

Illusions of a Future:
Ishiguro, Liberalism, Political Theology

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I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and 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 here 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, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that – I didn't let it – and though 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, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be.¹

In the final scene of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) – a speculative fiction about a group of clone children who are engineered purely in order for their vital organs to be harvested by the terminally ill – the narrator Kathy H. watches pieces of rubbish accumulating on a barbed-wire fence and briefly allows herself to fantasize about the restoration of everything she has lost over the course of her short life. It is tempting to read the poignant end of Ishiguro's novel as a kind of metaphor for the fate of 'political theology' – however we might understand that massively overdetermined yet still curiously empty term – in contemporary fiction. After all, Kathy's fantasy about the return of her beloved Tommy is curiously reminiscent of another image of the failed *restitutio in integrum* of historical detritus: Walter Benjamin's classic thought experiment about Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940). To recall Benjamin's famous Thesis IX, the Angel of History 'would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has

¹ Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, p. 282.

been smashed'. Yet, 'a storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned' – and this storm 'is what we call progress'.² Perhaps we might even see Kathy, the professional 'carer' – whose vocation is to guide her fellow clones through their 'donations' (organ harvesting) until they 'complete' (die) – as a kind of biopolitical equivalent to Benjamin's angel: she, too, wants to stay and redeem what has been lost but is equally powerless in the face of the ever-growing history of human catastrophes that modernity chooses to call 'progress'. If Ishiguro's novel seems to deliberately invite the possibility of a political theological reading in this historical constellation, however, it just as quickly shuts it down: whereas Benjamin's angel is propelled into the future against his will by the storm, Kathy chooses to turn her back on the tragic scene of history because she knows that the idea of a 'messianic' justice for her dead friends is nothing more than a fantasy. This short essay asks what, if anything, might remain of 'political theology' within a contemporary literary moment that, literally and metaphorically, turns its back on religion as 'fantasy'. What, to adapt Freud's famous title,³ might be the future of the political theological illusion in contemporary fiction?

It is not as if Ishiguro's novel is exactly devoid of enabling or consoling illusions, of course, but they tend to be markedly 'secular' in form and content. As many critics have observed, *Never Let Me Go* obeys the basic rules and conventions of the dystopian genre to which it belongs: an enclosed social space (a private boarding school); an alternative temporality (England in the 1990s); a collectivist ideology of service (compulsory group activity as well as a prohibition on solitude, friendship and love) and the production of docile bodies (via a system of 'guardians' and 'carers') – all in the service of an obscene biopolitical regime of legalized slavery from birth to death.⁴ Yet, in contrast to equivalent biopolitical dystopias like Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Ishiguro's novel is a godless text: religion is

² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 257-8.

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*.

⁴ See the following for recent readings of Ishiguro's novel to which I am indebted: Liza Fluet, 'Immaterial Labours: Ishiguro, Class, and Affect', Jane Elliott, 'Suffering Agency: Imagining Neo-Liberal Personhood in North America and Britain' and Arne de Boever, *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel*.

conspicuously absent from the ideological apparatuses that underpin this world.⁵ If Kathy and her friends have a faith in an ‘afterlife’ of any kind, it consists in nothing more metaphysical than the stubbornly persistent folk-myth that clones who have fallen in love with each other might be granted a temporary stay of execution.⁶ For the spectacularly credulous Kathy herself, religion seems to be just about the only ‘fantasy’ in which she *cannot* bring herself to believe – the only illusion that has no future. In the novel’s concluding sentence, she rejects messianic justice only to apparently succumb to the more insidious illusion that she still possesses a special value within the immanent order that exploits her: ‘I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be’.

To be sure, ‘political theology’ – or whatever comes to fill that placeholder – is thus never anything more than an exploded or bankrupt illusion in *Never Let Me Go*, but what I want to hypothesize here is that it is paradoxically *because* of its illusory status that it may still have a future both in Ishiguro’s fiction and contemporary fiction more widely. It is precisely religion’s privileged historical position as our ‘master fantasy’ that enables it to cling to the literary imaginary like the detritus on Kathy’s barbed-wire fence. As Slavoj Žižek has argued in a series of recent texts, for instance, the God of Christianity is not the absolute transcendental master of theological repute but one who suffers and dies in this world. For Žižek, Christ’s Crucifixion is not only the death or *kenosis* of the Christian ‘Big Other’ but of all the other Others (Man, Family, Party, Capital or any master signifier) we use to explain and redeem the meaningless chaos of history: ‘it refuses any “deeper meaning” that obfuscates the brutal reality of historical catastrophes’.⁷ If belief in the transcendental God of Christianity really is just Marxist false consciousness, Nietzschean *ressentiment* or Freudian delusion, then Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey Robbins (riffing off Žižek) contend that it is the illusion *par excellence* – the illusion that reveals the essentially illusory, projected and fetishistic condition of our relation

⁵ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

⁶ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, p. 150.

⁷ Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* pp. 54-5.

to everything we call the real.⁸ In an extension of Marcel Gauchet's famous definition, then, Christianity might perhaps be called 'the illusion of the exit from illusion'.⁹

For Žižek, this (simultaneously melancholic and triumphalist) Christo-Hegelian-Lacanian grand narrative suggests that the future of the political theological illusion might paradoxically lie in a new kind of materialism emptied of all transcendental guarantees: 'we, humans, are left with no higher Power watching over us, just with the terrible burden of freedom and responsibility for the fate of divine creation, and thus of God himself'.¹⁰ To take political theology seriously *as* an illusion in this way – as the false consciousness that, in turn, reveals the 'falsity' of all consciousness – I want to hypothesize that we might also begin to mobilize it as a kind of critical machine to expose all the other deep fiduciary investments in Big Others that circulate unnoticed within the (neo-)liberal social and cultural imaginary: family, work, service, debt and so on. If this reading of political theology is recognizably still a species of ideology critique, it is one carried out with the Lacanian twist described by Eric Santner: our goal is not simply 'to see through the theatrical and rhetorical machinery at work in political theology' to what really lies beneath but rather 'to acknowledge that there is more political theology at work in everyday life than we might have ever thought'.¹¹ In contrast to the typical interpretation of the ending of *Never Let Me Go* as a moment of total surrender – where Kathy seems to definitively abandon any hope or belief that the world could be otherwise and resign herself to her fate as a slave – we might thus be able to offer a somewhat more 'positive' counter-reading in which her passage through the political theological fantasy becomes the ground for a kind of radical *freedom*. What if Kathy's deliberate turning away from the illusion of political theology is less the symptom of her total

⁸ Clayton Crockett and Jeff Robbins, *Religion, Politics and the Earth: The New Materialism*, p. 27.

⁹ Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*. In Gauchet's account, Christianity is the 'religion of the exit from religion'.

¹⁰ Žižek and Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, p. 254.

¹¹ Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*, p. 46.

ideological capture than of her explicit refusal to make any symbolic sense of, or assign a deeper value to, the historical catastrophe unfolding in front of her?

What, then, might be the materialist future of the political theological illusion in *Never Let Me Go*? It is possible to speculate that this future might ironically be present in the novel all along if we (and perhaps Ishiguro) could but see it. As the novel's bleak conclusion makes abundantly clear, Kathy and her friends live in a world of junk: everything they own is someone else's hand-me-down, Hailsham, their supposedly 'privileged' school, is a dilapidated folly operating on a shoestring budget and they are themselves, of course, nothing but a kind of living medical waste to be disposed of once their vital organs have been removed. However, nonetheless, we might argue that – with the benefit of a Benjaminian small messianic adjustment – Ishiguro's second-hand dystopia might be rendered entirely otherwise, indeed almost utopically. To take this parallax view,¹² we begin to see that Kathy and her fellow students could perversely be said to live an everyday life that is almost 'communist': what defines their existence is neither private interest nor agency, self-preservation nor self-determination, production nor consumption, property nor capital, expenditure nor debt, but a kind of pure messianic remnant or 'waste' which exceeds their own obscene biopolitical capture. If they are indeed biopolitical slaves, we might see them as the – parodic, repressed, abject – embodiments of the affirmative theory of the slave recently proposed by Giorgio Agamben in the final volume of his *Homo Sacer* project, *The Use of Bodies* (2015). In the midst of the savage exploitation of lives, bodies and matter that is the dark heart of Ishiguro's novel, the simple everyday lives of the clones – which consists largely of play, talk, friendship, guilt-free sex, a gift economy of free exchange and empty or purposeless work – perhaps offer a glimpse of a different, and radically inappropriable, use of bodies: 'a form of life that never assumes the figure of a free subject', Agamben writes, 'of a zone of ethics entirely subtracted from strategic relationships, of an Ungovernable that is situated beyond states of domination and power relations'.¹³

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*.

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies: Homo Sacer IV*, 2, p. 108. In this volume, Agamben seeks to recuperate a liberatory 'nucleus' within Aristotle's theory of

In drawing this essay to a close, though, I would like to imagine one final future for the political theological illusion in *Never Let Me Go*. It is rarely observed in the (now exhaustive) commentaries upon Benjamin's Ninth Thesis that, in Paul Klee's original drawing of the *Angelus Novus*, the Angel actually stares, not backwards or sideways as one might expect of someone staring at the past, but directly *outwards* from the frame – which is to say directly into the eyes of the viewer or spectator themselves. Against the grain of many interpretations, then, Benjamin's Angel may be less a proxy for the spectator's own gaze than a symptom of what Lacan famously calls the 'object gaze': we do not see through his angelic eyes, so much as we are seen *by* him.¹⁴ To re-read Benjamin's famous claim that the Angel's face is turned towards the past in the context of this reversal of perspective, we are thus driven to a disturbing conclusion: we are not the angel but the dead, the damned, the historical detritus who are the true cost of liberal, social democratic or 'neo-liberal' progress. Yet if my political theological constellation between Benjamin and Ishiguro has any purchase at all, then we might read the poignant conclusion of *Never Let Me Go* as an equivalent shock to any superior gesture of readerly pity or disappointment. If we readers are accustomed to asking ourselves why Kathy accepts her fate so passively, why she does not try to resist or escape her death sentence as we like to think we would do if we found ourselves in her position, then this reading turns the question back on us and exposes our own deep fiduciary commitment to the Big Other – our automatic belief that there *is* something else to do, somewhere better we are 'supposed' to be, that 'life', no matter how abject or servile, is always to be preferred to death. What if Kathy – like Benjamin's angel – is actually pitying *us*? What if our demand that Kathy be a good liberal subject like us, act in her own best interest and secure her physical existence for as long as possible, only proves (as Jane Elliott argues) our own tragic complicity with the biopolitical logic of infinite self-preservation that leads to the production and destruction of the clones in the first

natural slavery from what he sees as its anachronistic and moralizing philosophical reception history.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

place?¹⁵ What if the real reason why the novel is so disturbing to its readers is that Kathy and her friends seem to find a terrible kind of freedom in their very *refusal* of private interest, agency, self-preservation, self-determination, in short, the entire architecture of (neo-)liberal subjectivity? In Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, I think one final future for the political theological illusion may be to expose the illusion of a future – the storm called progress – that is liberalism itself.

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¹⁵ In making this argument, I am indebted to Elliott's reading of Ishiguro's novel in terms of what she calls 'neo-liberal personhood'. See Elliott, 'Suffering Agency', p. 96-8.

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