

Paola Partenza / Özlem Karadağ / Emanuela Ettore (eds.)

# **Different Voices**

Gender and Posthumanism



**unipress**

# Passages – Transitions – Intersections

Volume 10

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Emanuela Ettore (eds.)

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Gender and Posthumanism

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## Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*: the Performative Function of Literature and the Discourse on Human-ess and Identity

This chapter explores the performative function of literature in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, a novel that significantly exemplifies the performative effects of literature and art. It does its work by getting readers to see science differently by way of fiction, not by its direct representation but (as Aristotle knew) by its action, its plot, the stories it tells. The story told in *Never Let Me Go* invites its readers to see their own histories differently, and as a result to behave differently.

The Hailsham experiment, which aims to challenge the whole system of the donation programme, actually fails not because of the Morningdale<sup>1</sup> scandal but because there is something wrong with its own premise, as evidenced by Miss Emily's blind candour when she explains to Tommy and Kathy the motives of the project:

[...] we challenged the entire way the donations programme was being run. Most importantly, we demonstrated to the world that if students were reared in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being. Before that, all clones – or *students*, as we preferred to call you – existed only to supply medical science. In the early days, after the war, that's largely all you were to most people. *Shadowy objects in test tubes*.<sup>2</sup> (last italics mine).

The point and paradox is that Hailsham will contribute further to this consideration of the “*students*” as “shadowy objects in test tube”, firstly to alleviate the guilt of those who thought of using science for these purposes, but above all through the teaching methods adopted at the college, which do not encourage students to become more aware and thus other than mere experiments. There are no exchanges or dialogues through which to negotiate meaning and thus avoid

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1 The scandal concerns a scientist named James Morningdale who wanted to offer people the chance to have children with certain characteristics such as superior intelligence, above-average athletic abilities, etc.

2 Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber and Faber 2006), 256. All references are to this edition.



the danger of making it fixed and univocal; the teaching seeks only to achieve consensus rather than to start that process where everyone changes their perception of the world, acquires awareness and critical spirit, and build their own identity. In other words, it is an experiment that aims to destroy identity, to demotivate every project by extinguishing dreams and hopes, to stifle any unforeseen development, to ignore individuals and individual psychic processes, sexual orientation and emotional disorientation, conducted by guardians who have no wish to change the established course of things.

The essay begins with a theoretical account of the notion of the performative, before moving to an analysis of how this notion works in the novel, and of what it shares with Posthumanism and posthuman critical theories. It concludes that both are committed to the construction and representation of the human under the pressure of a new idea of existence that, influenced as it is by technological invasions, requires a redefinition of individuals and their identity in a post-anthropocentric, anti-human and therefore posthuman condition. *Never Let Me Go* invites the reader to ask whether the time has come to give due consideration to other perspectives in order to read more broadly this world in which economic, technological, social and environmental changes not only appear to be inextricably linked but propose other points of reference which are no longer negligible.

The concept of the “performative” was born in the linguistic field by the British philosopher J.L. Austin who, in *How to Do Things with Words*, introduces the concept of “performative” language to indicate its potential both to describe and to perform actions. This idea has been welcomed by literary criticism which recognizes the ability of literary discourse to create characters, actions and situations, and above all ideas and concepts. The literary work in particular has a double performative nature: on the one hand, there is the act of writing; on the other, the ability to change the way of thinking and feeling. In other words, “[it] takes its place among the acts of language that transform the world, bringing into being the things that they name”.<sup>3</sup>

However, the concept of the performative has implications that reach beyond literary theory. Its greater and more incisive effects are in the field of teaching, that is, the transmission of literary, artistic, and any other fields of knowledge. The term “performance”, evidently borrowed from the theatrical lexicon, draws attention to the link between the context of teaching and that of theatrical representation: teaching becomes a sort of show in which an actor, the teacher, performs in front of the audience of students, who in turn attend to the teacher/actor’s gestures and tone of voice. It refers to the more traditional teaching

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3 J. Culler, *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press (1997) 2011), 97.

method and context, in which the student attends what is usually configured as a “one-man or one-woman show”.<sup>4</sup> The limitation of this model – widely spread in our school system, especially in the highest levels of education – is that often it is only the teacher who thinks actively, with the consequence that students are not provided with the means or the opportunity to *capture* new and original ideas and end up more intimidated than stimulated. Hence, we perceive an imbalance between the “performance” of the teacher and that of the students, who are not guided to an active understanding process since they are not shown how to learn and think critically.

What needs to be changed is the very idea of knowledge: from something that is transmitted from the text to the student to something that happens in the student questioning the text, a change that therefore privileges reading, interpretation and criticism rather than the canon.<sup>5</sup> However, exposing to literary works is not a sufficient condition to capture the interest of students, literary works must be related to their life experience since only in this way will they acquire the right skills to understand what they read and the tools necessary to read independently in the future. Otherwise, there is the risk that literature becomes the means to passive consent and repetition of other people’s opinions without any personal elaboration and unfortunately without the slightest awareness.

Literature is the ideal place to exercise critical thinking because texts allow you to identify relationships between events, analyze, infer, synthesize and evaluate the content and language used. According to Tolstoy’s definition, the work of art is a “labyrinth of connections”, and thus a set of relations which requires readers to carry out complex operation, which entails reference to previous experiences and knowledge to construct meaning; making distinctions between facts and opinions; identifying textual details and inferring links among them; perceiving different point of view; and above all, applying the resultant skills and abilities to other contexts. This means moving the centre of interest from what the text “says” to what the text “does”, that is to say, from its constituent value to its performative value.<sup>6</sup>

Essential to this process is the affective element that allows the encounter with a literary text to be interiorized; this in turn depends on the way literature puts us in contact with concrete life experiences rather than with vague ideas, arousing

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4 E. Showalter, *Teaching Literature*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 32.

5 Showalter says that more than content, it is better to focus on the skills to develop in students: “[...] overall, our objective in teaching literature is to train our students to think, read, analyze, and write like literary scholars, to approach literary problems as trained specialists in the field do, to learn a literary methodology, in short to ‘do’ literature as scientists ‘do’ science” Showalter, *Teaching Literature*, 25.

6 Cfr. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

personal answers even if raw and inarticulate. A novel, or indeed any piece of art, is not primarily a means of exposing facts but a vehicle for developing critical thinking and thus avoiding the mere repetition of preconceived ideas or notions. This is not to argue that the text is a self-sufficient entity from which readers must simply extrapolate a single meaning: on the contrary, they have to decode it on the basis of their own experiences – to read it and contribute to the construction of the meaning, filling the empty spaces, making predictions, imagining a course of events in a more fruitful and dynamic relationship. These inferential activities arise from the fact that literature does not make meaning immediately apparent, so much as it creates space for interpretation and for questioning, and therefore moving from the specific level of the narrated facts to a general level of social types and values. The teacher, in turn, has the task of pushing the student to overcome a purely personal point of view in favour of broader and more universal conceptions.

This theoretical introduction seems necessary to my reading of *Never Let Me Go*, the novel that Kazuo Ishiguro writes a few years after the cloning of the sheep Dolly,<sup>7</sup> setting it in a parallel version of England in the late nineties. The narrator and protagonist is Kathy H, a 31-year-old woman who lives in a world where some humans have been cloned in order to create organ donors. At the beginning of the story, Kathy, one of the clones, is not yet a “donor” but the carer of the other donors whom she looks after both from a “psychological” point of view and with regard to the medical care they need when they begin to undergo the series of donations that will lead them to death or, as it is called in the novel, to “completion”.

Drawing on a memory<sup>8</sup> that is not always reliable, Kathy recounts her childhood and that of her companions at Hailsham, an institute situated in an area of the English countryside that is left undefined. At first, Hailsham seems to be a normal boarding school where Kathy and her classmates study, practice sports and take part in all the activities of the period from elementary to high school. However, as we move forward we find that in Hailsham there are rules and behaviours that can hardly be considered normal such as the “Exchange” or “Barthers”. These consist of a large exhibition and sale of painted objects, drawings, ceramics, sculptures and other things the students have created in the previous three months. Here they both bring their own products and buy those of their classmates, using Vouchers provided by the guardians and assigned to each

7 The sheep was produced at the Roslin Institute in Scotland near Edinburgh where she lived until her death about seven years later. Scientists announced her birth the following year, on 22 February 1997. The method used for the production of Dolly has substantially contributed to the development of biotechnology and the mechanisms regulating cell development.

8 Kathy’s story develops on two levels: memory and interpretation that have, among others, the aim of demonstrating the fallacy of memory and the impossibility of a univocal interpretation.

artistic production as a means to measure the level of the clones' "creativity". In fact, as Kathy notes, the "Barterers", especially when they take the form of the "Great Enchantment", are also the only opportunity to buy things from the outside world, although most of the time these were a "big disappointment":

Looking back now, it's funny to think we got so worked up, because usually the Sales were a big disappointment. There'd be nothing remotely special and we'd spend our tokens just renewing stuff that was wearing out or broken [...] But the point was, I suppose, we'd all of us in the past found something at a Sale, something that had become special: a jacket, a watch, a pair of craft scissors *never used but kept proudly next to a bed*.<sup>9</sup>

Kathy does not have the appropriate terms to grasp that these supposedly entertaining moments are in fact the starting point of that process of reification to which the clones are submitted, and according to which things have value in themselves and not as a means to satisfy human needs. That old and often broken stuff, utterly useless to the students, not only has its own autonomous life but comes to define, through its circulation, the sense of human activity and the value of things. The "Great Enchantment" exemplifies what Marx had feared and prefigured, the inevitability of that abstract, anonymous and regulatory form of all exchanges which is the market and which still regulates the life of all.

Is this not one of the many messages that Ishiguro conveys through the story of these seemingly harmless games which in fact underlie one of the many mechanisms of our society of which we are almost never aware? So too the clones are unaware when they are reprimanded by Miss Emily for their bad behaviour during the sale of the objects, but fail to understand much of the speech recalled by Ruth and Kathy at the Dover Rehabilitation Center many years later:

It was partly her language. 'Unworthy of privilege' and 'misuse of opportunity' [...] Her general drift was clear enough: we were all very special, being Hailsham students, and so it was all the more disappointing, when we behaved badly. Beyond that, though, *things became a fog*. Sometimes she'd be going on very intensely then come to a sudden stop with something like: 'What is it? What is it? What can it be that thwarts us?' Then she'd stand there, eyes closed, a frown on her face like she was trying to puzzle out the answer.<sup>10</sup>

A first brief and perhaps rudimentary answer to Miss Emily's distressing question, "What is it? What is it? What can it be that thwarts us?", could be that at Hailsham children are thought of as plants, or as seeds that will grow up in a suitable soil with a few drops of water. The metaphor helps me to enter into the core of my topic.

<sup>9</sup> Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 4, italics mine.

<sup>10</sup> Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 43, italics mine.

The way of teaching at Hailsham is that of “told and not told”. Kathy remembers talking to Tommy about Miss Lucy, who will be sent away just for her hesitant attempt to tell them something more, and to stimulate some questions:

Tommy thought it possible the guardians had, throughout all our years at Hailsham, *timed very carefully and deliberately everything they told us*, so that we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information. But of course, we’d take it in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads *without us ever having examined it properly*.<sup>11</sup>

The students do not know how to dive deep: no one has ever considered it useful to stimulate them to think critically. The guardians seem rather to believe that the only objective of teaching is to create better people, which is certainly true but not enough. In this way, they neglect the most important function of teaching, that is, to encourage the search for meaning, preferring instead the passive learning of a truth already constituted. At Hailsham students are destined to remain empty vases to be filled with forms of knowledge they cannot doubt, contest or interrogate. That is why, when retracing the episode of Miss Lucy’s expulsion, Kathy finally concludes that “[...] we never considered anything from her [Miss Lucy] viewpoint, and it never occurred to us to say or do anything to support her”.<sup>12</sup> The girl’s bitter reflection makes her the emblem of that student who has never been given the opportunity to interrogate the knowledge provided to her, but only to acquire and employ it in the terms in which it was taught and transmitted. The students of Hailsham do not know how to modify the stereotyped and crystalized ideas, they do not know what they see as reality is relative, nor can they see things from different angles. At Hailsham they are obliged to regard an unnatural state of affairs as normal; but if you encounter no other possibilities, you have no option but to accept the one presented to you. As result, as Kathy’s words have showed, another fundamental competence is erased in the process of teaching, namely “the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have”.<sup>13</sup> Its name is empathy, which both fosters a more open and tolerant society and makes people critically alert by activating those psychological mechanisms that help to defend against any form of indoctrination. That is why at the Cottages, where the clones go after Hailsham, and where they will no longer have any tutors, Kathy observes:

11 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 81, italics mine.

12 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 87.

13 M.C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 95–96.

But then again, when I think about it, there's a sense in which that picture of us on the first day, huddled together in front of the farmhouse, isn't so incongruous after all. Because maybe, in a way, we didn't leave it behind nearly as much as we might once have thought. Because somewhere underneath, a part of us stayed like that: fearful of the world around us, and – *no matter how much we despised ourselves for it* – unable quite to let each other go.<sup>14</sup>

Not knowing what freedom is, what emerges from this passage is the force of fear that has been inculcated in them and that, although they despise it, they are unable to *let it go*. Moreover, even when they talk about how much they miss their friends who have been transferred to other Cottages, Kathy notes that “[...] we could tell ourselves there was nothing stopping us going to visit them”,<sup>15</sup> in fact, not even the geography classes have provided them with the basic notions of how to be autonomous, and “[f]or all our map lessons with Miss Emily, we had no real idea at that point about distances and how easy or hard it was to visit a particular place”.<sup>16</sup>

Nor does the teaching method change with different topics such as sex:

Miss Emily used to give a lot of the sex lectures herself, and I remember once, she brought in a life-size skeleton from the biology class to demonstrate how it was done. We watched in complete astonishment as she put the skeleton through various contortions, thrusting her pointer around without the slightest self-consciousness, she was going through all the nuts and bolts of how you did it, what went in where, the different variations, like this was still Geography. Then suddenly [...] she turned away and began telling us how we had to be careful *who* we had sex with. Not just because of the diseases, but because, she said, ‘sex affects emotions in ways you’d never expect’. We had to be extremely careful about having sex in the outside world, especially with people who weren’t students, because out there sex meant all sorts of things. [...]

Miss Emily’s lecture that day was typical of what I’m talking about. We’d focusing on sex, and then the other stuff would creep in. I suppose that was all part of how we came to be ‘told and not told’.<sup>17</sup>

Again the clones do not ask any questions and again it is clear that it is easier to govern if no one asks questions and tamely accepts everything that is told them.<sup>18</sup> And when they try to understand something more, they make the most bizarre

14 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 118 (my italics). Veiled but not too much here is the reference to the title of the novel that appears both a request for love and solidarity and also the denunciation of the impossibility of letting go, of feeling free.

15 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 116.

16 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 116.

17 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 82, italics in the text.

18 From this point of view, the novel is both a reflection on totalitarianism and a painful meditation on the dangers of post-industrial societies, where education is aimed only at satisfying the alliance of science and market at the expense of feelings which have instead an important cognitive function in individuals’ development.

assumptions, not even the books they refer to are useful for clarifying their almost ridiculous ideas:

[...] the books we had at Hailsham weren't at all helpful. We had a lot of nineteenth-century stuff by Thomas Hardy and people like that, which was more or less useless. Some modern books, by people like Edna O'Brien and Margaret Drabble, had some sex in them, but it wasn't ever very clear what was happening because the authors always assumed you'd already had a lot of sex before and there was no need to go into details.<sup>19</sup>

The experience of books becomes frustrating because at Hailsham the idea of the canon as a tool of control is subtly widespread. In this regard, it is helpful to see the means the guardians use to prevent children from smoking, including forms of censorship:

[...] at Hailsham the guardians were really strict about smoking. I'm sure they'd have preferred it if we never found out smoking even existed; but since this wasn't possible, they made sure to give us some sort of lecture each time any reference to cigarettes came along. Even if we were being shown a picture of a famous writer or world leader, and they happened to have a cigarette in their hand, then the whole lesson would grind to a halt. There was even a rumour that some classic books – like Sherlock Holmes ones – weren't in our library because the main characters smoked too much, and when you came across a page torn out of an illustrated book or magazine, this was because there'd been a picture on it of someone smoking.<sup>20</sup>

The students are not given a choice, and everything that is not part of the skills they are supposed to acquire is erased at the very root. This also eliminates the chance to know diversity and to accept it as a value. They are even more confused about homosexual love, for which they invent an inexplicable and funny definition: "For some reason, we called it 'umbrella sex'; if you fancied someone your own sex, you were 'an umbrella'. [...] at Hailsham we definitely weren't at all kind towards any signs of gay stuff".<sup>21</sup>

Together with the lack of choice and the rejection of all forms of diversity, the students' lexicon is also impoverished: if it is true that we are also the language we speak, they lack the terms to define their feelings and emotions, even those required to comment on a drawing which represents something they cannot easily recognize. When Tommy shows her his drawings, eager for her judgment, Kathy does not know how to react:

Even so, for some time, I didn't come up with wholehearted praise. Maybe it was partly my worry that any artwork was liable to get him into trouble all over again. But also, what

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19 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 97.

20 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 67.

21 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 94.

I was looking at was so different from anything the guardians had taught us to do at Hailsham, I didn't know how to judge it.<sup>22</sup>

How can Kathy find the words to articulate her thoughts or express her admiration for drawings whose inscrutability could be overcome only if they were seen from a certain distance, and thus from a different perspective?

As for feelings and emotions, the characters in this novel seem to be completely incapable of either recognizing them or talking about them. Like Estella, in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, they suffer from the nihilism that leads her to reject Pip's love. Miss Havisham, unyielding in her hatred for men, stubbornly manages to penetrate the feelings of her pupil, confusing her thoughts, erasing any perspective and horizon, weakening her soul and depriving her of passion, so that when Pip confesses his love for her Estella's reaction is very similar to that of Hailsham's students. When she tries to make Pip understand why she has chosen Drummle as a husband rather than the boy who has always loved her, Estella confesses that she cannot give herself to a man who would immediately see that she had nothing to offer in terms of love. Love for her is just a word, and with the usual contempt she reserves for Pip she answers:

"It seems", said Estella, very calmly, "that there are *sentiments, fancies*, – I don't know how to call them, – which I am not able to comprehend. When you say you love me, I know what you mean, as a form of words; but nothing more. You address nothing in my breast, you touch nothing there. I don't care for what you say at all".<sup>23</sup>

Like Dickens's character, the victim of a lack of sensitivity and denied any emotional ties, the students of Hailsham find themselves in an emotional desert that makes them perfect illiterates<sup>24</sup> with regard to recognizing and expressing feelings. Even the search for their origin,<sup>25</sup> fundamentally important for any human being, or as they put it for the "possible" from whom they were generated, becomes futile: in Kathy's words, "[o]ur models were an irrelevance, a technical necessity for bringing us into the world, nothing more than that".<sup>26</sup> It is this "technical necessity" which leads her to talk about love without any awareness, and with the same coolness that might be used to describe a mechanical con-

22 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 185.

23 Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 270, (italics mine).

24 The definition of "emotional illiterates" is by Umberto Galimberti who in *The Disquieting Host. Nihilism and Young People*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2007, English transl. mine), analyzes the condition of youth by identifying in culture rather than psychology the origins of the unrestlessness at the basis of their nihilism.

25 Another Dickensian theme: inheritance matters for one's own identity, that is, the possibly determining influence our ancestors have on us.

26 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 138.



traption, even when she is referring to one of the many afternoons spent with Tommy hoping to get the fateful “deferral”:

Perhaps we’d have been happy if things had stayed that way for a lot longer; if we could have whiled away more afternoons chatting, having sex, reading aloud and drawing. But with the summer drawing to an end, with Tommy getting stronger, and the possibility of notice for his fourth donation growing even more distinct, we knew we couldn’t keep putting things off indefinitely.<sup>27</sup>

Melancholy and cynicism oscillate in this passage triggering the nihilism towards which Hailsham’s students are led through a learning process that suppresses emotional gratification and mortifies subjectivity in the name of a supposedly functional, objective knowledge; but this knowledge serves to give identity more to the teachers rather than the students who are in frantic search for it.

Not without irony, the picture of the Hailsham project is completed when at the end of the novel Kathy and Tommy, hoping to get the “deferral” of donations, go to Madame and Miss Lucy, the chief guardians at Hailsham. The fact that they have come to think that Tommy’s art is proof of the love that binds them seems to suggest that they have managed to perceive something beyond what they have been told, despite the obstacles placed in their path. In fact, they simply believe a rumor that spreads among the students from time to time, that is, the hope for some future about which they have only a very faint idea. But even this is enough to make Kathy feel guilty when, together with Tommy, she thinks she can plan differently for their years to come. The explanations they receive from Madam and Miss Lucy might seem a joke if they were not pronounced with the seriousness of those who are totally convinced that they possess a unique and sacred truth, with no awareness that they too are the “pawn”<sup>28</sup> of a system:

You see, we were able to give you something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by *sheltering* you. Hailsham would not have been Hailsham if we hadn’t. Very well, sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you. Yes, in many ways we *fooled* you. [...] But we sheltered you during those years, and we gave you your childhoods. Lucy was well-meaning enough. But if she’d had her way, your happiness at Hailsham would have been shattered. Look at you both now! I’m so proud to see you both. You built your lives on what we gave you. You wouldn’t be who you are today if we’d not protected you. You wouldn’t have become absorbed in your lessons, you wouldn’t have lost yourselves in your art and your

27 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 238.

28 “[P]awns in a game” is how Miss Emily defines the students when Tommy presses her to find some sense to all the activities they were involved in at Hailsham, but, she adds, apparently to remove him from the despair she had just thrown him, “lucky pawns” (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 261).

writing. Why should you have done, knowing what lay in store for each of you? You would have told us it was pointless, and how could we have argued with you?<sup>29</sup>

In this passage, which deserves to be quoted in its entirety, we celebrate the epiphany of the absurd. Through the woman's discourse, Ishiguro warns us of the dangers we run if we do not rebel against the way the world is handed to us, a world that has been already interpreted and codified in its meaning by others, and about which we can form no personal judgment because both our formal schooling, and the structures of the society in which we live, have failed to provide us with the tools to create our own world, and to recognize the lies we are told.

Hence, the step towards a more careful and thoughtful reflection on the relation between the human and the non-human is quite short. I deal with it in this last part by combining the suggestions arising from the novel with some theoretical studies on the subject, which is becoming increasingly important in a technological age and a globalized economy which can also be defined as post-human.<sup>30</sup> The debate on what constitutes the human has been very lively in recent years, fueling reflections that any field of knowledge must take into account if we want to grasp properly the transformations that are taking place around us. Literature is no exception, as is shown by works like *Never Let Me Go* – among many others and from all over the world – since it lets us perceive those shadows and nuances that, while always hidden in its intrinsic nature, contribute to the definition of the human being. I will focus on the effects that an exclusively anthropocentric vision has on the construction of subjectivity, leading to the conclusion that the time is ripe for a new and broader concept of humanism, one which accepts the idea of otherness no longer external to the I and/or located in sci-fi contexts.

*Never Let Me Go* makes an important contribution to the discussion of post-humanism, which displaces traditional humanistic ideas of the unity on the subject by focusing on issues such as the blurring of the boundaries between life and death and/or nature and culture, the normalization of scientific language, the representation of art as a bargaining chip and, last but not least, the fear that may arise from a situation whose consequences are difficult to predict.

The novel shares with posthumanism an approach that implies abandoning the humanistic ideal of Man as the universal measure of all things, and of the

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29 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 262–263, italics in the text.

30 In particular, I am referring to the texts by Rosi Braidotti such as *The Posthuman*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) and *Nomadic Theory. The Portable Rosi Braidotti*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). These books are very important to understand the post-humanism that in its many declinations – onto-epistemological, scientific and bio-technological – intersects the anthropological analysis on the subjectivity that will be destined to inhabit the earth, and starting from the convergence of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism, goes beyond the critique of the universalist image and superiority of Man.

hierarchy of species that puts man in the first place. The distance from anthropocentrism is subtly evoked by Ishiguro's choice to entrust the narrative to a clone telling us the story from the point of view of the other rather than the "typical" human being. It is precisely Kathy's reflections that create in the reader that alienating effect of estrangement, which is more powerful because it comes from an internal focus. Kathy H. might represent then an attempt by the writer to blur the distinction between man and other species and biological organisms, up to the biotechnologically modified bodies of clones. However, Kathy has been deprived of her autonomy, her critical sense, her freedom of thought and even her freedom of movement, as has been widely said. Therefore, in order not to consider it simply a textual strategy to further weaken the first-person narrative of the protagonist who, in her turn, relies on the physiological uncertainties of memory, it would be useful to grasp in the choice of such a narrative point of view an invitation to the reader to wonder about the potential, expressed only at times, by the students of Hailsham and, setting aside metaphor, to ask whether it's high time to give due consideration to other perspectives for a wider reading of this world where economic, technological, social, and environmental changes offer new and different points of reference.

In the short span of their lives, clones have the chance to come into contact with other human beings, arousing only some perplexity in their interlocutors and not even a faint suspicion of their "diversity". Indeed, when they go to an art gallery in Norfolk, the gallery owner sees them interested in the works on display and naturally approaches them to talk about a painting that Tommy is observing in ecstasy:

[...] 'Are you art students?'

'Not exactly', I [Kathy] said before Tommy could respond. 'We're just, well, keen'.

The silver haired lady [...] started to tell us how the artist whose working we were looking at was related to her, and all about the artist's career thus far. This had the effect, at least, of breaking the trans-like state we'd been in, and we gathered round her to listen, *the way we might have done at Hailsham* when a guardian started to speak. [...] and we kept nodding and exclaiming while she talked about where the paintings had been done, the times of the day the artist liked to work, how some had been done without sketches.<sup>31</sup>

As students of Hailsham, they have learned many notions about art history but certainly not in the way the woman is telling them, as she strives to convey to them the feelings the artist felt while "creating", or some hidden reasons behind a picture. The clones have learned art in a functional way, and the art they were forced to produce is even more functional. From an early age, they have been

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31 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 161, italics mine.

taught to consider art as their “most marketable stuff”<sup>32</sup> defining their status in the community, as well as to accept supinely that in the future their organs will be the only “extractable surplus value”<sup>33</sup> which justifies their existence. Exchanging drawings and poems also helps to create a sort of interdependence between the children, which prepares them for the task of taking care of each other when donations begin:<sup>34</sup>

If you think about it, being dependent on each other to produce the stuff that might become your *private treasures* – that’s bound to do things to your relationship. A lot of the time, how you were regarded at Hailsham, had to do with how good you were at ‘creating’.<sup>35</sup>

Ishiguro considers the ability to create and appreciate art as the heart of what defines a person’s humanity, a “private treasure” to be jealously guarded despite the fact that the tutors, who consider themselves fully human, deny the clones the wealth that art should produce. Cloaked by the best intentions, the school of Hailsham seems to offer its students a different logic that only apparently expresses the need for a radical overthrow of the society that created the whole system.

However, the episode in the art gallery in Norfolk demonstrates how clones would be able to integrate into the world outside their own, and that it is for the reader – who learns their story through Kathy’s memories – to perceive that they will never be part of the world outside. Unlike those who come across them, we know what takes the clones so far from canonical definitions of the human. It is only the idea of reality they have been nurtured with, their reactions, their reasoning, that petrify the reader, who as an ordinary human being looks at the world from his/her exclusive perspective. At the beginning of chapter four, Kathy tells us that “I won’t be a carer any more come to the end of the year, and though I’ve got a lot out of it, I have to admit I’ll welcome the chance to rest – to stop and think and remember”.<sup>36</sup> The chance to rest that Kathy speaks of corresponds to the beginning of her path as a donor, which will lead her to death. Her passivity reveals the way she thinks of what lies ahead; she does not see the cruelty because she perceives her future both as the mere “completion” of her journey and as what is commonly called a high sense of duty. Concerning the clones’ passivity, Ishiguro argues that humans are not wholly different from them:

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32 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 39.

33 Cfr. G. Griffin, “Science and the Cultural Imaginary. The Case of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*”, *Textual Practice* Vol. 23, no. 4 (2009), 652.

34 Cfr. Eckart Voigts, and Alessandra Bollet, eds., *Dystopia, Science Fiction, Post-Apocalypse. Classics – New Tendencies – Model Interpretations*, (WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2015).

35 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 16, italics mine.

36 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 37.

I was much more interested in the extent to which we accepted our fate, the kind of lives we were allowed to live as people, rather than focus on the rebellious spirit we gain and try to move out of our lives. I think this is predominantly what takes place in the world, that people take the life they feel they've been handed. They try their best to make it good. They don't really try to go outside of that. They say with varying degrees "This is my life. I'm going to do the best with what I've been given". [...] The strategy here is that we are looking at a very strange world, at a very strange group of people, and gradually, I wanted people to feel that they're not looking at such a strange world, that this is everybody's story.<sup>37</sup>

The uncritical acceptance of one's destiny as given and inalterable is typically the result of the limited and limiting vision of human beings whose subjectivity is founded in a world that makes no allowance for the extent and rapidity of contemporary change. In the case of Hailsham, science has been allowed to enter domineeringly the lives of the students so as to make them mere biological organisms. The result of the migration of terms like "genes" and "genetics" from the scientific code to ordinary language is that students "know and don't know" that they are "genetic tests", sequences to be read through their DNA, whose identity assumes the human as a normative category, and in so doing creates distinctions and inequalities both between different classes of men, and (even) more so between humans and non-humans with the clones belonging to the latter group. Considered as objects of a destiny fixed by genetics, the clones can only make choices based on predetermined options, a risk the reader is called to reflect on, in order to avoid the danger normalizing and domesticating scientific language. Clones are completely unaware of the way language, specifically the use of scientific terms in everyday life, influences their thinking about themselves and others. It thus becomes essential for us to grasp the complexity of the formation of the subject in order to negotiate between the present as virtual and the present as real; a new dialectics emerges that rewrites the rhythms that shape the individual's development between what is ceasing to be and what is in the process of becoming.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, when Kathy asks Madam why she was crying the day she saw the girl dancing on the notes of "Never Let Me Go", the old woman answers:

When I watched you dancing that day, I saw something else. I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sickness. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the

37 Brian W. Shaffer, and Cynthia F. Wong, eds., *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 215–216.

38 Cfr. Fuller Matthew, and Rosi Braidotti, eds., *A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities*, in "Theory, Culture & Society", 2018.

old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never let her go.<sup>39</sup>

Ishiguro takes us to a world where science has made unimaginable progress and has succeeded in creating human beings from test tubes. The novel, however, goes beyond that, as shocking as it may be, pointing straight to what it means to be human by asking the reader to consider whether the clones are like us or different from us.<sup>40</sup> The clones, destined to be *killed* in the process of donating their organs, are for human beings a memento of their mortality, of their being subject to diseases, and this is probably why in the novel the “real” human beings refuse to see them as human. *Never Let Me Go* puts mortality before our eyes, reminding us that the relentless and unalterable fate of the clones is what awaits us too, notwithstanding our efforts to suppress this knowledge. To face such topics is to raise a large number of existential issues that in *Never Let Me Go* are covered by the veil of the ordinary in order that “[t]he novel becomes a story about us, about what we wish or need to do before we die”.<sup>41</sup> Ishiguro’s commitment to stimulating such reflections is clearly shown in his answer to questions about the shortness of the clones’ life:

I was always trying to find a metaphor for something very simple [...] a metaphor for the human condition, and for coming to terms with the fact that we’re not immortal, that we’re here for a limited time. There is a countdown. By creating a situation where to us – the readers and me the writer – their lives seem cruelly truncated, inside their world, that’s what’s normal. I thought by creating that kind of situation for them, we could get a perspective on our situation, where we hope to live to eighty if something doesn’t strike us down. These people operate in the same way. They’ve been given this fate and they accept it. There is a cruelty about it but they don’t see it to the same extent.<sup>42</sup>

Ironically, what most seems to distance clones from human beings is one of the major points they have in common. Their gradual acceptance of the need to follow the path mapped out for them by others also characterizes the life of modern men who, must either meet the challenge of keeping together contradictory ideas such as materialism and spiritual research, growth and extinction or, like the clones, become unwitting slaves in a society which has created for them a spacious golden cage that they naively believe they can manage at will. With this novel, Ishiguro asks the reader complex and inconvenient questions about life and humanness, as his own observations show:

“What really matters if you know that this is going to happen to you?” Ishiguro asks, referring to death. “What are the things you hold on to, what are the things you want to

39 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 266–267.

40 Cfr. G. Griffin, 653–54.

41 Cfr. Wai-chew Sim, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, (USA and Canada: Routledge, 2010), 83.

42 Brian W. Shaffer, and Cynthia F. Wong, eds., *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, 215.

set right before you go? What do you regret? What are the consolations? What are the things you feel you have to do before you go? And also the question is, what is all the education and culture for if you are going to check out?”<sup>43</sup>

The normal life span for humans is from birth to somewhere between sixty and ninety years, but for the protagonists of *Never Let Me Go* this period is deliberately shortened according to the Hailsham project. Nevertheless, the clones face the same questions and problems as humans do. The gap between the enormous responsibilities and difficulties that Ishiguro’s characters must face as assistants and donors, and the superficiality of the daily problems that Kathy describes as she remembers and recounts their past, gives *Never Let Me Go* a disquieting intensity. Kathy recalls her friends as full of hormones, engaged in sex, and stubbornly committed to being on trend, listening to music with walkmans and gossiping about their professors and the other students. They are typical teenagers, as Ishiguro observes:

I didn’t want them to worry about how to escape. I wanted their concerns to be more or less the same ones that all people had. What are the things important to us while we are here? How do we fit things like love, work, and friendship into what is a surprisingly short period of time?<sup>44</sup>

Hailsham’s efforts to humanize them seems to have been achieved from the point of view of both guardians and teachers, who do not realize that it would have been enough to assume the clones’ perspective to make them human. It has been precisely the lack of this attitude that has denied the students the means to feel “normal” people, and this leads us to the recognition that the only non-human aspects of the clones are dictated ironically by those who wanted to prove that they were human beings. Madame herself, the defender of this reform movement, is not fully persuaded that the students are more than laboratory animals. Although not completely clear, the students feel the woman’s contempt and interpret her fear as the result, among the many hypotheses they make, of their looking like spiders to her eyes. What was only the clones’ perception, a fear difficult to formulate and understand, is clearly revealed in the final speech of Miss Emily:

It reminded people, reminded them of a fear they’d always had. It’s one thing to create students, such as yourselves, for the donation programme. But a generation of created children who’d take their place in society? Children demonstrably *superior* to the rest of us? Oh no. That frightened people. They recoiled from that.<sup>45</sup>

43 J. Freeman, “*Never Let Me Go*: a Profile of Kazuo Ishiguro”, in *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, 197.

44 Cynthia F. Wong and Grace Crummet, “A Conversation about Life and Art with Kazuo Ishiguro” in *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, 214.

45 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 259, italics in the text.

Miss Emily's thoughts perfectly encapsulate the answer to the question of why clones are not treated as human beings by their guardians and creators; the fear of creating a "superman" is an intrinsic consequence of such a scientific experiment. Human beings can neither tolerate the risk of creating something that might dominate over them, nor accept behaving in so inhuman a way as to treat their fellow men as beasts to be slaughtered for their own purposes. This is also why it has been so difficult to convince people of the clones' humanity:

"Suddenly there were all these new possibilities laid before us, all these ways to cure so many previously incurable conditions. This was what the world noticed the most. And for a long time, people preferred to believe these organs appeared from nowhere, or at most that they grew in a kind of vacuum. [...] However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neuron disease, heart disease. So for a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter [...]"<sup>46</sup>

It is Miss Emily who explains to the clones this cruel but necessary truth. Objectively, there could not have been another way to support the organ trade programme, and those who managed it evidently did not have too much difficulty in convincing themselves that the clones were just test-tube products. It is not easy even for the teachers at Hailsham, who have been in close contact with the students, to see them as human beings; Miss Emily herself, who fought to persuade others that those boys were normal, admits that:

[...] We're *all* afraid of you. I myself had to fight back my dread of you all almost every day I was at Hailsham. There were times I'd look down at you all from my study window and I'd feel revulsion...<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, how could they consider them as humans and continue to work in a system that had the ultimate aim of leading them to a premature and pre-ordained death? Yet, Miss Emily believes that it was worth it, that in this way they have at least managed to give them a decent and respectful childhood. Ishiguro himself explains this obtuse but linear vision:

That scene [...] with Miss Emily is where we're presented with an idea that in order to have proper childhood, an element of deception must be used. If they had known they would die in the way they do, would they have embraced this arts education? They might say, "What's the point? Why are we making all this effort?" I don't mean just in arts, but in their relationships. Would we make any effort to be decent human beings? I think that's the main point raised in this scene. Miss Emily is saying, "As far as I'm concerned,

46 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 257–258.

47 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, italics in the text.



it's worth it, even if it all ends up in dust". To make this childhood work, you have to deceive them into believing it's all worthwhile.<sup>48</sup>

The questions that Ishiguro poses here add to the several others that *Never Let Me Go* raises. Once the last page has been turned, what this novel bequeaths to the readers, and imprints on their minds, is the power to ask questions with new eyes and a more aware and conscientious perspective. Reading the novel allows us to make the kinds of enquiry that Kathy, Tommy and Ruth, with the few means at their disposal, are not able to formulate, despite the vague sense of urgency about their condition and future. *Never Let Me Go* does not seek to provide answers, but rather to lead us to further questions, towards a more inclusive humanism that can envision a new world that is neither dystopian nor alienating. The "normality" of the world of Hailsham is the starting point for a new ontological consciousness of human beings, and a new awareness of the other subjectivities that in various ways inhabit the planet.

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48 Cynthia F. Wong and Grace Crummet, "A Conversation about Life and Art with Kazuo Ishiguro" in *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, 218.

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