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LETTERATURA E NUOVI REALISMI

a cura di *Francisco Martín Cabrero*

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“WE ALL COMPLETE”*Kazuo Ishiguro and the Posthuman Imagination*

ABSTRACT The hypothesis of cloning human life has always been an imaginative kaleidoscope of ‘posthuman’ possibilities. The development of bioengineering is now making this hypothesis even more palpable, raising more questions. Could man generate life? If so, what ends might justify it? Are extending life expectancy and eradicating diseases targets that make everything permissible? How far is medical research changing man’s life? Is it still possible to discern what is ‘natural’ and what is ‘artificial’? What are the differences between human beings and human clones? What would it feel like to be a clone? *Never Let Me Go* (2005) is a novel by Kazuo Ishiguro that challenges these questions, imagining a society where clones are used as organ donors to cure people of diseases such as tumours and leukaemia. This article analyses Ishiguro’s novel in the tradition of dystopian fiction, and focuses on his ‘posthuman’ reworking of classical myths, such as that of Orpheus and Eurydice, to describe the metamorphoses of a biotechnological age.

KEYWORDS Biotechnology, Clones, Posthuman, Literature, Dystopia

“Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable”, was a well-known mantra in the city of Uqbar, according to Jorge Luis Borges’ *Ficciones* (Fictions, 1941): indeed, both of them were pure illusions, demonic tools of reduplication.

Borges’ parody was aimed at Plato’s aesthetics, which condemns the world as a copy of ideas, and art as a copy of that copy. Since long before Borges, however, the confusion between the original and the copy has been one of the most frequent themes of fantasy literature: not only mirrors and sons, but also ghosts, shadows, twins, and automata reduplicate the image of man, opening the doors to a metaphysical “hesitation” which, according to Tzvetan Todorov (1970), represents the core of this literary field.

However, what happens when the double is a “clone”, and the reader’s hesitation concerns man’s identity? How can the original be discerned from the copy? Where should the border between natural and artificial be drawn? Is there a rigid frontier or not? If it is possible to duplicate man’s body, would clones also share man’s feelings, creativity, imagination? And why should they not be considered humans?

Since the cloning of Dolly the sheep almost twenty years ago, clones have been – as have cyborgs before them¹ – one of the crucial images of the critical debate on the ‘posthuman’.² Nowadays, the field of ‘posthuman’ studies could be divided into two main branches: on the one hand, the discussion on robotics, biotechnologies and artificial life, and their actual (or not) possibilities of improving man’s health; on the other hand, the debate on the limits of anthropocentrism, and the new care for the rest of nature (ecocriticism, animal studies).³

The hypothesis of human cloning brings together both perspectives, because of the multitude of questions it raises: as Martha C. Nussbaum suggested, “We want to know what human cloning would mean for the children born in this way. Would they really be creatures without souls, not fully human? [...] What kind of lives could, or would, clones have? [...] Who would choose cloning [...]? Whom would they choose to clone? [...] And what would become of our world [...]?” (1999, 13).

‘Posthuman’ critics use the notions of clones, cyborgs and other beings which blend human and artificial features in order to rethink the category of identity in a plural, unstable, hybrid way. From this perspective, subjectivity becomes something which always changes and which could always be renegotiated. N. Katherine Hayles (1999), for example, followed Donna Haraway in writing that there is more “humanity” in these spurious identities than in the essentialist ideas of traditional humanism: “In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (Hayles 1999, 3). What these critics wrote about cyborgs seems to be even more appropriate for clones: since they are made of the same stuff men are made of, clones share more with them than cyborgs do.

There is a long (although not always scientifically informed) literary tradition on man’s desire to create life, and on the dangers of this aspiration. The history of this tradition almost always coincides with terrible nightmares, tragedies, dystopias. From Ovid’s myth of Pygmalion, through Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), to the robots of Philip K. Dick in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), writers have never considered the creation of life as an innocent act. In the last few years, the book that has best discussed and renewed this literary tradition, focusing on the risks of artificial life, is

¹ See ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ [1983], in Haraway 1991, 149-181.

² On clones, see at least Nussbaum-Sustein 1999; Atlan 1999; Klotzko 2001; MacKinnon 2001; Piunker 2002; Pence 2016; Micali 2015; Ferrando 2016.

³ The concept of ‘posthuman’ is widely discussed in Haraway 1991; Hayles 1999; Fukuyama 2002; Leghissa 2014.

perhaps *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro, a novel which is also a powerful allegory of the ‘posthuman’ condition.⁴

Biotechnologies and the dystopian novel

My name is Kathy H. I’m thirty-one years old, and I’ve been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year. That’ll make it almost exactly twelve years. Now I know my being a carer so long isn’t necessarily because they think I’m fantastic at what I do. There are some really good carers who’ve been told to stop after just two or three years. And I can think of one carer at least who went on for all of fourteen years despite being a complete waste of space. So I’m not trying to boast. But then I do know for a fact they’ve been pleased with my work (Ishiguro 2005, 3).

“My name is Kathy H...”: *Never Let Me Go* starts as an autobiography, continues as a *Bildungsroman* and ends in a dystopia.⁵ Ishiguro uses the old strategy – well-known in science fiction, such as, for example, in *Sentry* (1954) by Fredrick Brown – of giving the floor to an “unreliable narrator”.⁶ Kathy presents herself as a “carer”, a young woman who devoted her life to others, eliciting readers’ sympathies. However, during the book, readers discover that being a “carer” actually means being a clone who helps other clones to donate their organs, before becoming, in turn, a donor.⁷

Never Let Me Go is set in a uchronic England of the late 20th century, where the health service has succeeded in defeating mortal diseases by using clones as organ donors, as already imagined in Greg Egan’s short story *The Extra* (1990).⁸ Clones’ lives are short: as soon as they become adult, they start donating body parts, and quickly “complete” their destinies and die, after their last vital organs are transplanted into others.

The novel can be divided into three parts: the first one is set at Hailsham, a boarding school where Kathy spent her childhood with other clones; the second one describes her years at the Cottages, where she experienced the “real” world for the first time; the last one is about her work as a “carer.”

⁴ Ishiguro’s novel inspired the homonymous movie (UK 2010), directed by Mark Romanek, starring Carey Mulligan, Andrew Garfield, and Keira Knightley.

⁵ On *Never Let Me Go* and literary genres see in particular McDonald 2007, 74-83; and Hartung 2011, 49-57.

⁶ Scurr 2005 defines Kathy as one of Ishiguro’s usual “unreliable” narrators.

⁷ The idea of clones as organ donors derives from Ira Levin, *The Boys from Brazil* (1976), which was the basis of the homonymous movie (UK 1978) directed by Franklin J. Schaffner, with a cast featuring Gregory Peck and Laurence Olivier.

⁸ Actually Ishiguro’s fantasy is not so different from the international market of organs, where, instead of clones, donors tend to be desperate people from poor countries.

Hailsham is described as a “smart, cosy, self-contained world” (Ishiguro 2005, 159). It is a private school where young clones grow before becoming organ donors. They study, play sports, and are encouraged to produce artworks. Kathy falls in love with Tommy, a shy boy, who has surges of anger when he is mocked by other boys. Kathy’s best friend, Ruth, is jealous of their feelings and seduces Tommy, becoming his girlfriend.

One of their teachers, Miss Lucy, tells them the truth about their destiny, but is fired at once. Clones face reality when they turn 16, and move to the Cottages, a residential complex where they are exposed to the outside world. One day Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth visit Norfolk, where two of their housemates tell them that some students may “defer” their donations for three years if they are truly in love.

Soon afterwards, Kathy becomes a “carer” and leaves the Cottages. Ruth and Tommy break off their affair and become donors. Ruth’s first donation has a bad outcome; Kathy becomes her carer, but they both realise that Ruth would not survive another surgery. Ruth asks Kathy to arrange a trip with Tommy, in order to reunite them for the last time. They go to a beach where they find an abandoned boat. Ruth reveals her old jealousy and gives them the address of an old lady, called “Madame”, who may grant them a deferral. Tommy and Kathy start a relationship, and go to see “Madame”, but their attempt fails and they cannot obtain a deferral.

Never Let Me Go calls to mind a long tradition of dystopian novels about eugenics programmes, such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). Ishiguro imagined a plot about the risks of bioengineering and the consequences of man’s claims to improve nature. *Never Let Me Go* is a ‘posthuman’ novel since it shows the power of technology to change the normal relationship between the natural and the artificial world:

In so far as we know ourselves in both formal discourse (for example, biology) and in daily practice [...], we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras. Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. (Haraway 1991, 177).

If a *Bildungsroman* traditionally implies a moral or social improvement of the main character, Ishiguro, on the contrary, uses the word “completion” with sad irony, since the “donors”, in completing their missions, also prepare for their deaths (see Krüger-Fürhoff 2008, 151).

The transition from the idyll of the private school to the dystopian novel relies on an ambiguous ellipse of the truth, which was consciously hidden by teachers from pupils. Kathy points out that she and her friends “had only the haziest notions of the world outside” (Ishiguro 2005, 66) and that they were “told and not told” (82) about their future:

Thinking back now, I can see we were just at that age when we knew a few things about ourselves—about who we were, how we were different from our guardians, from the people outside—but hadn’t

yet understood what any of it meant. [...] So you're waiting, even if you don't quite know it, waiting for the moment when you realise that you really are different to them; that there are people out there, like Madame, who don't hate you or wish you any harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you—of how you were brought into this world and why—and who dread the idea of your hand brushing theirs. The first time you glimpse yourself through the eyes of a person like that, it's a cold moment. It's like walking past a mirror you've walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange. (Ishiguro 2005, 36).

This ambiguity, of course, concerns Kathy only as a character, not as the narrator. When she becomes a “carer”, she knows everything, and, while telling her story, she proposes, to her readers, the same elusive representation of reality given by her teachers, playing with narrative time.⁹ The focalisation on Kathy leads readers to assume her perspective: “What would it feel like to be a clone? What would it do to one's sense of personhood, moral worth, and self-esteem to know that you were made, not begotten – created strategically for an overtly instrumental purpose?” (Jennings 2010, 18).

Kathy's laconic acceptance of her fate is impressive: no questions, no objections, no mutinies.¹⁰ Clones may complain about their lives, but they never rebel: “I'm sure it's at least partly to do with that, to do with preparing for the change of pace, that I've been getting this urge to order all these old memories” (Ishiguro 2005, 37).

The “possibles theory”

“Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other”, wrote Haraway (1991, 151), referring to contemporary society. Dystopia, as a literary genre, has frequently focused on the burden of totalitarian power on individuals, such as in Zamjatin's *We* (1924), or in George Orwell's *1984* (1948); in this context, technological research was seen as an ally of social coercion. Ishiguro reversed the perspective: in his novel, clones are the unarmed casualties of a society which sold human compassion for a longer life.

Miss Lucy's revealing discourse focuses on the alternatives precluded to her pupils, like the anaphors “none of you will” and “you're not” point out:

You've been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some people are quite happy to leave it that way. But I'm not. If you're going to have decent lives, then you've got to know and know properly. None of you will be going to America, none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets as I heard some of you planning the other day. Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to

⁹ See Currie 2009, 353-367, who analyses the narrative use of verbal tenses in the novel.

¹⁰ In this regard Nunokawa talked of “deadpan minimalism”, “closer to silence than speech” (2007, 303).

donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do. You're not like the actors you watch on your videos, you're not even like me (Ishiguro 2005, 81).

Ishiguro's sad irony ascribes to the fate of clones something that modern society does every day to everyone: "your lives are set out for you". Is Miss Lucy talking about her pupils, or about herself? Is she talking about clones or human beings? Both clones and men are strangers in a cosmos they did not choose, and this commutability is evidence of their affinity.¹¹

After discovering their cruel destiny, clones start to invent stories in order to tolerate the horror. One of these stories is what Kathy calls the "possibles theory". Behind each clone there should be a real human being from whom the replicant was taken:

The basic idea behind the possibles theory was simple, and didn't provoke much dispute. It went something like this. Since each of us was copied at some point from a normal person, there must be, for each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her life. This meant, at least in theory, you'd be able to find the person you were modeled from. (Ishiguro 2005, 127).

This is the reason why, when they are among men, clones always look for their "possible" model: "when you saw the person you were copied from, you'd get some insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you'd see something of what your life held in store" (Ishiguro 2005, 140).

This "possibles theory" lacks any scientific basis, but it is one of the main elements of man's fear of cloning in the collective imagination.¹² Furthermore, it closely recalls Borges' Uqbar: copies are attracted to their models, but this attraction is the starting point for a quest that inverts the direction of the glance, and thus calls into discussion the ontological priority of the original.

Borges used to say that a paradoxical "theory of repetition", according to which the copy comes before the original, was invented by the Argentinian philosopher Macedonio Fernández. Ishiguro's novel seems to develop an analogous theory, since, as John Marks puts it,

¹¹ "One of the great virtues of this novel is that such statements are clearly not just for or about cloned children. In extrapolating from our own society, Ishiguro's science-fiction premise also of course sends us back to it" (Robbins 2007, 292).

¹² Cloning, obviously, does not imply any kind of univocal correspondence with a model; see Pinker 2002, 224-226: "The bizarre misconceptions of cloning can be traced to the persistent belief that the body is suffused with a soul. One conception of cloning which sets off a fear of an army of zombies, blanks, or organ farms, imagines the process to be the duplication of a body without a soul. The other, which sets off fears of a Faustian grab at immortality or of a resurrected Hitler, conceives of cloning as duplicating the body together with the soul".

The clones are not copies, but rather copiers. In a neat reversal of the Romantic *doppelgänger* as a sinister and fantastical harbinger of death, the pupils from Hailsham cultivate the hope that they might be able to locate their 'possibles' [...]. The novel might be read as an attempt to show that the clones are 'like us'. We, too, are copiers, and their vain search for 'possibles' constitutes an affecting parallel with our own efforts". (Marks 2010, 349).

Human beings in *Never Let Me Go* need clones: their organs, their flesh, their life. Nevertheless, clones are attracted to them, want to know them. Their reactions reveal "more" humanity than that of the human beings: men are creators and persecutors at the same time; clones are suffering creatures. But their individuality is undeniable: Tommy is shy and irritable; Kathy is sympathetic enough to fall in love him; Ruth is jealous and steals Kathy's boyfriend. The novel follows the evolution of these feelings with accuracy. The retrospective point of view of the narrator superimposes on these feelings an aura of resigned pointlessness, but still they seem real.

The fact that some clones take care of other clones is further evidence of their humanity. Clones are "brought up to serve humanity in the most astonishing and selfless ways, and the humanity they achieve in so doing makes us realize that in a new world the word must be redefined" (Yardley 2005). Kathy admits that being a "carer" is a choice of deep "solitude" – "You spend hour after hour, on your own, driving across the country, centre to centre, hospital to hospital, sleeping in overnights, no one to talk to about your worries, no one to have a laugh with..." (Ishiguro 2005, 207-208), but she also considers her work "a part of herself [you]", a possibility to redeem her destiny, a chance to get a sense out of her life:

"It's important there are good carers. And I'm a good carer."

"But is it really that important? Okay, it's really nice to have a good carer. But in the end, is it really so important? The donors will all donate, just the same, and then they'll complete."

"Of course it's important. A good carer makes a big difference to what a donor's life's actually like." (Ishiguro 2005, 281-282).

Human beings use clones to live longer, to defeat time and to pretend to be infinite. But playing the part of god has a price: passion is on the side of the clones; indifference on that of man. Clones have less time at their disposal, so they have to try another way towards the infinite, and they attempt an interior way, that of feelings.

However, is there something more human than love near death? Kathy and Tom discover that they are clones, but their "possibles" are Eurydice and Orpheus, Thisbe and Pyramus, Iseult and Tristan, Francesca and Paolo, Juliet and Romeo ...

A dystopian novel about human cloning, *Never Let Me Go* is also a 'posthuman' reworking of the old theme of love and death. It challenges the relationship between the model and the copy on two levels: from a metaphysical perspective, the dialectics between man and clones, and from a meta-literary one, that between literary sources and their reworking.

The love and death theme is also the basis of the other story invented by clones: that of a possible "deferment". Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy are told that a couple of clones got three years of postponement for the donations. But they had to show the genuineness of their love through their artworks: "your art [...] will reveal your inner selves" (Ishiguro 2005, 254).

Kathy and Tommy request a deferment from the "Madame" who collected their drawings, announcing they are "in love". A little shocked, with more sadness than sarcasm, she replies: "You believe this? [...] How can you know it? You think love is so simple?" (Ishiguro 2005, 253).

Then Miss Emily, the former Hailsham headmistress, tells them that Hailsham was different from the other colleges of clones. It was a space where they could exercise their sensitivity, so that human beings might realise that they had feelings. However, the experiment was reputed too dangerous and the college was closed. Neither "Madame" and Miss Emily can do anything for them: no "deferments" are possible.

Miss Emily justifies the Hailsham project with the aim of proving that they "had souls" and were not "shadowy objects" (Ishiguro 2005, 255-256):

"We took away your art," she says, "because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to *prove you had souls at all.*"

She paused, and Tommy and I exchanged glances for the first times in ages. Then I asked:

"Why did you have to prove a thing like that, Miss Emily? Did someone think we didn't have souls?" A thin smile appeared on her face. "It's touching, Kathy, to see you so taken aback. It demonstrates, in a way, that we did our job well. As you say, why would anyone doubt you had a soul? But I have to tell you, my dear, it wasn't something commonly held when we first set out all those years ago." (Ishiguro 2005, 260).

Thus, Kathy and Tommy's attempt ends with another cruel discovery: for human beings, their feelings are nothing more than the result of a cultural experiment. After many years, Tommy has again a surge of anger. Kathy observes: "maybe the reason you used to get like that was because at some level you always knew" (Ishiguro 2005, 275).

"We all complete"

"Why train us, encourage us, make us produce all of that? If we're just going to give donations anyway, then die, why all those lessons? Why all those books and discussions?", asks Kathy towards the end of the novel (Ishiguro 2005, 254).

When Orpheus went to Hades and Proserpina in order to call back Eurydice, he did not seek anything but a "deferment":

Omnia debemur vobis, paulumque morati
serius aut citius sedem properamus ad unam.
Tendimus huc omnes, haec est domus ultima, vosque
humani generis longissima regna tenetis.

Haec quoque, cum iustos matura peregerit annos,
iuris erit vestri: pro munere poscimus usum;
quodsi fata negant veniam pro coniuge, certum est
nolle redire mihi: leto gaudete duorum. (*Met.* x, 32-39).

In the myth, Orpheus' hopes relied on the persuasive power of poetry and music. Ishiguro preferred figurative arts, but the story, more or less, is the same. Art is what makes experience comprehensible and sharable with others (see Seltzer 2009, 132): it is what tells both human beings and clones “what you were like inside” (Ishiguro 2005, 260).

If *Never Let Me Go* overturns the moral priority between the model and the copy, it is because Ishiguro's reworking of the myth changes some roles: the *personae* who in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice are mortals, in the novel become clones; those who are gods, in the novel become humans.

Never Let Me Go reveals that the human claim of being immortal at all costs is a cruelty towards other things. It hurts the world. “Madame” was shocked to learn that Kathy and Tommy believe in simple, old-fashioned values such as real “love”, because they were the same simple, old-fashioned values that her society swapped for the promises of bioengineering.¹³

Clones hate their destiny, but they accept it. This is also their ‘posthuman’ lesson to human beings – Ishiguro seems to suggest – who should accept their frailties, their mortality, their non-uniqueness: “To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is to be an illusion, and so to be involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other. Yet to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial. One is too few, but two are too many” (Haraway 1991, 177). Machines and clones are not something to be “animated, worshipped, and dominated”: they are “us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. [...] We are responsible for boundaries; we are they” (180).

Bruno Latour wrote that recognising ‘posthuman’ otherness, and its relationship with the future of human condition, would be the first step for the development of real ‘posthuman’ solidarity: “Now the nonhumans are no longer confused with objects, it may be possible to imagine the collective in which humans are entangled with them” (Latour 1991, 174).

There is a beautiful image of this “collective” in *Never Let Me Go*, which is also the reason for the book title. One day, during her childhood, Kathy danced with her pillow to a song called “Never Let Me Go.” At the end of the novel, she asks “Madame” why, that day, she was crying:

¹³ See in this regard Bowman 2006, 104-108.

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 sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go. That is what I saw. It wasn't really you, what you were doing, I know that. But I saw you and it broke my heart. And I've never forgotten. (Ishiguro 2005, 267).

Maybe clones are not completely human; maybe their life is not real life. However, something which can suffer and die actually shares a form of life: "We all complete. Maybe none of us really understand what we've lived through, or feel we've had enough time" (Ishiguro 2005, 265).

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cosmo@unito.it

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