

Copying, cloning, and creativity: reading Kazuo Ishiguro's 'Never Let Me Go'.

"Imitation cannot go above its model." Ralph Waldo Emerson: Divinity School Address.

Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's (2005) dystopian novel *Never Let Me Go* is set in 1990s Britain, in a boarding school called Hailsham. Through the adult voice of one of the children remembering at her time there, the reader gradually learns that Kathy and her friends have been raised as artificially-generated clones, manufactured to provide body parts for 'normals' in the world. The narrative deploys flashback and hindsight in order to interrogate the essentialism of biological origins, raising complex questions concerning the relationship between memory, copying, creativity and selfhood. These topics are discussed through a psychoanalytic reading of Ishiguro's novel where I draw on Apter's (2011) ideas about textual translation, Laplanche's (1999) notion of 'afterwardsness' and clinical material to explore the various ways in which memory and identification are implicated in the development of personal identity.

Key words: afterwardsness, après-coup, cloning, copying, identification, Ishiguro, Laplanche, memory, psychoanalysis.

Introduction.

Growing up in 1970s London, I wanted to be a violinist. When I was nine years old, my parents bought me a cheap violin, and I started, very painfully, to master the difficult art of making the kind of sound that other people could bear to listen to. Later, as a teenager training to be a violinist, I was enthralled to hear a piece of violin music written by the early twentieth century Viennese composer/violinist Fritz Kreisler, and I immediately went off to my local library – no iPods in those days! - to see if I could find more. Eventually, I located an early recording of Kreisler himself playing his own compositions: *Liebesleid*, *Liebesfreud*, *Schon Rosmarin*, *Tambourin Chinois*, *Praeludium and Allegro*, *Humoresque*, miniature gems that sparkled through the hiss and crackle on my old gramophone. I listened to them avidly. But what mesmerised me was not only the music; it was the quality of the sound that Kreisler drew from his violin, a quality that even now I can conjure up in my mind, its precise tone and timbre utterly distinctive, like a fingerprint. Smoky, woody, mellow, warm and flavoursome, Kreisler's inimitable sound was redolent of a faded but fascinating and romantic fin-de-siècle Viennese era that I knew nothing of, but was utterly enchanted by. The sound of his violin was like chocolate cream. I wanted to eat him up.

And indeed, I proceeded to eat him up over a period of several years. Hour after hour, week in, week out, after school and at weekends, I was listening to his records over and over again. My ears became a conduit through which I was absorbing sheer magic. I thought that if I heard it for long enough – and if I practised hard enough - then, surely, that same enchantment, now installed within the bones and cartilage of my ears, would somehow flow out through my fingers and bow, replicating the rich, sophisticated sensuousness that Kreisler incarnated for me at that time. Eventually, with all that practice, I got to play some of those wonderful pieces myself. But what I really sought, more than anything else, was to draw that same quality of sound from my own little violin, to cast that magic spell myself. To make my violin sing in the way that his did; to charm, mesmerise and enthrall those who were listening to me in the same way as he had captivated his audiences. Such hubris could never succeed of course. It was only as an adult, long after I had given up my dream of becoming a violinist, that I recognised how important it had been for me to try to

imitate that fabulous sound. My protracted efforts to absorb, ingest, soak up Kreisler until he actually became part of me, part of my cell structure, I now see as an early attempt at creatively establishing a sound for myself, an effort to find my own musical voice through the voice of another.

'Identification', says Fuss (1995), 'is that detour through the other that defines a self' (p. 2). Unwittingly, we absorb aspects of each other, unconsciously incorporating the tone, the flavour, the characteristics and mannerisms, the emotional stamp of the other whose ghostly presence becomes threaded through the fabric of our own subjectivity. Self-identity presupposes, is predicated on, a kind of permeability. Indeed, this extraordinary psychological porousness, says Freud (1921) 'is the earliest and original form of emotional tie.....the ego assumes the characteristic of the object' (p. 107). In 1917, Freud had already discussed how, in melancholia, the ego identifies with the lost object, in this way magically retaining and preserving its link to the absent person. He was subsequently to see in this elegiac process of ego formation a more general feature of the individual's development: 'the character of the ego', he writes in 1923, 'is a precipitate of abandoned object cathexes and...it contains the history of those object choices' (p. 29). We are all, according to Freud, in thrall to, appropriated by the other, and this insertion of the other into the self is constitutive: at its inauguration, the self is signed and sealed, as it were, by its commemorative ties to the other.

Training as a psychoanalyst, these themes – of identification and copying – continue to fascinate me. Perhaps this is why I have been drawn to the notion of the clone, that literary device so frequently used to explore and interrogate notions of identity and selfhood. In 1932, Huxley took up the idea in *Brave New World* by describing his concept of 'Bokanovsky's process' where human embryos are split to produce identical gamma, delta and epsilon drones, engineered to perform menial labour for the superior alphas and betas. Later writers, such as Alvin Toffler (1970) in *Future Shock* and Ira Levin (1976) in *The Boys from Brazil* wrote about a future where human beings would be able to make carbon copies of themselves. More recently, Kazuo Ishiguro's (2005) novel *Never Let Me Go* offers a dystopian myth that interrogates the nature of time, memory and creativity using the fiction of an artificially-generated group of children without origins who are manufactured in order to service others. Ishiguro's densely textured writing raises multiple ethical, spiritual and psychological issues, woven into a bleakly beautiful story that explores and amplifies what Dennett (1976) has called 'conditions of personhood'.

It's probably fair to say that the analyst, like the novelist, is also concerned with 'conditions of personhood'; with illuminating and describing the ways in which we come to be fully human, as well as the difficulties of recognising the other as human too. Indeed, the plethora of psychoanalytic terms and theories attempting to label and account for the process of identity formation is testament to our difficulties in articulating how we arrive at a subjective experience of ourselves in relation to others. In this paper, then, I want to approach this complex topic through a reading of Ishiguro's novel, using his story of cloned children to explore the relationship between copying and creativity. Along the way, I will draw on Freud and Laplanche, as well as clinical material, to consider the importance of memory and identification in the development of self-hood.

Never Let Me Go.

Ishiguro's novel revolves round Kathy H., a 31 year old woman remembering her time at a boarding school called Hailsham where she grew up with two particular friends, Ruth and Tommy. Whilst we hear this was in Britain 'in the late 1990s', it soon becomes clear that Kathy and her friends inhabit a world that only partially parallels the contemporary Britain with which we are familiar. From the

outset, for example, Kathy's incomplete name presents us with a question about her lineage and her background. Indeed, the children at Hailsham appear to have no homes or parents of their own; the teachers who look after them are referred to as 'guardians' and they, in turn, are called 'normals' by the children. Inhabiting the limited awareness of the children, the reader only gradually comes to understand that the children's lives are dictated by the circumstances of their status as clones: they have been created in order to donate organs for 'normals' in the outside world. At sixteen, they will leave Hailsham and spend some time in an intermediate establishment before being called up, at first to be 'carers' for other 'donors', and then to donate organs themselves. Their lives will be cut short after the fourth operation to harvest their organs: they will 'complete' – die – in young adulthood. Only Miss Lucy, one of the guardians at Hailsham, is prepared to hint at what is to come:

'the problem as I see it is that you've been told and not told. 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 go 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 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. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided'.

Against this surreal backdrop, the void, the aching emptiness and the sense of dimly-glimpsed loss at the heart of the children's lives is only slowly and incrementally revealed. Like the children themselves, we as readers are *'told and not told'*: the pace of our understanding is rationed, not because Ishiguro is a latter-day Agatha Christie, but because he wants us to inhabit his characters' gradually dawning awareness of their fate. References are oblique, hidden: visible only in the characters' actions, voiced in a deceptively understated prose. Through the lens of Kathy's evolving consciousness, the reader, along with the children, begins to realise the significance of the narrated events, the reasons why they are different; and there is an awakening appreciation of their fate as well as a recognition, through memory, of half-understood feelings and anxieties that were previously felt but now are recognised and acknowledged. We slowly come to realise that the children's position is not only a status predicated on and constituted by loss, it is one that encompasses a profound discarding of their subjectivity. Indeed, a quiet theme running throughout the book continually alludes to the role of rubbish, its textual unobtrusiveness mirroring the children's occluded awareness of their status as disposable items themselves. The toys and clothes that are brought to the school for the excitedly-anticipated 'Sales' are all items that have been rejected or discounted by the outside world. The 'Exchanges' that take place between students four times a year –mirroring the four 'donations' that they will all be expected to make before 'completing' – involve 'buying' each other's paintings and sculptures made from old bits of trash and garbage such as bottle tops and crushed tin cans: a recycling of personal possessions that foreshadows the future recycling of their own body parts.

It is within this desolate setting that Ishiguro sponsors the role of art as signifier of the very interiority that the children are assumed to lack. Art is valued highly at Hailsham, and the mysterious 'Madame' visits the school to select the children's best creations. Not understanding why their artwork is taken away, Kathy starts to pick up stories from other students and snippets from her teachers, eventually piecing together a story about Madame's 'Gallery' which she stocks with the children's art in order to prove to the outside world that the children have souls. The hypothetical status of the Gallery - *'everyone talked about it as though it existed, though in truth none of us knew*

for certain that it did' - here mirrors the uncertain ontological status of the children, and the perpetual question-mark that hovers over the existence of their souls.

The unstated losses that reverberate through this novel are embodied by two central interrelated fantasies that come to dominate the children's lives. The first is a fantasy amongst all the pupils at Hailsham about lost property. What the children call light-heartedly the 'lost corner' in the school is the place they go to if they lose a jumper or a book, or if they find anyone else's possessions. But hearing in a geography lesson one day about the 'lost corner' of England – Norfolk – the children develop a story amongst themselves about how this place is where all the lost things in life end up. Norfolk comes to assume a mythical, Atlantis-like status in their imaginations; it is both the site of lost hopes and the location of possible futures. In adulthood, as Ruth awaits her final 'donation', she is consoled by this reassuring idea:

'What was important to us, as Ruth said one evening when we were sitting in that tiled room in Dover, looking out at the sunset, was that when we lost something precious, and we'd looked and looked and still couldn't find it, then we didn't have to be completely heartbroken. We still had that last bit of comfort, thinking one day, when we were grown up, and we were free to travel around the country we could always go and find it again in Norfolk'.

But myth becomes reality after the children leave Hailsham for the Cottages, a halfway home where they can potentially enjoy rather more freedom with other teenagers before they are called up to start donating. At this point, Ruth and Tommy develop their relationship, leaving Kathy, who loves and understands Tommy, to manage her jealousy and her own sexual yearnings. But it is at the Cottages that the second fantasy, that of the 'possible', becomes elaborated:

'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 modelled from. That's why, when you went out there yourself – in the towns, shopping centres, transport cafes – you kept an eye out for 'possibles' – the people who might have been the models for you and your friends'.

Kathy's studiously bland voice disguises what is here an acute rendition of the orphan's desperate search for the lost parent. In the absence of a narrative of origins, of belonging, the children try to invent their pasts by speculating about the human model from which they believe they were made; in this way, they also create a narrative of the kind of life they have the potential to lead and the kind of person they would like to become. Hearing from some friends that a 'model' for Ruth has been spotted in nearby Cromer, - in Norfolk - Ruth, Tommy and Kathy decide to see for themselves if this is really Ruth's 'possible'. Glimpsing a woman through the glass door of an office they follow her with great excitement and trepidation as she walks to an art gallery. It is in this gallery, not coincidentally, amongst the pictures and works of art that publicly announce and acknowledge the presence of interiority, of souls in 'normals', they all realise, after all, that this woman cannot be Ruth's 'possible'. Her physical present and voice are 'too close', as if the mirage of the 'possible' simply fizzles out in the face of brute reality.

'But now, in the gallery, the woman was too close, much closer than we'd ever really wanted. And the more we heard her and looked at her, the less she seemed like Ruth. It was a feeling that grew among us almost tangibly, and I could tell that Ruth, absorbed in a picture on the other side of the room, was feeling it as much as anyone'.

As they all leave the gallery, Ruth's disappointment and disillusion are palpable. The spell has been broken; the illusion fades. It is as if the subjunctive mood intrinsic to the value of the 'possible' has abruptly shifted into the present indicative, where its hypothetical status can be violently disconfirmed. Rejecting all comfort from her friends, Ruth furiously dismisses the idea that they could ever be modelled from someone 'normal' and insists that they are all made only from trash:

'If you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that's where you'll find where we all come from'.

But something is found in Norfolk after all. After Ruth storms off, Tommy and Kathy start searching the shops for a precious cassette tape that Kathy lost at Hailsham. It is of a song that she used to play over and over again as a pupil in the school, its lyrics expressing Kathy's unspoken, unfulfillable yearning to experience an intimate connection with a mother and, in turn, to hold her own baby close to her:

'I just waited for the bit that went: 'baby, baby, never let me go'. And what I'd imagined was a woman who'd been told she couldn't have babies, who'd really, really wanted them all her life. Then there's a sort of miracle and she has a baby and she holds this baby very close to her and walks around singing: 'Baby, baby never let me go' partly because she's so happy, but also because she's so afraid something will happen that the baby will get ill or be taken away from her'.

Whilst Ruth painfully finds nothing lovable in the rubbish she assumes she is made from, Kathy and Tommy, searching the odds and ends in a nearby jumble shop, find the lost cassette tape amongst all the unwanted odds and ends. The discovery of this cassette – something loved has been found after all in the recycled rubbish - provides the hope they need to cement and develop the love they have always had for each other. It is at this point the pre-ordained lives of the three main characters now inexorably gather momentum. Over the next few months, Ruth will be 'called up' to donate and soon Tommy, too, starts to undergo operations, whilst Kathy's role remains, for the moment at least, that of gifted 'carer'.

Having been disillusioned about ever finding their 'possibles', Kathy and Tommy subsequently desperately seek more time to be together before they too succumb to their fate. Having heard a rumour in Hailsham that those in love can seek a deferral before they have to start donating, Tommy suggests that they need to seek out their old 'guardians' at Hailsham, to find out if there is any more time for them:

'Suppose it's true. Suppose two people say they're truly in love and they want extra time to be together. Then you see, Kath, there has to be a way to judge if they're really telling the truth. That they aren't just saying they're in love, just to defer their donations....Madame, or whoever it is, they need something to go on...She can find the art they've done over years and years...Don't forget Kath, what she's got reveals our souls. She could decide for herself what's a good match and what's just a stupid crush'.

In the end, Ishiguro bleakly reminds us there is no more time. Tommy and Kathy's fates are fully elucidated when they finally return to their guardians, Madame and Miss Emily, to ask for a deferral. This time, the unavoidable and disillusioning realities of facts and the limits of time are instated. The contingency of the children's existence as clones is underlined – their lives have been a product of their time and the outside world's interests; they must now live out the purpose for which they were born: *'There was a certain climate and now it's gone. You have to accept that sometimes that's how*

things happen in the world. People's opinions, their feelings, they go one way, then the other. It just so happens you grew up at a certain point in the process'.

The guardians attempt to exonerate themselves, saying they had the children's best interests at heart; that it would have done no good to burden them with the knowledge of what was to come. Finally, Madame tells Kathy that she remembers seeing her as a little girl, singing to herself along with the cassette tape, and explains: *'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'.* The loss of Kathy and Tommy's future together is absolute. Tommy returns to undergo his final donation and Kathy remains, a carer to the end, awaiting the moment when she will need to start donating herself.

Copying and cloning.

Copying, of course, is something we can't help doing. The capacity for imitation seems central to notions of what we think it means to be human. *'..it is an instinct of human beings, from childhood, to engage in mimesis'* writes Aristotle, *'indeed, this distinguishes them from other animals: man is the most mimetic of all, and it is through mimesis that he develops his earliest understandings'* (p. 38). Perhaps it is for this reason that psychoanalysis has always had theories about copying. Probably the best known of these is the Winnicottian distinction between the 'true' and the 'false' self. While the true self is based on an experience, or an illusion, of omnipotence provided by the 'good enough' (m)other, the false self derives from a failure of such an illusion and results in the precocious use of the mind as an alternative to dependence on a reliable caretaker. Over time, the false self starts to dominate, with compliance as *'the main feature, with imitation as a speciality'* (1960, p. 147). Identification, then, takes the place of authenticity – *'there may'* admits Winnicott, *'be some almost personal living through imitation'* – but the infant has now been seduced into a kind of pretence, a fabricated existence where he or she has to comply with what is required and identify with - become 'like' - the person who runs the show.

Ishiguro has always been interested in the various ways in which we become 'like' someone else. Indeed, his strategies of description and narration aim to mimic the characteristics of the culture and people represented – something particularly evident, for example, in the English voice of Stevens, the butler in his earlier novel, *The Remains of the Day*. Ishiguro's interest in simulation reaches an apotheosis in *Never Let Me Go*, where the children are not only copies or clones, their very existence is predicated on imitation. Without parents, they have no alternative but to conform unquestioningly to the rules and mores of Hailsham. Without friends or family in the outside world, they are forced to understand others and make relationships by copying the behaviour, mannerisms and gestures of each other and from those they watch on TV. As Kathy tells Ruth, who has picked up a way of slapping Tommy on the arm, a habit she has learned from her friends, who themselves have acquired it from a television comedy, *'It's not what people really do out there in normal life....It looks daft, the way you copy everything they do'*. These second-hand gestures and behaviours, akin to the second-hand copies of cassette tapes, toys and objects that they receive from the outside world, are mirrored by that flat, bland, apparently untroubled voice of Kathy. Frank Kermode's (2005) critique of Ishiguro's narrative style as a kind of *'dear-diary prose'* that *'surely reduces one's interest'* I think rather misses the point: it is in fact an evocation of the constraints and mimetic conditions of Kathy's very existence. The clichés and colloquialisms she deploys articulate her experience in the manner of a schoolgirl who can only express herself by copying the words and jargon of her friends. It is precisely this notion that clones as well as humans are copiers that destabilises any clear

distinction between the two. Indeed, this blurring of boundaries between clone and original ensures that the very category of originality, and the essentialism it assumes, is contested.

This issue is closely related to the difficulties of translating a text and Apter (2011) has examined some of the epistemological and ethical issues that arise where there appears to be no original language or text on which to base a particular translation:

'The reader is either placed in a netherworld of "translatese" that floats between original and translation, or confronted with a situation in which the translation mislays the original, absconding to some other world of textuality that retains the original only as fictive pretext. In both instances, the identity of what a translation is is tested; for if a translation is not a form of textual predicate, indexically pointing to a primary text, then what is it?' (p. 162).

Ishiguro confronts the children with precisely this dilemma. They are faced with the task of living a life in which they feel they have mislaid their origins and, in these circumstances, the *'fictive pretext'* of the *'possible'* is retained in order to sustain the notion that there was such an original: to maintain the idea that they are predicated on something – someone - with a more ontologically valuable interior, perhaps, that would render them more *'real'*, more significant in the world's eyes. *'We all of us, to varying degrees, believed that 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'*. Not surprisingly then, as Apter (2011) points out, the notion of a copy without an original raises ethical and ontological questions: for if the copy is not that which is based on an original form, what is it?

Time, memory and translation.

Ishiguro invites the reader to consider this question and join the children on their search for self-understanding and identity by means of a narrative deploying flashbacks, hindsight and memories. But memories are not isomorphic with events. When we remember the past, we are not simply retrieving the unvarnished *'facts'* of a situation. *'Our memories are card-indexes consulted'*, grumbles Cyril Connolly (1920), *'and then put back in disorder by authorities whom we do not control'*. Laplanche's name for this disorder – his French translation, in fact, of Freud's (1918) notion of *nachtraglichkeit* – was *'après coup'* or *'afterwardsness'*, an expression denoting the way in which prior events come to acquire retrospective meaning and significance. Just as Kathy is revisiting, rethinking and retrieving the events of her childhood at Hailsham in the light of subsequent events, so too Laplanche suggests *'the subject revises past events at a later date (nachtraglich) and that it is the revision which invests them with significance and even with efficacy of pathogenic force'* (1999, p. 112). Laplanche was trying to resolve a long-standing dilemma for psychoanalysis: whether the past determines the present - as in Freud's defence of the *'real'* primal scene in his case study of the *'Wolfman'* - or whether the present retroactively determines the past, via reconstruction of prior events that come to acquire the status of truth for the individual. Laplanche's position points to the importance of the adult's message – the *'enigmatic signifier'* as he calls it - that is implanted into the individual, the child, and the way in which that unconscious message will always be subsequently translated and reinterpreted:

'This past cannot be a purely factual one, an unprocessed or raw 'given'. It contains rather in an immanent fashion something that comes before – a message from the other. It is impossible therefore to put forward a purely hermeneutic position on this – that is to say, that everyone interprets their past according to their present – because the past already has something deposited in it that demands to be deciphered, which is the message of the other person'. (1999 p. 265).

According to Laplanche, the child cannot help but assimilate the enigmatic, traumatizing, unspoken messages conveyed by the adult. Like Kathy and her friends at Hailsham, we are all, somehow, *'told and not told'*; as children, we have no means of understanding or translating what has been unconsciously conveyed to us, even though, as Tommy eventually realises, *'at some level you always knew'*. And it is these untranslatable communications – the residue of the Other who is always already there - that form the core of the child's own unconscious, and which the child subsequently attempts to master, reinterpret and retranslate throughout development. The shudder that 'Madame' is always suppressing in the children's presence, for example, is emblematic of the tacit message that they are somehow different, repulsive, abject: an unconscious communication the children attempt to master and represent via their artwork and the redemptive potential they believe it holds for them.

In this model of the self, it can be seen that the adult who implants these enigmatic messages is equally unconscious of what he or she is doing to the child and of what is being conveyed. This means that there is no clear relationship between the parental unconscious and the child's – no direct link between the past and the present. There is, instead, a *'profound reshaping'*, says Laplanche (1999), where, in adulthood, we rework and revise the messages or memories that we have already interpreted: we can only translate our translations, as it were. It is as if we thought we were pressing the 'save' function on the computer keyboard, whereas we now realise we were always pressing 'save as'. As Modell (1999) suggests, our memories are constantly being overwritten, rethought, reinvented throughout our lifetime.

The interesting thing about this translation model of the unconscious is that it unsettles what we mean by an original, correct, 'true' memory as much as it debunks any notion of an original or 'true' self. Indeed, like Apter's notion of a translation without textual predicate, it suggests that in questions of personal identity there is no original, privileged or 'true' self to refer back to, simply a series of translations or versions of the self that reproduce *'not an original text, but an afterlife cloned from the (lost) life of the original'* (p.171). Drawing on Benjamin's (1923) essay on 'The Task of the Translator', Apter goes on to argue that the status of a translation depends on whether we condemn it as a *'tissue of plagiarized fragments'*, (ominously, this is exactly how the children are viewed by the outside world that harvests their tissues and organs for its own medical benefit) or whether we can permit the traditional significance of originality to yield to broader considerations of the way translation can offer continued life and fresh meaning to a now obsolete original. For the children at Hailsham, these are not simply academic issues; they are acute ontological dilemmas. What is the value and meaning of a life that has lost its origins? Can a person who is merely a 'plagiarized fragment' have a soul? And can there be - could there be - anything unique and distinctive within the child who is only a copy?

Copying and psychotherapy.

A therapist whose work I supervise told me about a young girl that she had recently started working with. The girl had come for help as she was worried that her relationship with her boyfriend was breaking down due to her persistent lying and deceitfulness. She would often lie about where she was; occasionally, and rather curiously, she would steal her boyfriend's clothes. On each occasion, she would eventually reluctantly admit what she had done, weather the upset and recriminations from her boyfriend, and then beg forgiveness. However, it was clear that this pattern of behaviour was now wearing rather thin, and she realised that her boyfriend was becoming increasingly impatient of her dishonesty and unreliability. My supervisee found out that this girl had grown up in what sounded like a rather cold and loveless family, dominated by a charismatic father from whom

she had despaired of ever getting attention. The stealing and the lying had started when she was a child – indeed, she used to steal her father’s clothes - partly, it seemed, as a way of eliciting a response from what she felt was an uninvolved parent. After persistently stealing money and clothes from her parents as an adolescent, she eventually left the family home at eighteen to live with this boyfriend.

My supervisee described how this young girl appeared to be ‘like a robot’, clearly unwilling to engage or discuss her feelings in much detail. During sessions, there was a curious feeling of lifelessness and monotony, and as therapist, my supervisee often felt rather despairing as if no real work was being done or indeed attempted. Her efforts to show concern or interest were generally met with an air of rather baffled astonishment that there could be any question of a real problem and simple comments or interpretations about her situation resulted in frank, occasionally belligerent, disagreement. The sessions felt at the dead end, and, not surprisingly, my supervisee was feeling a mixture of despair, anger and hopelessness, bordering on futility. After about three or four dismaying months of this, during which time of course we considered the usual analytic repertoire of possibilities, including the countertransference significance of my supervisee’s feelings, an unexpected event occurred at the end of one therapy session. Just as she was leaving, the patient hastily handed my supervisee a hand-written note, asking her to read it to herself during the week. At this point, of course, there was no time to discuss the clandestine nature of this communication, and my supervisee duly read the note after her patient had slipped out of the room. In the note, her patient, clearly upset and distressed, said that she had been feeling awful about the fact that she had, for some weeks now, been secretly tape-recording each session. She was feeling extremely guilty about concealing this from her therapist, but said that she wanted to remember everything that she, the therapist, said during the session so that she could think about at home on her own.

At our next supervision session, my supervisee was indignant. She made much of the lying and deception that had taken place, and indeed felt that she had been royally hoodwinked. Just as her patient’s father and boyfriend had been furious at being lied to, so too the patient’s ‘acting out’, as it is rather unsympathetically called in analytic terminology, seemed unconsciously to invite exactly the same kind of censure from her therapist. Indeed, my supervisee felt that she had been on the receiving end of a particularly unwelcome sort of con-trick, and it took some time before we could think calmly about what had been going on. We could say that the surreptitious recording of the session embodies a very particular kind of copying, a piece of what Freud calls ‘repetition compulsion’: the unthinking replication of an earlier pattern of behaviour that is incarnated in action rather than remembered or symbolised in words. But in the other kind of copying that I am thinking about here, it’s as if this young girl is continually duplicating or re-creating a version of her session, or her therapist, that she can then take away, mull over, think about and make something of herself. Like the clothes she steals from her father, it is as if she is taking what she can in order to make something of a person that she feels she cannot get from them face-to-face. In the language of Winnicott, then, we could say that she is attacking and destroying the object; as if, by taping or stealing the session and ruthlessly creating her own private version of the therapist, she will then have something that she can secretly possess and use during the week.

From cloning to creativity.

Taking someone’s clothes – dressing up as someone else, as it were, – is a form of imaginative identification. Through imitation, we become ‘like’ the other, borrowing their traits, characteristics and mannerisms. These conscious and unconscious identifications, suggests Freud, are the building

blocks of our identity, they form the character of the ego. The ego is *'altered by identification'*, its nature is changed by absorbing or withdrawing the other into itself. Indeed, drawing on the clinical example above, we might say that we all clone ourselves from one another, borrowing or stealing bits and pieces of each other like a jackdaw to build a self, or an ego, within. But, as Kathy comes to realise, as did I, remembering a younger self practising the violin, copying alone is not enough. We must be more than our identifications; we must create something new around the internal residue, the kernel of the other. T. S. Eliot, writing about the Elizabethan playwright, Philip Massinger in 1921, argues:

"One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion" (p. 114).

If all we are is our identifications, if we are only copies of each other, we miss the opportunity to make something unique and new of ourselves. As Richard Rorty (1989) points out, the realisation that one is merely a facsimile or reproduction, the Bloomian *'horror at finding oneself to be a copy or a replica'* (p. 24), is to fail as a human being. Like Bloom's strong poet, Rorty argues that we need to be aware of our debt to those from whom we have stolen, those whom we imitate, but then go on creatively to *'misread'* in order to rework it into something new, fresh, original. In this way, what we take in of someone – a song, a piece of writing, an analyst's words - needs to be absorbed and remodelled: we weld our theft of otherness, as it were, into the fabric of our own subjectivity, in order to create a self that is valid on its own terms.

What then is the function of the *'possible'*? Its magnificently subjunctive status seems to provide a fantasy of origins, a promise of authenticity that the children feel will permit them to weave a myth about themselves that transcends their pitiful status as disposable items bred for the convenience of the outside world. So Ishiguro is here sustaining the narrative of a putative parent model in order to question the very notion of originality and its validity in establishing identity: in order to interrogate the basis of a shared humanity, and whether humanity can – or even should - be established by reference merely to biological origins. Recall that Kathy's search for her missing cassette tape ends during her visit to Norfolk with Ruth and Tommy, when she and Tommy find it in the second hand shop. Tommy is gripped by the possibility that it is the original, the *'actual'* tape, an obsession that mirrors Ruth's determination to find her original parent model on this same visit to Norfolk. However, Kathy is unsure about its status. Whilst similarly fascinated by the possibility of finding her parent model, she eventually realises that the tape's originality is not essential:

"I really appreciated having the tape-and that song-back again. Even then, it was mainly a nostalgia thing, and today, if I happen to get the tape out and look at it, it brings back memories of that afternoon in Norfolk every bit as much as it does our Hailsham days."

For Tommy, finding the real, original version is what is important, allowing him to sustain a fantasy of recovering the original lost object. But Kathy sees that what is important is the way the tape – even if it is a copy – can generate memories and feelings: it sponsors emotional experience and in that sense is as valuable as any original. Whether the tape is the actual one she lost at Hailsham, or whether it is one of thousands of copies is irrelevant: its value lies not in its origins but rather in how it can be used creatively to develop and add substance to her own identity, her own memories and her own self-narrative. In this way, the value of the tape mirrors the value of the children

themselves: the terrible question of their humanity, an ontological status they believe can be secured only by finding their 'possible', is surely secondary to their creative capacity to engender love and desire amongst themselves: to generate stories, meaning and memories from these emotional experiences and to feel loss.

For Kathy, the copy that is her memory is ultimately more important, more durable and more meaningful than the events on which the copy is based. Towards the end of the novel, she disagrees with one of the 'donors' she is caring for who claims: *'Memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly'* (p. 261-2). *'But I don't go along with that'* she argues. *'The memories I value most, I don't ever see them fading. I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won't lose my memories of them'* (p. 262). Whilst this could be seen as akin to what John Mullan calls a 'sentimental' notion of how we console ourselves after someone's death, Ishiguro seems rather to be privileging Kathy's reworking of her experiences, the way she has created a sense of attachment and belonging out of the grim realities of her time at Hailsham. These original experiences have now been supplanted by the copy that is her reworked memory. It is this that she will 'never let go', that she will sustain until she, like Tommy and the donors she continues to care for, 'completes'.

Conclusion

'To be in the subjunctive mode', claims Bruner (1986), *'is to be trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties'* (p. 26). It is this perpetual Laplanchean ingenuity – the capacity to refashion, renew and make meaning from that which is second hand or recycled, that I think Ishiguro is gesturing towards as the hallmark of humanity. It is not the children's biological relationship to the 'possible' that secures their status as human beings, but their capacity to create or invent the 'possible' out of need and desire. It is not their artwork that establishes their souls, but their persistent attempts to weave a story about the redeeming power of art and love in their lives. It is surely in refashioning and redescribing their abject circumstances and curtailed futures, like Kathy's story about the singer of the song *'never let me go, oh baby baby, never let me go'*, that they refute their status as copies without a soul and establish their ontological correspondence with the reader.

Indeed, the chatty way in which Kathy addresses the reader – *'I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham...'* thus disguises what I see as the central, disquieting premise of the novel: that Kathy is addressing us as readers who are 'in the know', who are *clones like herself*. So it is not that Ishiguro is attempting to make an ethical distinction between humans and clones by suggesting that 'we' are somehow more 'real', 'true' or 'authentic' than 'they' are; and it is not only that he is, as the critic James Wood suggests, asking us to consider the parallels between the futility of the children's foreshortened lives and the futility of our own. Rather, I suggest he is defining our humanity precisely in terms of our kinship with clones – suggesting that we are all copies of one sort or another (or copies of copies), because there was never anything original there in the first place.

The promiscuous nature of our identifications, the contingency of our sources of selfhood are, claims Oliver Sacks (2013), *'a paradoxical strength.....indifference to source allows us to assimilate what we read, what we are told, what others say and think and write and paint, as intensely and richly as if they were primary experiences.....'* And so I find concealed in the bleakness of Ishiguro's fable of the clone living out a brief, pre-ordained life a more hopeful message: that we too can find and use all sorts of things and people for our own self-fashioning; that these assorted identifications can form the basis of a self that does not have to be fixed or pre-determined by our biological origins, but can instead be updated, changed, transformed; that the stories and memories we create for ourselves are more important than the fixed narratives other people decide we should live by; and

that we may, after all, in Adam Phillips' (2006) beautiful phrase, be 'more like clouds than stars' (p.142). Of course, the fact that all these transformative possibilities may be, and frequently are, constrained by genetics, culture, class and gender only renders Ishiguro's dystopian world an even more telling parallel with our own.

Back in 1970s London, practising my violin, the pleasures - and complexities - of reading Ishiguro were yet to come. But in adulthood, I find myself remembering Kreisler and I recall the intensity with which I tried to emulate the sound of his lovely, lively, singing strings. I realise now that I was looking for an imaginary starting point; I needed him as a musical 'possible'. Thinking about my psychoanalytic training through Ishiguro's eyes, I realise too that I have needed my own analyst as a 'possible', a necessary fictive pretext around which I can dream up and experience new emotional origins: a provisional starting point, perhaps, for reworking memory, desire and subjectivity, for letting go of old stories and unwanted identifications; for crafting and re-crafting, yet again, something new within a borrowed self.

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