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DAYS OF PAST FUTURES: KAZUO ISHIGURO'S NEVER LET ME GO AS "SPECULATIVE MEMOIR"

KEITH MCDONALD

The autobiographical mode of writing is often thought to be a genre in itself, a genre where the self-penned life story of those in the public eye is marked out by publishers as having a worthwhile story to tell. These apparently true life accounts are often scrutinized for their authenticity, and this is often the case where writers bear witness to a traumatic event, an historical moment, or a perceived social injustice. Leigh Gilmore writes of the pitfalls that emerge when a writer represents trauma:

Because testimonial projects require subjects to confess, to bear witness, to make public and shareable a private and intolerable pain, they enter into a legalistic frame in which their efforts can move quickly beyond their interpretation and control, become exposed and ambiguous, and therefore subject to judgments about their veracity and worth. (7)

She goes on to suggest that in order to “navigate” this dilemma, “some writers move away from recognizably autobiographical forms even as they engage autobiography’s central questions” (7). Examples of such works include popular autofictions, in which writers recast their own experiences in a hybrid narrative. Such examples include *The Farewell Symphony* (1995) by Edmund White, in which there is an account of the rise of the AIDS crisis told in a “fictional autobiography,” and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), which depicts the plight of a socially excluded individual told from an autofictional perspective. These texts and others abandon the need for autobiographical authenticity, and suggest an alternative where a creative shaping of experienced events provides a conduit by which a fundamental “truth” is made available.

It is worth noting, however, that there is a clear argument to suggest that this debate over the authenticity of the autobiographical work, functioning

in a genre where there necessarily exists an answerable scale of empirical truth, may be wrong footed and fundamentally flawed as a workable model of analysis. Paul De Man is extremely effective in destabilizing the notion that autobiography should primarily function as a genre where truthful accounts unfold, rather than a cross-genre approach to reading. In "Autobiography as De-Facement," De Man contends that the genre-centric approach to autobiography is "simply false" (61):

Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighboring or even incompatible genres and, perhaps most revealing of all, generic discussions, which can have such powerful heuristic value in the case of tragedy or of the novel, remain distressingly sterile when autobiography is at stake. (68)

De Man suggests an alternative view of an autobiographical trope that moves far beyond classification by genre, and that can be seen as a more fruitful and widespread writer/reader exchange. He contends that if the reader is to enter into a relationship where he or she generously agrees to accept the events of the autobiography as related to truth (and this differentiates from fact in this case), then we should accept that all phenomenological textual exchanges engage in this agreement also, and that autobiography is "a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts" (70).

Once freed from the restrictions of genre and mode, autobiography can be seen as a means of providing a coherent narrative account that focuses on the recounting of experience (be it empirical or rational) as a means of creating a rapport between reader and writer across a broad spectrum of literary genres. Once exploded, we can see that the autobiographical exchange is both pervasive and effective, as can be seen today in Kazuo Ishiguro's speculative memoir *Never Let Me Go* (2005) as well as in many other Science Fictional texts. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), for example—a tale that recurrently finds parallels with the novel under discussion in this essay—can be viewed as a battle between two autobiographies vying for the reader's attention in a contest for limited moral superiority, in which each account contains the subject's abhorrent behavior.

Never Let Me Go is a novel that utilizes many of the techniques of the autobiographical memoir, while simultaneously barring itself from classification as an example of this genre. The novel is narrated by Kathy H, a thirty-one year old graduate of Hailsham boarding school, who works as a "carer" at the time of writing, and who recounts her childhood and early adulthood, and the revelations that she has learned about the "special" nature of Hailsham

students. The novel is set in a fictional late twentieth century England, where children are cloned, reared, and schooled as carers to donors whose organs are gradually removed in a series of procedures, before the carers in turn become donors and yield their crop to the authorities. Although this horrifying practice is revealed as the narrative progresses, the text itself focuses on the everyday nature of the friendships and love affairs that grow in Hailsham, and the novel has a particularly subdued air rather than a spectacular take on the institutionalized cloning of individuals and their harvesting. In this sense, the novel also alternates from some of the generic tropes of much Science Fiction, which often takes place in an otherworldly or spectacular environment. The world we are presented with is disturbingly similar to our own, and crucially, the practice of harvesting has become a largely unspoken but widely recognized fact of life, drawing parallels with the everyday human injustices witnessed in contemporary culture.

Never Let Me Go is reminiscent of two canonical Science Fiction texts, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), the former of which deals with the issue of cloning and the social implications of a eugenics program, and the latter of which focuses on the plight of a woman in a world where biological reproduction has been hijacked by a totalitarian state. Aaron Rosenfeld points out that the many "future histories" of Science Fiction "offer a critique of how we live and who we are now . . . they speak in and to the present, if not of it" (40). *Never Let Me Go* is no exception to this. It provides us with a window into a culture of genetic engineering and cloning technology in which people are exploited and killed by a state seeking the wider benefits of organ farming, a window that nevertheless reflects in part the decisions facing contemporary culture. I wish to explore the ways in which the tropological features of autobiography are employed in this novel, and the possible reasons and outcomes of such a narrative strategy. This will specifically involve a discussion of the different autobiographical exchanges that the novel utilizes, which include the depiction of schooling and the coming of age narrative, the meta-fictional references to the writing process, and the consideration of the novel as a pathography, where the illness of those cared for is given testimony, with the reader acting as witness to trauma and loss.

Klaus Martens notices that autobiography "seems to express meanings associated with the term 'education,'" and it is worth noting that the autobiographical trope is in many ways an education, as we learn of the experiences of narrators as they themselves encounter new information (90). More specifically, I wish to draw attention to the fact that schooling is often a significant and sometimes dominating factor in autobiography, and the educational

environment provides protagonists with a microcosm of the wider world they are later to experience. These experiences are present in Anthony Trollope's *An Autobiography* (1883), which begins naturally enough with a chapter entitled "My Education," where we see the youth's first major societal reckoning, however childish and naive. The focus in schooling is much more prominent in Thomas Hughes's thinly veiled autobiographical account of his youth, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), where the hierarchies and social conventions of Victorian society can be seen in the local rituals of the boarding school. If we are to break free from the legalistic insistence on empirical truth drawn from the author's own life, and look to semi-autobiographical and fictional autobiographies, other texts can be seen to foreground the educational experience. Tobias Wolff's *Old School* (2004) recently portrayed the prep school as a place of innocence before the onset of adulthood and the upheavals of the late twentieth century, and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) depicts the experiences of schooling from the perspective of the teacher. Considering the model of the Science Fiction autobiography, Shelley's *Frankenstein* again comes to mind, with the privileged education of the arrogant Victor sharply contrasting with the terrible conditions in which the creature learns of the world and its power structures.

But why is there this focus on the re-telling of childhood and schooling, other than for simple linear clarity and the directions that it can lead to? I wish to suggest that novels which depict schooling provide a fruitful forum by which the narrator's agency in a complex power structure can be framed, questioned, and understood. Sociologists have contended that "childhood" is by no means a natural and unproblematic cultural and biological occurrence, but a construct that has different ramifications over different cultures and time periods. As Phil Scratton notes, "Childhood is not a static, objective and universal fact of human nature, but a social construction which is both culturally and historically determined" (2). This social construction is fundamentally involved in a nexus of ideological forces, where the notion of childhood is often bound up in a register of nurturing, benevolence, and protection that can also reveal social injustices and discourses of power. For example, in *Frankenstein*, a charitable visit to the poor by the young Victor and his mother uncovers the angelic Elizabeth, bearing "a celestial stamp" so different from the "dark eyed, hardy little vagrants" that surround her (34). She is quickly removed from her poverty-stricken life and becomes a member of the wealthy Frankenstein clan, an act that reveals the deep-seated biological and racially determined power structures that the novel scrutinizes. These discourses may not be apparent because they "become naturalised and, though constantly elaborated upon, their basic propositions are assumed rather than

expressly articulated" (Cox 7). This is entirely relevant to *Never Let Me Go*, where the raising of children for the harvesting of organs has not only been conveniently marginalized in spatial terms to various schools, centers, and homes, but also internally normalized by the donors themselves, typified in the figure of Kathy H, who remains passively in the grip of her duty as a carer and donor, embodying the relentlessly bleak tone of the novel. This normalization is evident not least in the language that is used to describe the harvesting of the victim's organs. The children (or captives) are described as "special" and "gifted" by their guardians (or wardens), and their murders are described as "completions," a jarring reminder of their sole purpose in the eyes of society, and of the ways in which language can normalize atrocities deemed necessary in a given ideology.

Another aspect of schooling as a socially revealing practice depicted in the novel is the narrator's void of experience regarding infancy. Whereas even fictive autobiographies usually include some information about the birth and parentage of the subject, here we receive nothing, because there is simply no experience to mine. Similarly, other than the eventual decline and tragically short romance with her childhood love Tommy, there is little of hope or interest in life after the boundaries of Hailsham and the purgatorial summer camp that follows. Whereas the realist autobiography may present school as a place where infancy has led the subject, and an experience that informs and sets a template for adult life, here the focus is on Hailsham because this is the only experience of any relative normality, family, and co-existence. While in Hailsham, the students willingly participate in a denial of both the outside world and their futures, and this acceptance of the fate that awaits the donors represents a death knell and a realization of the "special" nature of their life-span. Considering this, Ishiguro draws upon autobiographical conceits—that is, the memory of education. However, because of the aspects of reality that mirror but adjust our own world in the mode of Science Fiction, this conceit cannot be fully realized. The result is an autobiography drained of its usual depth and acknowledgment of a fuller life outside of the textual boundaries, but fixated instead on what little experience the protagonist holds.

This poverty of experience can also be seen in the social events, rituals, and artifacts presented in the novel. For example, periodic "car boot" sales see outsiders donate unwanted items and paraphernalia to the students of Hailsham, and these unspectacular items are treasured and traded, forming part of the collections that the students see as linking them to a sophisticated outside world. Similarly, schoolyard pranks become elaborate plans, childish feuds become long-running dilemmas, and adolescent crushes become monumental

affairs. This heightened sense of drama and emotion is of course part and parcel of the experience, the narrative unfolding of adulthood into childhood; however, the ramifications are altered in this case. The students of Hailsham remain trapped in a state of adolescence during their maturation into biological adulthood, unable, unschooled, and unprepared for any semblance of an adult or free existence. The narrator and the other students are unequipped and unwanted in mainstream society, and indeed seem to become more of a burden (or perhaps a guilty reminder) to the wider world, which remains much of a mystery to Kathy H. In these instances, the reader is left to make his or her own assumptions about this unseen world, which of course reminds us of our own as it is extrapolated from contemporary moral landscapes.

Another feature of autobiography, and a frequently utilized trope of the postmodern narrative, is meta-referencing, which is used at key points in *Never Let Me Go*. The novel draws attention to itself as a construction, strengthening the illusion that it is the narrator telling this story, and that the reader acknowledges the authenticity of the narrative, distancing Ishiguro from the writing process. For example, Kathy H tells us:

I don't know where it was where you were, but at Hailsham we had to have some form of medical almost every week—usually up in room 18 at the very top of the house—with stern faced Tricia, or crow face as we called her. (13)

Irving Goffman writes that when encountering the artificial laid bare through meta-reference, "one can learn how one's sense of ordinary reality is produced by examining something that is easier to become conscious of, namely, how reality is mimicked and/or how it is faked" (251). A paradoxical situation occurs in the case of *Never Let Me Go*. In drawing attention to the artificiality of the work—that is, letting the reader know that she is aware of the reader/writer exchange, rather than creating an apparently seamless fiction—Kathy H is re-enforcing the notion that this is an autobiographical account of events, and stamping her authentic authorial voice upon the work. In reality of course this is a conceit through which Ishiguro effectively removes his presence from the novel and turns it over to his fictional construction. This tradition is nothing new, and can be seen in many fictional novels that provide us with a character's written account of personal experience. For example, Kalliopi Nikolopoulou notices that Henry James employs a similar strategy in *The Turn of the Screw*, in which the "transposition of the autobiographical project to an entirely fictional plane merges autobiography with fiction, exposing the former's figurative basis" (6). This can also be seen in *Never Let Me Go*, where we are encouraged to approach the fiction as autobiography, thus unveiling the notion of autobiography as privilege in a system

of authenticity and empirical authority. However, a difference occurs in the case of *Never Let Me Go*. Whilst Douglas acts as our recipient of the Governess's tale in *The Turn of the Screw*, effectively functioning as a conduit and guide by which the reader receives the ghostly narrative, in the case of Kathy H's story, the reader receives the tale as if inhabiting her world of cloning and organ harvesting. This raises some interesting questions as to who the intended audience is for Kathy's autobiographical project, and where the reader fits into this merger of fact and fiction, as shall be discussed in the closing parts of this essay.

It seems, then, that the autobiographical trope of meta-reference seeks to draw the reader into the account of events, to ask us to bear witness to the dystopian world and the treatment of its victims, and it is this point that I now wish to focus on. In addition to being an account of Kathy H's experiences at Hailsham, the novel in its closing stages also grants the reader some insight into her life as a carer. In this section, we see her tend to her lifelong friends Ruth and Tommy as they each go through surgery and partial recovery before eventual decline and death. The three attempt to negotiate a fitting end to their lives together at an accelerated rate, as their respective friendships and love affairs are torn apart by the wider social "responsibilities" that they exist to fulfill. The novel expands at this point beyond its autobiographical frame, and draws from a "pathographic" trope: the writing of corporeal decline and the affects of illness on others (see Hawkins). It is worth noting here that pathography is a genre of nascent popularity in the 1990s in which *Never Let Me Go* is set. As Roger Luckhurst observes, "In the 1990s the success of the memoir genre was a result of its re-organization around trauma. The experiential, if it was to gain a hearing, had to pass over certain thresholds that mark out traumatic exceptionality from the everyday" (36). In telling her story, Kathy H is also involved in a life writing project that will preserve the memory of dead and dying loved ones. By incorporating them into her own memoir, which includes their decline and death whilst simultaneously entwining their experiences around her own, a symbolic binding takes place in which the pathography acts as an elegiac act of witness and testimony. Judith Butler offers a helpful insight into this notion of incorporation and loss:

The lost object is . . . made cohesive with the ego itself. Indeed, one might conclude that melancholic identification permits the loss of the object in the external world precisely because it provides a way to *preserve* the object as part of the ego and, hence, to avert the loss as a complete loss. . . . Giving up the object becomes possible only on the condition of a melancholic internalization or, what might for our purposes turn out to be more important, a melancholic *incorporation*. (246–47)

The text itself becomes the vessel in which this incorporation takes place, with the memoir functioning as the testimony and the reader as the witness to the traumatic unfolding of events. Julia Kristeva depicts the life writing project as a fight against corporeal decline and disintegration, with the writer as warrior facing oncoming death: "Aesthetic and particularly literary creation [sets] forward a device whose prosodic economy, interaction of characters and implicit symbolism constitute a very faithful semiological representation of the subject's battle with symbolic collapse" (35). As noted, the recounting of trauma and illness "marks out traumatic exceptionality from the everyday." Indeed, the autobiographical project seeks to italicize the subjects from others around them, where recounting is transformed into witnessing via the autobiographical exchange. John Sturrock writes that, "The autobiographical hero rises and in order to do so breaks ranks with the stage army of the anonymous, or that undifferentiated human mass whose members may be assumed to have no story to tell" (289). Not all autobiographical subjects, though, are so bold and heroic, and Kathy H's passivity and acceptance of her lot is at times enraging.

Some readers, however, will undoubtedly find heroism in her ability to recount her experiences in a world that goes so far as to disenfranchise her from the human mass, where she is reduced to a cog in a bioconsumerist culture. I am reminded again of *Frankenstein*—another tale of bioconsumerism and its victims—and of the plight of the creature, who when finally meeting his maker begs to be allowed to give testimony to his own traumatic education at the hands of a world that will not recognize him. Reduced to begging to be heard, the creature nonetheless gains an audience within the text, as does the Governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, who finds a rapt audience of listeners after her death. The same can be said of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is recounted as a case study (and therefore finds a witness in the text) long after the epoch to which she is victim. But who is the intended witness to Kathy H, who finds no reader in her alternate world of bioengineering and body harvesting? We could assume that as the memoir is set in the 1990s rather than the present, and that there is a movement campaigning for the rights of clones in the text, that there is some imagined reader who will witness the testimony after some kind of emancipation has taken place. Yet this remains unresolved and vague within the narrative itself. However, the narrative closure does offer us some clues into the intended witnesses of the testimony. The novel ends with a visit to Norfolk, a place where in the imaginations of the students of Hailsham, all lost things return. At this point, while looking into a field, Kathy H surrenders to a fantasy in which those she has lost return to her:

I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing there in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I'd see it was Tommy, and he'd wave and maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that—I didn't let it—and although the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, and drove off to wherever it was I was supposed to be. (282)

Ending the novel at this stage in the narrative gives over the testimony to this place of lost things. Crucially though, it has by this point been witnessed by the reader. The novel itself represents the symbolic field, where past things surface, and the reader and narrator exist at either side of this landscape, each looking for traces of lives lost. In utilizing the tropological framework of the autobiography in a discourse of an imagined world and environment, Ishiguro invites us to abandon the veil of authenticity and bear witness to a memoir from another reality, an imagined past that could represent a real future, where Science Fiction again calls on our imaginations to act as a lens by which to scrutinize contemporary social dilemmas.

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