On Being Soulless

At the climax of Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*, as the facts of her circumstance are being revealed to her, the narrator asks, “Why did you have to prove a thing like that? Did someone think we didn’t have souls?” (260). That the existence of her soul should be taken to be self-evident has come to constitute something of a commonplace among commentators on the novel. That her soul’s existence might be considered a question at all arises from the fact that she is a clone. To suggest that this clone, Kathy H., and the many others who populate the novel may be something other than fully human, that they may lack “souls”—to suggest, indeed, that one might “have to prove a thing like that”—lands the critic in an uncomfortable alliance with the clearly cruel society that emerges in the negative space of the narrative. The novel seems to demand that the reader endow the clones with humanity, lest she find herself on the wrong side of an ethical divide, aligned with a social logic that would authorize the cultivation of populations of human clones for the sole purpose of harvesting their organs. Needless to say, one would be wise to think twice before taking this leap, and it is a leap few critics have seen fit to take.

*Never Let Me Go* is narrated by Kathy H., but it was also, it is suggested, written by her. She introduces herself in the first lines with name, age, and occupation: she is Kathy H., a thirty-one year old so-called “carer” who nurses other clones through the process of organ donation, and her document is addressed to carers like herself. The reader is frequently interpellated as a fellow carer by the text, and in these invitations to identification one is presented with a choice: either identify with Kathy, answer the call as also a carer and thus *also a clone*—and then to deny clones humanity would be to deny one’s own—or resist this call, distantiate oneself from the category of clone, delineate the boundary of humanity around oneself, and fail to hear this story properly: to refuse identification with clones is to misread the story by omission, and thus
one is quickly trapped. The choice is practically made in advance: humanity for all, even if it requires entertaining the possibility that one has something in common with a clone (which, of course, one does), is far and away a more pleasant program than the alternative, which entails tacit endorsement of a social logic of dehumanization.

It is, I suspect, these perils that account for the critical eagerness to assert a total continuity between humans and clones of them. The critical literature on the novel largely takes for granted that clones are humans, insofar as it does not take account of their being clones at all.¹ It appears to be self-evident—indeed, it goes without saying—that the clones in this story lack any ontological distinction from the other humans in it, and further still, that they are representative of—that they refer to—all human actors, fictional or real, whose lives take shape in a post-war, post-industrial context. The quick collapse of cloned and non-cloned humans misses the opportunity that the novel presents, in its obsession with the relationships between originals and copies, to examine the complexities of the relationship between the human and its copies, one such copy being the literary character. One way of approaching the relationship between these analogous dissonances—between original and copy, human and character—is by considering the novel’s relationship to genre, insofar as genre sets the parameters by which we read different modes of literary representation. There is wide-ranging uncertainty about how to generically characterize Never Let Me Go, and reviewers and critics have collectively aggregated a broad and, often, apparently contradictory set of terms for classifying its genre: science fiction, bildungsroman, gothic novel, dystopian fiction, satire, fictional memoir, and romance are just a few. I would add one more to the list: the nineteenth-century realist social-problem novel.

One might quite reasonably object that there is nothing farther from realism than a counterfactual memoir about post-war England penned by a fictional human clone, and I would agree that indeed, such a story bears little resemblance to the reality that I have come to know as
my own. But I will insist upon the relationship between *Never Let Me Go* and the realist novel insofar as *Never Let Me Go* takes up many of the questions of representation, reference, individuality, and interiority that notoriously plagued its realist forebears, and, more pointedly, I will suggest that contending with the way the genre engages with characterization—specifically the tension therein between referentiality and allegory—will allow us a point of access to the significance of both clones, and critical interpretations of them.

*Never Let Me Go* has some obvious affinities with Victorian genres like the bildungsroman or the orphan narrative, but even as it does engage with the kinds of searching for origins and dreaming of futures that concern such narratives, all efforts to find them are frustrated and, ultimately, embarrassed, marking I would suggest a rejection of, rather than a point of continuity with, these varieties of Victorian fiction. Even as the clones experience great excitement in searching for their “possibles,” the humans from whom they were cloned, this excitement inheres merely in the fantasy of replicating exactly the mundane life of one’s match, going about the same routine and toiling away at the same low-level office job. This sounds quite pathetic, as fantasies go, especially when billed as a “dream future,” as it is in the novel, but it intimates most fundamentally the desire to live a social life, to have one’s labor recognized, to participate in the quotidian movements and interactions of the social at the most basic level of its functioning—all things, simple as they may seem, to which the clones have no access. Thus what looks initially like a perversion of any number of classic Victorian narratives is revealed in fact to be a tale of unsuccessful social mapping, of failed access to the social as a totality and failed access to the interiority of individual social being. This is what makes it a social-problem novel—that is, its failed realism. In other words, in its catastrophic failure at both tasks of this kind of 19th century realism—namely, mapping a social whole and representing singular psychological
depth—it emerges as a social-problem novel in the inverse, a novel for which the problem is the social.

Now I’ll turn to talk a little more specifically about the role of characters in this failed social mapping.

As Alex Woloch characterizes them in *The One vs. the Many*, characters in the realist novel are both mimetic and symbolic, but this representational labor is divided between the protagonist and a multitude of minor characters. We begin with a protagonist presumed to refer convincingly enough to what we know human being to be in the world. The singular and psychologically rich protagonist—or “the one” of Woloch’s title—is then generalized to enable a view of the broader social field; this generalization is achieved by surrounding the protagonist with—embedding him or her in a system of—minor characters who paint a picture of the social writ large by representing not singularity or psychological depth, but rather type, class, and “the many.”

At the center of the character system of *Never Let Me Go* resides not a psychologically complex protagonist with rich, singular interiority, but rather a nullity, a flat character who is also the narrator and, ostensibly, author, but lacks depth on all of these counts. Here I will speak the unspeakable, and scandalously depart from the compulsory humanist reading to admit the obvious: Kathy H., the narrator and protagonist of this novel, is not deep, and is incapable of endowing anyone else with depth. Her flat narration glides along the surfaces of things, only just adequately mapping their contours. This is a picture of the social conveyed not by Asmodeus, waving away the rooftops of all the buildings in the city, but rather by a copy of a social being whose ability to narrate the social network from which she is excluded in all but the most terrible way takes shape only in the negative: society is present in this narrative only as an absence. To bring the social to the fore, then, is to invert the novel. In the final pages Kathy’s so-called
“guardian” Miss Emily exhorts her to adopt a global view of her plight: “But you must try to see it historically” (262). There could be a no more ridiculous expectation than this.

For the realist novel the relationship between the allegorical and referential aspects of character becomes a pressing question. As Woloch writes, while the realist novel “has always been praised for two contradictory generic achievements: depth psychology and social expansiveness, depicting the interior life of a singular consciousness and casting a wide gaze over a complex social universe,” the resolution of this contradiction is not reached without sacrifice: “Allegorical characterization now comes at a price: the price of the human particularity that it elides” (19, 20). The 19th century social problem novel is afflicted by a troubling inability to realistically represent the laborers with whom its sympathies lie without reproducing the objectification and metonymic disarticulation of their bodies that the material conditions of industrialization themselves effect, and in testimony to the inhumanity of which most such novels seek to employ realism in the first place. In an effort to articulate a relationship between the singular and the typical, between the laborer and the laboring class, such realist narratives reach an ethical impasse: in order to address both singularity and typicality, the laboring body must be conscripted as a symbol of its own instrumentalization, toiling figuratively as it does physically.

Never Let Me Go presents a similar problem. There seems to be an ethical imperative to grant the clones the kind of dynamic subjectivity that is proper to a fully dimensional person, a subjectivity that has a mimetic relationship to human being. However, the underside of this imperative is that to find in these clones allegories for ourselves, or to find in ourselves something of the clone—to see, in other words, Ishiguro’s novel as a story “about us all,” as generalizable—one must immediately drain the clones of the individuality and depth just granted them in order to raise them to the level of allegory. In other words, reading depth into the clones
to some extent reproduces the violence that the plot inflicts on them: the literal evisceration enacted on them in the course of the plot is redoubled in their rise to the realm of the figurative. In short, one endows clones with subjectivity only to make available the opportunity to rob them of it: first by generalizing it to include all subjects, and then by arguing that all subjects are constrained by their absolute subjection to the systems that produce them. As Kathy asks in her revelatory meeting with her so-called “guardians,” Madame and Miss Emily, “If we’re just going to give donations anyway, then die, why all those lessons? Why all those books and discussions?” (259)—why foster interiority and consciousness in the clones if ultimately their value will only ever reside in their evisceration?

Kathy’s friend and eventual lover Tommy has the most vexed relationship to interiority in the novel, and, perhaps consequently, the most ardent belief in its power to guarantee human worth. In the fateful meeting with his “guardians,” Madame and Miss Emily, to which I’ve referred a few times already, he offers up his artwork, detailed drawings of “imaginary animals” (sad echoes of the “poor creatures” that Miss Emily takes the clones to be) as manifestations of his inner being—both proof that he has interiority, and proof, he hopes, that he and Kathy are truly in love and thus qualify for a deferral of their inevitable organ donations. Madame mocks his earnestness: “Because of course… your art will reveal your inner selves! That’s it, isn’t it? Because your art will display your souls!” (254). Madame’s impatience is dismissive, and maybe even cruel, but the novel makes possible two insights born of this impatience with interiority: first, that humane treatment should be offered without interiority as its justification, and finally that the establishment of interiority may itself be inhumane.

The obsession with interiority and the singularity it implies is effectively also an obsession with individuality. This is a distraction from something that this novel is more pressingly about: relationality—both its impoverishment and its excesses. While a humanist
logic would insist, as I’ve suggested, that one affirm a total continuity between humans and clones of them, the price of this is their connectedness. Asserting continuity at the level of human being requires asserting individuality at the level of social being. The ways those that populate the world are related to one another are not always pleasant, as this novel makes devastatingly clear, but they are nonetheless the fundamental forces of our collective being. The reorientation to relationality and reproduction that the novel makes possible urges and enables us to think about relatedness, contingency, webs of power, and circuits of capital as forces that bind us together, even when that means parts of our very bodies become extractable and exchangeable. Attempting to rescue Ishiguro’s clones from this plight simply reproduces a fantasy of charismatic critical power, offering narcissistic self-replication—a kind of critical cloning—as the cure for constraint.
\[1\] See in particular the 2007 special issue of *Novel on Ishiguro* (40.3) for a representative swath of the critical literature referred to here.

\[2\] It could be considered to be perverse in any number of ways: as an ersatz orphan plot dragged into a late-twentieth century dystopia, or a novel of education where the bright young protagonist is swapped out for a clone myopically consumed with the endless series of petty betrayals of which her insular boarding school life was comprised, or a coming of age story in which the development of the protagonist is brutally foreclosed by the specter of an inevitable series of ultimately lethal organ extractions, etc.

\[3\] In Lisa Fluet’s reading of *Never Let Me Go*, in which she situates the novel firmly in Ishiguro’s oeuvre, the collectivity that emerges from the loss of a sense of selfhood is described as a form of “class affiliation.” While undoubtedly the clones in *Never Let Me Go* perform labor, both affective and material, the radical eccentricity of the clones to any concept of history or of the broader social world makes a reading of their collective identification as a class improbable. The stratification of society into collectivities that emerges in *Never Let Me Go* is not the stratification of classes of human laborers, but rather stratification of the human itself. Of course this cannot be said to be totally unrelated to class, but there remains something unaccounted for by it. This is a major point of departure from its C19 realist forebears: the “social problem” is not the dehumanizing effect of class-based poverty but rather dehumanization itself.