Let Me Go is a mild and melancholy dystopia with literary roots going back to, among others, Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World* even though, according to Ishiguro's 2006 interview with John Mullan, the work of the author's imagination started with the psychological effect rather than with its fictional setting.² The foundational ideas of

¹ The cluster of classical topoi discussed in Curtius 79–105 has been snowballing in the course of the history of the novel. As a medium of intertextual links, a topos (e.g., adultery, seduction, debut, or panoptical surveillance) enters into complex relationships with the array of morphological features in each individual narrative (cf. Propp).

² Speaking about his early books with the novelist Oe Kenzaburo, Ishiguro says: "I would search through history books in the way that a film director might search for locations for a script he has already written. I would look for moments of history that would best suit my purposes" (115). The case may be seen as a real-life parallel to an author's fictional search for a functional setting in Borges's "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero": "in my

both novels³ have to do with in-vitro creation of human beings. Huxley translates the rigidities of the British class system into a social stratification based on innate or artificially controlled IQ levels. Ishiguro's protagonists are clones whose intelligence is unimportant because they have been created merely as organ banks.⁴ When physically mature, they have to donate their vital organs and die — die relatively early, unlike Huxley's characters who are “spared” decrepitude but usually do not die before they begin to decline.

Like Huxley's and Orwell's dystopian societies, Ishiguro's bend-sinister world introduces euphemistic neologisms: obligatory organ harvestings are referred to as “donations,” as if they were voluntary; the individual organ banks are referred to as “donors,” and, if the first three “donations” have gone well, after the fourth the donor “completes.” The term “complete” in Ishiguro's novel suggests that one has accomplished one's mission in life; it also evades the notion of “death.” The careful choice of new terms that take advantage of old positive connotations emphasizes the link between ideological propaganda and marketing⁵ — a deadly combination that makes the brute brainwash of Orwell's 1948 *Nineteen Eighty Four* and the “hypnopaedia” (Huxley 17) and pavlovian conditioning in *Brave New World* seem obsolete. This semantic programming can, however, misfire: towards the end of the novel we discover

idle afternoons I have imagined this story plot which I shall perhaps write somewhere and which already justifies me somehow. Details, rectifications, adjustments are lacking; there are zones of the story not yet revealed to me. . . . The action takes place in an oppressed and tenacious country: Poland, Ireland, the Venetian Republic, some South American or Balkan state. . . . Let us say (for narrative convenience) Ireland; let us say in 1824” (72). Once the keynote has been struck, the setting, chosen for its appropriateness to the plot, begins to accumulate flesh and mimetic power. However, even the most truthful novelists' on-record comments on the etiology of their imagination are often new fictional products that are to be read not as a transparent medium to biographical facts but as new cultural products in their own right. Such comments, moreover, seldom do justice to the semantic complexities of narrative details.

³The most prominent topos of utopian/dystopian literature is the presence of a *foundational principle*, a philosophical or sociological idea which forms the deep structure of a utopian setting but which may take somewhat debased surface forms; see Toker 1996: 219–23.

⁴Anxiety with respect to this issue is also reflected in, for instance, an inset fantasy in Marge Pierce's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* and in films such as *The Island*, directed by Michael Bay, and *Coma*, directed by Michael Crichton.

⁵In Margaret Atwood's dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale* the ideological leaders of the new society are former marketing specialists.

that one of the worst fears of the “donors” is that they might not quite die during the fourth surgery — that their consciousness might linger on, helplessly watching the residual parceling out of their bodies.

Unlike most dystopias, which are set either in un-locatable places like Thomas Moore’s nowhere island (only the absence of a narrative plot prevents it from fully revealing its dystopian qualities – see Greenblatt 38–58) or the land of the horses in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (see Harrison) or else after a future social cataclysm (*Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, Evgeny Zamyatin’s *We*), Ishiguro’s novel is set, as indicated by the a paratextual note prefacing the text, in the England of the 1990s, about a decade *before* the novel’s publication. The possible world conjured up by the novel differs from the familiar realities of the latter half of the twentieth century in one technological particular: the invention of cloning, including human cloning, seems to have followed shortly on the development of the techniques of organ transplant.⁶ It seems, moreover, to have developed more successfully than transplant surgeries, which often fail. The novel thus feeds into the (post)modern paranoia about the possibility of conspiracies or social phenomena that are carefully hidden from public discourse. The choice of England as a setting does not merely put to use the author’s profound knowledge of English culture; it highlights the contrast between the *internal* and *external* frames of reference (see Hrushovski). It is also a safe choice: as Robert Conquest has recently noted with sad irony, in the days of political correctness, Anglophobia is “the only permissible xenophobia” (238).

The clone incubator in the novel takes the shape of a well-run and rather comfortable English co-ed boarding school, which, however, turns out to be a precariously maintained social experiment, since, as the reader is told at the beginning of the novel but fully understands only much later, there are other clone institutions, of much worse kinds. Indeed, Hailsham is referred to as a “privileged estate” (4), suggestive of the tripartite medieval hierarchy of church, court, and peasantry. This reinforces the “specialness” of Hailsham students. Nevertheless, the name suggests its own ambiguity: Hailsham is a “sham” which people “hail,” i.e., hold in high regard.

⁶ In terms of Marie-Laure Ryan’s possible-worlds analysis of literary works, the “accessibility relationship” operative in the world of *Never Let Me Go* is characterized by “compatibility of inventory”: its *fabula* includes all the inventory of the actual world as well as some details particular to this specific setting (32).

II

The Hailsham children grow up as rather well cared for, normal, and relatively happy boarding-school orphans, with typical childish power-plays, jealousies, friendships, and loves against a background of an emotional gap where a parent should have been. One of the most puzzling aspects of the novel, and the one which makes its connotations socially relevant well beyond the imagined world, is that upon growing up and coming to understand their destiny, Hailsham graduates do not rebel or even try to flee.⁷ The most they do is seek deferral—not escape—from what they still call the “donations” — the medical murder for which they have been predestined. The novel subtly explores the educational techniques that have conditioned them to accept their predicament. These techniques are, to some extent, re-enacted by the narrative structure which affects the reader in ways parallel to the intellectual development of the characters. Yet, unlike the characters, or at least Kathy, the protagonist-narrator, the reader cannot but wonder why the students submit to being used this way, why they do not object, refuse, or simply run away. The characters seem never to consider these possibilities.⁸ Indeed, they appear to be incapable of thinking outside of the system in general; they do not ask the basic eschatological questions typical of adolescents. This is a recurrent motif in Ishiguro’s fiction: in particular, reluctance to break free from a limited mode of thinking also characterizes Stevens, the butler, in Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* and the characters of *When We Were Orphans*.

With its pleasant grounds and decent facilities, the school is a kind of maternal environment, and its students and graduates never quite cut the umbilical cord. This is reflected in the title of the novel, “Never Let Me Go,” also the title of Kathy’s favorite song which she interprets as a mother’s love song to her baby.⁹ On one occasion Kathy is sympathetically espied in her room dancing to this song while holding a pillow like a baby. The observer is the somewhat mysterious collector of the stu-

⁷ In the interview with John Mullan Ishiguro explains this troubling feature of the novel by the senselessness of any attempts to escape the common human predicament which is, by implication, condensed into the experience of the novel’s characters.

⁸ The narrator makes a number of references to having to “sign in,” so there seems to be some system of coercion.

⁹ Joel Houston, Red Garland, Bill Evens, U2, Una McCormack, Jane Monheit, and Joe Scott have each written songs bearing that title; versions of such songs has been performed by Wynton Marsalis, Curtis Mayfield, Stanley Turrentine, Mona Larsen, Luther Vandross, and Jackie Allen.

dents' artwork referred to as Madame.¹⁰ In her attempts to interpret both the song and Madame's tears at the sight of her dancing, Kathy seems to repress a possible meaning that strongly suggests itself to the reader: the song's refrain enhances the irony of Hailsham students' *not wanting* to be released. Kathy prefers to think that Madame is sorry for her because her maternal instinct will be thwarted: the clones have been doomed to childlessness.

The main educational technique through which the students are brought to accept their fate consists of causing awareness of it to grow upon them gradually— as it similarly gradually grows upon the reader. In retrospect, neither the children nor the reader can tell exactly when they received the first unambiguous indication as to the purpose of Hailsham. It is as if they have known this crucial fact all along but without knowing that they knew. Miss Lucy, the more rebellious of the teachers,¹¹ says to the children: “you’ve been told and not told. You’ve been told, but none of you really understand” (81).¹² This sense of having long accepted the setup to which they belong reduces the children’s sense of that structure’s deceiving or victimizing them. They nevertheless are always disturbed by what, they feel, remains unsaid. The protagonist-narrator, who is one of the most successful and at the same time sufficiently alienated products of this system, is constantly on the alert for signs of further revelations. This makes her keenly attentive to minute details of the setting and of people’s conduct, turning her life, and the reader’s passage through it, into a conscious semiotic experience. As throughout Ishiguro’s fiction, the reader savors minor details while puzzling out their meaning.

The readers’ re-enactment of the characters’ cognitive experience is largely built through the relationship with the protagonist-narrator. First person narratives tend to inspire sympathy and/or identification with the

¹⁰ This character is reminiscent of Madame Beck, the headmistress of the boarding school and a master of surveillance in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*. On Ishiguro’s interest in Charlotte Brontë see Mason 336 and Shaffer 2001: 14.

¹¹ The Hailsham teachers are referred to as “guardians,” which combines the connotation of the legal guardians of orphans with that of property guards. One of the games invented by Kathy’s friend Ruth turns the tables on both the connotations by pretending to guard their favorite guardian, the angelic Miss Geraldine (whose name plays on that of the evil stepmother in Coleridge’s “Christabel”) from mysterious hostile powers.

¹² Brian Shaffer (1998: 9) has discussed the motif of the repression of knowledge and desire as a means of self-protection in Ishiguro’s first four novels. *Never Let Me Go* is a further development of this concern.

narrator¹³ – at least until, as in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, the reader is gradually led to realize the narrator’s moral unreliability. In *Never Let Me Go* the readers’ sympathy with the narrator is further reinforced by the narrator’s direct address to the reader who is also, implicitly, a “carer” (2), e.g., “I don’t know how it was where you were” (13, 67); “I don’t know if you had ‘collections’ where you were” (38). Thus the “narrative audience” of the early parts of the novel, that is the “role which the text forces the reader to take on” (Rabinowitz 95), is that of a graduate of a school similar to Kathy’s. One way or another, we are all in training to become “carers,” and then, in all likelihood, “cases.” Yet direct address of the narrative audience, thus defined, seems to end about a third of the way into the book – by then its mission is largely accomplished.

Sometimes the reader’s perplexity about details of the characters’ conduct is isochronic¹⁴ with that of Kathy herself (that is, of Kathy as the focal character rather than the retrospective narrator) – as when she wonders about the meaning of a teacher’s statement to her friend Tommy that he does not have to be “creative” if it is too much of a strain on him. Later, together with Kathy and Tommy, the reader wonders why the same teacher, Miss Lucy, changes her mind and tells Tommy, in an agitated manner, that creativeness, i.e., artistic production, is, in fact, of utmost importance.¹⁵ The reader will get the answers to these questions contemporaneously with Kathy and Tommy, first when they realize that artistic interests of the predestined “donors” are of no moment (it is much more important that they not smoke) and towards the end of the novel when the political significance of their “creativity” is revealed to them.

At other times, however, the perplexity of the reader is not isochronic with Kathy’s but may parallel that of other characters, such as Tommy who, together with the reader, wonders why Kathy examines a pile of pornographic magazines, though without any visible interest in their erotica. Kathy is aware of Tommy’s perplexity: “I hadn’t told him anything, but at that point I hadn’t thought things through properly myself and wasn’t ready to tell anyone” (137). This is a case of what Gérard

¹³ In the interview with John Mullan Ishiguro explains the conscious purpose of this technique as meant to prevent the reader’s almost automatic sense of superiority to child- and adolescent-characters.

¹⁴ On isochronic experience see Toker 1993: 73–74.

¹⁵ This teacher’s name is evocative of Wordsworth’s idyllic countryside but also of Charlotte Brontë’s educator-protagonist in *Villette*, who secretly maintains a role distance in most of her involvements. On the issue of role distance in Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, see Terestchenko.

Genette calls “paralipsis” (195) – the focal character knowing more than the narrative imparts to the reader at the given moment of the story.¹⁶ It is only later that the reader is given an answer: under the influence of her friend Ruth’s suggestion that the clones have been produced from underworld “models” rather than from respectable citizens, wondering at her cat-like fits of sexual heat, Kathy leafs through the magazines in search of her genetic source, her “possible,” among porn models.

The episode suggests that cloning may be associated with surgical extraction, especially in the case of women — reminiscent of the ovary donations in *Brave New World*. However that might be, the reader’s curiosity about the protagonist-narrator’s interest in the magazines is now replaced by the challenge of understanding her motive for withholding an explanation.

The reader’s experience of progressively informed suspense is fueled by the way Kathy’s narrative plants clues: an expectation is often raised in one chapter to be only partly fulfilled in the next, often leaving a temporary gap. This looping narrative movement forces the reader to keep reconsidering earlier sections retrospectively¹⁷ even as new proleptic touches create new informational gaps.

Another suspense-promoting technique is the use of the surveillance topos, mandatory in dystopian literature. Hailsham, the almost perfect school which other “donors” admire, is not free from at least some features of an alienating environment: it is a panopticon where the students are under constant surveillance; they are, moreover, themselves maneuvered into complicity with surveillance. Real privacy for talking about subjects perceived as dangerous is only possible when the conversation is hidden in plain view:

I suppose this might sound odd, but at Hailsham, the lunch queue *was* one of the better places to have a private talk. It was something to do with the acoustics in the Great Hall; all the hubbub and the high ceilings meant that so long as you lowered your voices, stood quite close, and made sure your neighbours were deep in their own chat, you had a fair chance of not being overheard. In any case, we weren’t exactly spoilt for choice. “Quiet” places were often the worst, because there was always someone likely to

¹⁶This technique, prominent in *Villette*, supports the sense of Ishiguro’s submerged allusions to Brontë’s novel. However, it also characterizes Ishiguro’s other work – see Phelan 50ff on “underreporting” in *The Remains of the Day*.

¹⁷Herbert Spencer would call this the “indirect method” of narration, a “method of conveying the meaning by a series of approximations” (8); Spencer notes that “for complex ideas, the indirect sentence seems the best vehicle” (16).

be passing within earshot. And as soon as you looked like you were trying to sneak off for a secret talk, the whole place seemed to sense it within minutes, and you'd have no chance (22).

When Kathy and Tommy step into one of the minefield subjects – e.g., the veiled insight into the hypocrisy behind the school's ways — they both instinctively practice conspiratorial types of conduct:

I walked round him and stood with my back to the water, facing the house, so that I'd see if people started gathering at the windows. Then for a few minutes we talked about nothing in particular, just like the lunch-queue business hadn't happened. I'm not sure if it was for Tommy's benefit, or for any onlookers', but I'd kept my posture looking very provisional, and at one point made a move to carry on with my stroll. I saw a kind of panic cross Tommy's face then, and I immediately felt sorry to have teased him, even though I hadn't meant to. So I said, like I'd just remembered:

"By the way, what was that you were saying earlier on? About Miss Lucy telling you something."

"Oh . . ." Tommy gazed past me to the pond, pretending too this was a topic he'd forgotten about. "Miss Lucy. Oh that." (26)

Eventually it becomes clear that Miss Lucy herself could not come to terms with the ambiguities of the Hailsham phenomenon. This realization comes to the reader and to the characters at about the same time — when their indistinct awareness that Hailsham students have been created for the sake of organ transplants is brought to the surface of their — and our — consciousness. It soon also becomes clear that the students' education at the boarding-school and their pseudo-novitiate in the Cottages afterwards are, just a way — perhaps the most decent of available ways¹⁸ — of filling in their time before they are ripe for the transplants. Even the papers that they are supposed to write while in the Cottages are of no significance beyond giving them something to do.¹⁹ Kathy, who is supposed to write a paper on the English novel (thus explaining her elegant and unostentatiously allusive writing style), eventually gives up this matriculation project, realizing that it has no pragmatic value. The

¹⁸"If you and your child were going to be killed tomorrow, would you not give him to eat today?" (Levi 21).

¹⁹One may also recollect the encroachments on the citizens leisure time in, say, Communist Russia, where the *force-majeur* shortages of consumer goods doubled as a solution for citizens' after work hours — to be spent standing in line or trying to work the garden plots allotted to the fortunate ones at a considerable distance from their homes, etc. We are grateful to Algimanta Pranckevičienė for this observation.

Cottages, a rural retreat, are supposed to create perfect conditions for peace of mind and concentration on the sham project. Their real purpose, however, seems to be to keep the Hailsham alumni out of harm's way, at a distance from society which might expose them to sundry temptations.

The Cottages are not behind barbed wire; the youngsters are not locked up; they can even take excursions to remoter areas. Nevertheless, this institution reinforces their sense of a structure which chains them to the mission for the sake of which they have been "created." The sense of a firm and fool-proof structure within whose bounds they enjoy a modicum of freedom has been instilled in them since their early experience at school. There, the regular boarding-school schedule was supplemented by "Exhibitions," "Sales," and "collection baskets." At the "exhibitions" students presented their artwork, the product of the "creativity," a big issue for Tommy (who eventually produces a gallery of fantastic Borgesian animal representations). For this they receive "tokens," a semiotic substitute for money. They can use the tokens to purchase the work of their fellow students, and items of hobby-activities or clothing offered them during the "Sales." Dostoevsky, in *The House of the Dead*, and Primo Levi, in *If This is a Man*, comment on the value of money and of the pseudo-profitable trade in respectively a Tsarist prison and a Nazi death camp: with the possibility of exchange that it grants, money (which, strictly speaking, is also nothing but tokens) creates a little space of freedom within the closed institution, a space of personal decisions, personal control of material reality. In the world of Hailsham it fosters a sense of active construction of one's individuality because the things purchased are kept in personal "collection baskets" intended to reflect each student's tastes, emotional needs, and attempt at self definition. That part of each collection includes the successful work of other students contributes to social cohesion, and to the sense of an in-group. Thus, though radically exploited by society at large, Hailsham students gain a basis for a sense of superiority to outsiders. The fact that Tommy does not contribute collectable items plays a role in his marginalization with respect to his social enclave.

The person who is first shown judging Tommy and justifying his temporary ostracism is Kathy's friend Ruth.²⁰ Victims of a system, any

²⁰ Names of the main characters of the novel are evocative. Tommy is a secular version of Thomas the Unbeliever, Kathy, or as Tommy calls her, Kath, is allowed not exactly "nine lives" but the longest possible span of life before she is to begin the "donations." Ruth bears

system, are not saints: Ruth is a typical power-mongering “queen of the classroom,” a creator and leader of in-groups within in-groups whose primary purpose is to shape conditions for excluding others. Kathy is Ruth’s friend; she forgives Ruth her betrayals, coming to understand that the highly intelligent Ruth’s somewhat inane acceptance of the system (a subtle form of the Stockholm Syndrome) is, in fact, an expression of her thwarted need for parental affection. The reader’s attitude to Ruth’s intrigues tends to be less charitable, yet the criticism is tempered by the narrator’s hinting, early in the narrative, that by the time the story is written, Ruth is already dead (and for that matter, so is Tommy). Kathy’s memories of Ruth bear signs of pain but not of hatred, nor even of harsh disapproval: this is in tune with the retrospective nature of the narrative – Kathy has already been Ruth’s “carer,” a person who must offer comfort and forgiveness; she has already received Ruth’s repentant confessions.

Indeed, part of the system which the characters of the novel have to accept as their ineluctable fate is that after a span of time in the Cottages (the length of which seems strangely up to each student) they begin to train as “carers.” They then work as “carers” to the “donors,” and are eventually summoned to become “donors” themselves. Being a “carer” is a spiritual/emotional rather than a medical occupation; it imitates the duties of family members who have to care for aging, sick, dying parents, siblings, or spouses before becoming sick and moving towards death themselves (and being cared for by others) in the natural course of human life. The clones thus provide surrogate families for each other, and, as in the case of families, do not usually have the choice for whom to care. One of Kathy’s perks for being considered a very good “carer” is being allowed to choose her patients (among them Ruth, and then Tommy). As happens in the best of families, some of the Hailsham graduates hate being carers and instead opt to submit to early organ-removal surgery, represented as a relatively quiet and sometimes even coddled time of their lives with no obligations except that of further surgery after recuperation.

One of the most poignant touches of the novel is its representation of the Hailsham students dreaming of different occupations in life, only to learn that a highly specific course has already been mapped out for them. As if by compensation, it is a course that exempts them from the

the name of the Scriptural stranger who adapts and makes her home amid “alien corn,” where Keats imagines her nursing a “sad heart.” This character continues the series of Ishiguro’s studies in self-deception and awakening – as in *The Remains of the Day* (see Marcus) and *When We Were Orphans*.

competitive struggles of the modern world,²¹ leaving them with only one (albeit towering) anxiety. It is not without a cathartic temper-tantrum that Tommy, who had such tantrums as a child, accepts this fate. Later, he and his peers come to terms with it by forming another in-group, this time that of the gentle but stiff-upper-lip *morituri*. He excludes Kathy from this inner circle even when she becomes his lover and carer; he also gently insists on doing things his own way: “If you were a donor, you’d see” (278). Both Kathy and the reader are limited to merely an intellectual understanding of a “donor’s” situation; Tommy is already a *flesh-witness*.

III

In a number of dystopian narratives, most prominently *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and *We*, love is a subversive force that threatens the stability of the system. This topos is reworked almost beyond recognition in *Never Let Me Go*. The Hailsham clones are sexually potent but sterile. Sexual relationships between them do not endanger their suitability for transplants, but there is a vague sense of official disapproval of intercourse on campus; legitimization of some form of conjugal coupling seems to be one improvement of the “adult” life at the Cottages over the high-school order at Hailsham. This unspoken attitude may be a residue of the traditional disapproval of sex between minors, a carry-over from traditional boarding-school attitudes. It may also stem from the sense of the potentially anti-social self-isolation of a couple, or from a fear that values and discipline may get out of hand. The reader is kept wondering — challenged, along with the characters, to puzzle out Ishiguro’s conception of the logic of the system. One obvious explanation for the tolerance of the sexual relationships between students is that such relationships are safer than sex with outsiders. Indeed, the couples at the Cottages are absorbed into the perpetuation of the in-group dynamics even when their contacts with the outsider worlds grow more extensive.

In a sense, love becomes a narcotic, one that goes a long way to reconcile Hailsham graduates with their predicament. This is also the basis for the rumor — later denied by their headmistress — that based on true love, couples may be granted a deferral: love is not expected to conquer

²¹ In *Brave New World*, the Beta children are taught not to envy the more intelligent Alpha children: “They work much harder than we do, because they’re so frightfully clever. I am really awfully glad I’m a Beta, because I don’t work so hard” (Huxley 19).

all, but perhaps it can at least buy time. This is refracted in one of the books that Kathy reads to Tommy when she is his carer during his donor period: *One Thousand and One Nights*, where Scheherazade's story-telling staves off her execution, until the Sultan spares her life out of love. While it is unclear what impact reading this book has on the characters, it contributes to the reader's hope that at least Kathy might survive.

It is in Norfolk that the idea of deferrals for couples truly in love is initially raised. The reader shares the characters' hopes that deferral is possible, while sensing that it is unlikely. Such hopes are reinforced by the finding of a copy of Kathy's tape, which has long been missing: the childish idea of Norfolk as the "lost and found" of England seems to be confirmed. Subconsciously, the reader then wonders what other superstitions may be true. It is noteworthy that after Tommy dies Kathy drives to Norfolk, perhaps to retrieve her sense of his presence where she retrieved her tape.

The rumor of the possibility of a deferral may be a deliberately lauded "deniability" (cf. Lang 38–41): if one expects a reward for unalloyed affection, the affection loses its purity. It is in this context that Ruth, well on the way to her last "donation," confesses to Kathy that her greatest fault in life was to keep Tommy and Kathy apart from each other: she had, indeed, claimed Tommy for herself at two points when Kathy was ready to own up to her love for him. Their ultimate coming together is reflected in the second book that Kathy reads to Tommy – *The Odyssey*, where a couple is reunited after an arduous and traumatic journey during which the man was unsuitably mated. Yet after Kathy and Tommy do become lovers, they seem to pursue the deferral as a bonus and not as the goal of their love. The poignant melancholy of the novel's ending is the loss of this love, Kathy's mourning for Tommy — and, to some extent, for Ruth.

IV

This mourning belongs to the novel's dénouement, whereas the climax occurs shortly before Ruth's death. In that episode the trio seeks out Madame — a recycling of another topos of the dystopian genre: the revelatory interview with the authorities. In *We*, *Brave New World*, and even at the torture/interrogation sessions in *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the protagonists are granted charged and revelatory interviews with authority figures. It is as if their whole experience in the course of the novel has

been a path to this type of fulfillment — receiving an explanation of the mechanics by which their society is ruled, from the rulers themselves.²² Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth follow Madame to her house and there discover Miss Emily, the former headmistress of Hailsham. The school has in the meantime been closed, depriving its graduates of the illusion of having a home, albeit a lost one, somewhere.²³

They are now favored with the revelatory discussion of the politics behind Hailsham. But first the terms of the session are laid down. Miss Emily is waiting for moving men to transport a valuable piece of furniture for sale, so her time is limited. The reader and the students share the anxiety of wondering not only whether all the questions will be answered but also whether there will be enough time. Together we share the experience of a false alarm when someone else comes to the door well before all issues are addressed — we are relieved that it is not yet the movers.

The conversation reveals that the students' artwork was collected not in order to penetrate their souls by some sophisticated psychological techniques and not to make a profit. It was exhibited in order to prove to the broader public that the students are human beings with living, active souls and should be treated as such, even though doomed to sacrifice. It then emerges that this policy backfired owing to a further scientific experiment: the creation of clones with pre-programmed features which would allow them to excel in specific fields. That experiment, "The Morningdale business" referred to by Miss Emily several times before she fully explains it (thus replicating, in miniature, the main rhetorical technique of the novel as well as the main feature of the process by which Hailsham students learn of their destiny), has frightened the public by the possibility that Frankenstein *Wunderkinder* would present overwhelming professional competition to ordinary people. Under such circumstances,

²² This topos of privileged explanation, often at the expense of suffering a punishment, reverses the crisis-dialogue topos of critical realist works (in Dickens, especially in *Hard Times*, and in Ibsen's plays the action culminates when one of the main characters is finally allowed to have his or, more frequently, her say). Such expectations are thwarted in Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle*, where the hero and the reader are denied conclusive understanding of the workings of the system. We are grateful to Amit Marcus for this observation.

²³ This may be connected to the motif of abandoned transportation devices which appear at several points in the book. For example, towards the end of the book Ruth, Tommy, and Kathy visit an old boat beached in a field far from any water. Their visit seems almost like a pilgrimage, and Tommy compares the boat to Hailsham which, by now they know has been closed. Earlier, at the cottages, Kathy and Ruth share confidences in an abandoned bus stop located near the grounds.

no politician would risk his or her career demanding the flow of public funds to schools like Hailsham, whose products would be reminiscent of the superior Morningdale beings. What Kathy and her friends now discover is that, by contrast to the protagonists of *Brave New World*, they have *not* been victimized by the school — on the contrary, the school actually did everything possible to minimize the damage that the society at large has done to its human spare-parts factories.²⁴

At this revelatory session many questions are answered but some of the most basic ones are not. Where do the children come from? Who are the models/DNA donors and how are they chosen? Why are the students sterile? Is that intentional? Kathy asks the obvious question of why society should invest so much in taking care of the children only to then take their organs and kill them. Developing their sensitivity through art lessons and training them to care for each other only to then slowly slay each student and leave the remaining “carers” without friends or family seems particularly cruel. Perhaps it would be kinder to avoid consciousness entirely by putting them in a coma from the earliest age. But even these questions are secondary. More fundamental is the question of the morality of creating life for the sole purpose of organ donation²⁵ and of the fostering of a dual class society. The reader likewise tends to be lulled into dealing with subsidiary issues, those more directly relevant to the interests of the protagonist-narrator.

Though the conversation with Miss Emily destroys the young people’s illusions about the deferral given to lovers, it still preserves one of their most important beliefs: the school, their surrogate parent, did not betray them; rather, as an institution, it has suffered a fate similar to their own. Miss Emily has always been faithful to her commitment of making

²⁴ Even Madam seems to be unable to treat the children as quite human: on one occasion the narrator believes that this woman has “decided in a second *what we were*, because you could see her stiffen — as if a pair of large spiders was set to crawl towards her” (248). The children are “what” and not “who.” True, spiders are rarely dangerous but nevertheless inspire fear and revulsion. Similarly, Madam refers to the students as “creatures” three times (254, 272). In a sense, however, theirs is the predicament of literary characters in general — to be, as verbal constructs, not quite whole, even when popping up from the page as imitations of possible persons.

²⁵ The continual harvesting of organs from living human beings would appear to be a violation of one of the seven “Noahide” laws — a set of laws which, according to rabbinic tradition (and as accepted by the 102nd Congress of the United States, 1991), applies to all mankind and represents the minimum level of behavior for a society. Among them is the prohibition against tearing a limb from a living animal.

their lives, while they lasted, as decent as the circumstances allowed. Her inability to change the basic terms of their existence is emblemized by her crippled state, her physical helplessness during the interview, at the end of which the young people politely help her to her car.

Miss Emily's helplessness is also the helplessness of the reader, who is made to feel complicit with the social structure that the novel conjures up.²⁶ The melancholy of the ending is enhanced by the reader's awareness that Kathy's own fate is similarly sealed, that, unlike Melville's Ishmael or other first-person characters (possibly even the protagonist of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*), though living long enough to produce the written narrative, she will follow in Tommy's and Ruth's footsteps since her time as a "carer," already extended, is now, at age thirty-one, running out. The reader's imagination is thus forced to complete Kathy's story, down to her own "completing"; it is not encouraged to stop, as in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* or *Bend Sinister*, before the ax or bullet hits the protagonist. In fact, the reader also lives in a world where much is done in order to preserve one's own life or that of one's loved ones without asking too many questions. The value of organ donations after one's own or one's relatives' demise has not yet filtered into broad public consciousness; patients wait a long time for legal organ donations and often die in the interim; some of them opt for buying organs illegally and often inhumanly; others do not ask questions about the origin of the organs that they buy, inexpensively, in excellent hospitals in China.²⁷ The world created in Ishiguro's novel may be inhuman, but it is the kind of aestheticized inhumanity which ultimately reminds us of much crueler and uglier practices – whether in the "other" fictional clone storehouses referred to but not described in the novel or – more urgently – in actual societies where organs can be taken from the condemned or purchased from the poor. In a sense, the shaping of social criticism implicit in *Never Let Me Go* is reminiscent of the narrative choices in Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the novella which first brought the Gulag forcefully to the reader's imagination while also "lightening" some of the atrocious aspects of the Gulag world.²⁸ Apparently the reader is better sensitized to a social evil (*mutatis mutandis*) when the evil represented is sanitized, aestheticized, or lightened.

²⁶ The case is comparable with that of implicating the reader's stance in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* and "Signs and Symbols" (see Peterson and Carroll respectively).

²⁷ See <http://helpstoporganharvesting.org.au/> (April 30, 2007).

²⁸ See the discussion of this narrative choice in Toker 2000: 190–96.

The aesthetic effect of *Never Let Me Go* does not, in fact, reduce its consciousness-raising potential. This potential is enhanced insofar as the reader is perplexed, provoked into self-scrutiny, implicated. Strangely, however, the consciousness-raising effect is tempered by the reader's re-enactment of a great deal of the experience of Kathy and her friends. Such a re-enactment, clearly one of the text's expectations of its target audience, is partly modeled by Kathy's narratee mentioned in early sections, an unnamed "donor" who keeps asking Kathy, his "carer," to tell him about Hailsham again and again: "What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to *remember* Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood" (5). Whereas the reader is implicitly placed out in the world of actual or potential organ consumers, his or her emotional flow is more akin to that of the novel's trapped organ donors. This effect is also associated with Kathy's eventually discontinued address of the reader as a fellow "carer."

By causing the reader to identify with the narrator and her peers and to re-enact the gradual process of their comprehension of this fate, Ishiguro creates the reader's close engagement, both personal and vicarious, with the possibility of dystopian tentacles insidiously extending into familiar social practices, the possibility of ordinary people discovering that they have slid to the side of the anvil or, what's worse, the hammer. In *Love's Knowledge*, exploring the relationship between the form of a literary work and its content, Martha Nussbaum notes that "certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of that narrative artist" (5). Literature provides experiential insight which can then be pressed into the service of ethical objectives.

The transition from literary experience to ethical action is seldom automatic; it requires a conscious commitment. Yet this commitment might not suffice in the absence of the intimate knowledge of the human predicaments which it has to address.

The setting of the novel in the 1990s may represent that decade's still slow growth of public awareness of the ramifications of organ transplant, such as organ harvesting. Yet the novel is not reducible to its consciousness-raising function, which, as has been shown above, is enhanced by the artistic achievements of the narrative. Insofar as the artificially created and controlled life of the Hailsham students is a condensed version of the normal human experience, its melancholy is also the melancholy of the brevity of ordinary life, its transience, the transience of the truest of true love, and the inevitable transformations that recycle another classical topos – that of the three ages of man: learner, "carer," case.

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