

## Recollecting Memories, Reconstructing Identities: Narrators as Storytellers in Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*

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In his novels, Kazuo Ishiguro uses the narrators as storytellers, both in a Benjaminian and in an Arendtian sense. He uses this literary strategy in order to connect his characters' construction of identity to their fragmented memory, a process which allows them to recover from their phantasmal and unresolved past. The central aim of this paper is to demonstrate that Ishiguro deploys the use of the literary strategy of the narrators' storytelling differently in his first four novels and that it plays a more active role in *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005). In these later novels the storytelling is closer to a dynamic subject agency and is used to demonstrate the narrator's rejection of falling into a paralyzing sense of victimization. Self-knowledge is more actively related to a process of critical understanding of the narrators' life experiences, as in their tales they leave aside the Benjaminian apocalyptic vision of the historical experience as paralysis and enter Hanna Arendt's domain of storytelling as action.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro; Benjamin; Arendt; storytelling; memory; death

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### La recuperación de la memoria en la redefinición de la identidad: la narración como estrategia literaria en *When We Were Orphans* y *Never Let Me Go*, de Kazuo Ishiguro

En sus novelas, Kazuo Ishiguro utiliza la técnica de la narración, entendida desde las perspectivas de Hanna Arendt y Walter Benjamin, como una estrategia literaria que relaciona la construcción de la identidad de sus personajes con un proceso fragmentario de recuperación de los recuerdos para negociar con los fantasmas irresueltos del pasado. Sin embargo, el objetivo central de este trabajo es el de demostrar que la narración como estrategia literaria no se utiliza de la misma manera en las seis novelas del autor, ya que en *When We Were Orphans* (2000) y *Never Let Me Go* (2005) el relato en primera persona define a unos personajes que rechazan ser victimizados por su pasado. El proceso de auto-conocimiento al que se someten a través de la recuperación de sus recuerdos los define como sujetos que se enfrentan a su historia vital dejando de lado la atmósfera apocalíptica benjaminiana de la experiencia histórica entendida como parálisis y entran en los dominios de Hanna Arendt, en la narración concebida como acción y progreso hacia el futuro.

Palabras clave: Kazuo Ishiguro; Benjamin; Arendt; narración; memorias; muerte

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’  
in which we live is not the exception but the rule  
WALTER BENJAMIN, *Illuminations*

### 1. THE NARRATOR AS STORYTELLER

The central aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the narrator as storyteller is not used in the same way throughout Kazuo Ishiguro’s six novels and that the literary strategy of storytelling plays a more active role in *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005).<sup>1</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro uses his narrators as storytellers both in a Benjaminian and in an Arendtian sense, linking the construction of identity to a fragmented memory process as a (mostly ineffective) means for the characters to recover from a phantasmal past. The retelling of the past as a strategy to redefine the present and regain the sense of tradition lost through violence and war is one of the field forces in the philosophical enquiry of both Walter Benjamin and Hanna Arendt. As Eva De Valk indicates, “Arendt and Benjamin tried to do justice to the past, as well as to connect the past to the present in meaningful ways . . . but while Benjamin’s emphasis is on redressing wrongs and (ultimately) hopes for Messianic redemption, Arendt sees the past as ‘a network of possibilities’” (2010: 37). In *The Human Condition*, Hanna Arendt connects the action of telling stories to the narrator’s belonging to the public democratic realm and identifies storytelling as a meeting point between public performance and personal life. Walter Benjamin stresses how storytelling originates in suffering, death, feelings of displacement and homelessness, while being at the same time the solution to overcoming such feelings. He sees stories as instrumental in surviving loss, an interpretation that will be useful in our analysis of *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*.

The storytelling of the protagonists of these two novels, Christopher Banks and Kathy H., differs to some extent from that of the narrators in Ishiguro’s first four novels.<sup>2</sup> I believe that the kind of storytelling used in the last two novels sees the narrators take on a more active role in their own lives and rejecting the impulse to fall into a paralyzing sense of victimization. In these narrations, knowledge is more actively related to a process of critical understanding of the narrators’ life experiences and to a painful redefinition of their family romance. Christopher Banks and Kathy H. leave aside, with some resistance on Banks’ part, the Benjaminian apocalyptic atmosphere of the historical experience as

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of the second part of section two of this paper was presented in March 2011 at the International Conference “Cultural Texts and Contexts in the English Speaking World” (University of Oradea, Rumania).

<sup>2</sup> This is what Graham MacPhee writes, for example, about Stevens’ use of storytelling: “For Arendt, the act of narration has the power to enable individuals and collectives to *experience* . . . this responsibility by assuming the role of the narrator of events, even though human groups or individuals can never be the sole authors of the history within which they find themselves . . . In Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, this relationship between storytelling and responsibility is inverted: here narration becomes a way of escaping responsibility” (2011: 178).

paralysis and enter Hanna Arendt's domain of storytelling as action. As Kazuo Ishiguro declared in an interview,

I am not interested in writing about storytelling, but I *am* interested in storytelling in the sense of what a community or a nation tells itself about its past and by implication therefore where it is at the moment and what it should be doing next. If you want to draw a parallel between how individuals come to terms with their past and decide what to do next, and how a nation or a community approaches such things, then the issue of storytelling is an important one. (Matthews 2009: 117)

Thus, Ishiguro's perception of storytelling, echoing Arendtian theory, consists of an act that a community or an individual carries out in order to bridge past and present and to enable them to move on towards the future (Matthews 2009: 117). When considering the six novels the British author wrote between 1982 and 2005, we reach a more profound understanding of his writing as a way of illustrating the human condition as a universal moral dystopian tale. Matthew Beedham suggests that Ishiguro's novels "investigate the institutions and social structures that govern our lives, and the mental constructs we employ in our ongoing attempts to negotiate life's hardships" (2010: 101). However, while in *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (1993) and *The Unconsoled* (1996) the narrators' storytelling is ultimately a passive account of their victimization, in *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*, the narrators' storytelling allows them to, painfully, become the active protagonists of their own life-stories while their tales fulfil the collective responsibility towards the voiceless victims of history.

Ishiguro's writing originates from an intense feeling of sympathy with that part of humanity predestined to be victimized by a complex and merciless order of things, from the victims of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki disasters of his first novels to the human clones suffering from appalling medical exploitation in *Never Let Me Go*. Some of his characters are destined to suffer the consequences of the atomic bomb, Nazism, war, death, violence and destruction, namely the end of traditional values and the crushing of their accepted moral standards under the pressure of a new order. All of Ishiguro's narrators, at some point, have lost or are unable to recognize familiar landscapes and as a result must go through a symbolic existential nightmare.

As Brian Finney (2002) illustrates, alienation from parental relations becomes an additional issue that overlaps others such as nostalgia and personal displacement in the construction of narratives of collective trauma in Ishiguro's most recent two novels. In *When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro both gives the impression of returning to a narrative style apparently rooted in Dickensian themes and offers a personal reinterpretation of detective novels (Sim 2005: 108). As in *Never Let Me Go*, he follows a narrative pattern that aims to surprise the reader, who gradually discovers the real heartbreaking personal reality of the characters. In both *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*, the representation

of the narrators' consciousness through their storytellings intersects with the active use of memory to overcome orphanhood and a different approach to the nostalgia of past times, which is vectorized towards the future.

Nostalgia is an idea that has structured Ishiguro's novels since the beginning and it is widely discussed by critics particularly in relation to *The Remains of the Day* (Griffith 1993; Su 2002). In Ono's and Stevens' worlds, Ishiguro represents nostalgia as the characters' inability to free themselves from the weight of history and move on. The characters feel nostalgic for a world whose meaning was intertwined with colonialism and an exclusive understanding of the notion of national identity (Beedham 2010, 90). However, by 2001, after publishing *When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro starts reflecting on a different way of defining his protagonists and their roles in relation to their memories, to nostalgia and to how they approach their current lives and perception of the world. He feels that critics have so far connected his characters with "emotional repression" (Shaffer and Wong 2008: 172) and with the inability to voice their feelings. He considers that it is time to use the narrators' memories as a liberating force in order to reinterpret the concept of nostalgia within their storytelling:

But I'm wondering if it's time to try to construct a voice, a way of writing, that somehow takes on board some of the post-Freudian tensions of life, that comes not from buckling up, not from being unable to express yourself, but from just being pulled left, right, and centre by possible role models and urges, by a sense that you are missing out. That would involve a different kind of voice, would imply a different kind of writing, and would lead to a very different-looking novel. (Shaffer and Wong 2008: 173)

In a subsequent interview, the author develops this idea and explains that in the late seventies and early eighties he was influenced by the Freudian model, namely by the concept that humans are a passive product of their past experiences, which leaves little scope for subject agency. Moving away from this theory, Ishiguro now insists on the idea that the human being is rather more complex and that his or her capacity for choice and action is possibly greater than that theorized within Freudian parameters. He explains that "[p]eople's potential to change their lives or to change themselves somewhere in the middle of their lives, that has been underestimated" (Matthew 2009: 120). Ishiguro's reflection can and should be applied to storytelling; nostalgia, then, is not understood by Kazuo Ishiguro as the presence of negative phantasmal presences, but as a means to recover positive emotions of fairness and safeness (Shaffer and Wong 2008: 166-67) and to fight to actualize them.

In his essay 'The Storyteller. Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' (1936), Walter Benjamin presents ideas that are useful to frame conceptually Kazuo Ishiguro's use of his narrators as storytellers. Benjamin begins by stressing that the real art of storytelling, that of orally transmitting experiences, is coming to an end as first the novel and then information have decreased in importance and strength although the storyteller does

not disappear but is reinvented “in the guise of the history-teller, as the very agent of redemption” (Wolfarth 1981: 1005).<sup>3</sup>

Benjamin draws a distinction between two kinds of storytellers: those who go on a voyage and relate their story when they get back, and those who chronicle the old stories and traditions of their villages without having travelled anywhere. In “The Storyteller” (1936: 2), he illustrates his idea thus: “If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman. Indeed, each sphere of life has, as it were, produced its own tribe of storytellers”. In Ishiguro’s first four novels, each narrator takes on both roles: Etsuko moves to England and then has memories of her former life in Japan; Stevens decides it is high time to go on a journey in order to deal with past issues; Ono reflects upon the old vanished order of things; Ryder’s journey is partly dreamlike and partly physical. They are peculiar storytellers, it must be said, as it is not their (conscious) aim to transmit their experience to the reader / listener. Their journeys and tales are in fact merely told to themselves; the reader is an intruder that they seem not to consider, even though s/he is actually *the one* that hears / reads each one’s tale. If, as Benjamin suggests, “it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free of explanation as one reproduces it” (1936: 4), Ishiguro’s narrators are successful. The characters’ inner dialogue is at times obscure and the reader / listener is left to imagine what has happened as there is room for interpretation. In his understanding of the role of the storyteller, Benjamin insists that memory is an important element, both in the telling and in the hearing of the story. The tale will be repeated time and again, thereby opening it up to the oral tradition that was lost when the novel became the bourgeois literary form *par excellence*. According to him, “memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening from generation of generation. It is the Muse-derived element of the epic art in a broader sense and encompasses its varieties. In the first place among these is the one practiced by the storyteller. It starts the web which all stories together form in the end” (1936: 9).

In the narrators’ tales, layers of memories and of history are transformed into words, and “the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings” (1936: 6). Tradition is then reconstructed through memory, not in a scientific way as in historiography, but as a door opened on remembrance and onto a web of tales that culminate in the representation of a collective traumatic tale, such as the bombing of Nagasaki or the Holocaust, as in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*. But memory is not the only aspect of storytelling and the presence of death is another nodal point to take into consideration. The tales of the storytellers refer back to the past and to chronicles of that past: “All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder. A ladder extending downward to the interior of the

<sup>3</sup> For a study on the use of orality in the novel from a Benjaminian perspective, see Peter Brook’s “The Storyteller” (1987).

earth and disappearing into the clouds is the image for a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier” (Benjamin 1936: 11).

Memories do not only belong to and recount a past time, but they are also instrumental in connecting past and present. The need to explore one’s past life experiences is a way of dealing with one’s life. Storytelling transforms such a negotiation into an act of reconciliation (Duccio 1996: 10-11) while it also gives life to a narrating self who tells his or her life, in the present, in relation to other people’s stories (Cavarero 2005: 56). Ishiguro declares with regard to his narrators: “I’m trying to capture the texture of memory . . . flashbacks aren’t just a clinical, technical means of conveying things that happened in the past. This is somebody turning over certain memories, in the light of his current emotional condition” (Shaffer and Wong 2008: 48). Thus, Christopher Banks’ and Kathy H.’s storytellings are not only a transmission of personal memories, but also a way of giving voice back to those who died. Recollecting the legacy of previous generations, as Benjamin suggests, is a way of fighting back barbarism. In this case, the truth about Christopher Banks’ parents —especially his mother’s fight against warlords and the drug market— is re-established and the memory of Kathy H.’s friends will linger. As she puts it herself, “the memories I value most, I don’t see them ever fading. I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won’t lose my memories of them” (2005: 280). Although memory, remembrance, trauma and death (also understood as the end of an era) are also key aspects of the tales told by the narrators of Ishiguro’s four first novels, they only voice their victimization by history. They become the symbol of people whose lives have been torn apart and who have been unable to fully reconstruct their identity and positively verbalize their trauma.

In a remarkable essay about Walter Benjamin’s influence on Hanna Arendt’s notion of storytelling,<sup>4</sup> Seyla Benhabib suggests that Arendt derives her belief regarding the “redemptive power of narrative” (qtd. in Herzog 2000: 2) from the German philosopher. Herzog also argues that both intellectuals share a similar definition of the meaning and origin of storytelling in that they both understand the past as fragmented, since memory can only retain scraps of past events; stories recover and reassemble such scraps in order to highlight the absence of those who died. In one of the first pages of her memoir, Kathy H. voices her need to put together the pieces of her past and to tell things that have been silenced for years. She attempts to reconcile herself with her past by keeping alive the memory of her disappeared friends: “[A]ll our differences —while they did not exactly vanish— seemed not nearly as important as all other things: like the fact that we’d grown up together at Hailsham, the fact that we knew and remember things no one else did . . . Tommy, Ruth, me, all the rest of us” (2005: 4, 5-6). Through her act of remembering, their memory and sacrifice will not be lost to the world.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed study of the intellectual relationship between Walter Benjamin and Hanna Arendt see also Eva De Valk’s ‘The Pearl Divers. Hanna Arendt, Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History’ (2010).

According to Walter Benjamin, history is made up of tragedies. Following this interpretation Hanna Arendt claims in *Men in Dark Times* that the world has become “inhospitable to human needs” (qtd. in Herzog 2000: 6). Within a context of horror and trauma (she refers to the rise, and acceptance, of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes and the Shoa), storytelling is used as a means to reassemble those fragments of the past that will help to redefine the present. Herzog summarizes it thus: “Benjamin’s epistemological relation between ‘telling a story’ and ‘showing’ the Now becomes, in Arendt’s writings, the material of a political aim: her stories aim at replacing the public realm destroyed in dark times” (2000: 9). Once the past is transformed into a confusing present, and tradition has been shattered, then the storyteller is the one who is able to give life back to the dead and to a forgotten (valuable) past (Benhabib 1990: 188) and put it “in order” (Wistrich 1998: 30).<sup>5</sup> Hanna Arendt begins Chapter V of *The Human Condition* (1998) with quotations from Isak Dinesen and from Dante,<sup>6</sup> thereby exposing clearly her literary connections. She borrows from Dinesen the saying that “All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them”; as underscored previously, these words reveal the redemptive and comforting power of storytelling and literature in the German philosopher’s view. The Arendtian concepts particularly relevant to this essay’s argument are the notions of action and speech. These ideas are productive as they help to create stories and are at the origin of the storyteller’s entry into the public realm, “for action and speech . . . are indeed the two activities whose end result will always be a story with enough coherence to be told” (Arendt 1998: 97).

## 2. STORYTELLING AS ACTION: *WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS* AND *NEVER LET ME GO*

In 2000, Ishiguro published *When We Were Orphans*. Critics have not missed the Dickensian echoes of the novel’s prose and of the portrayal of its characters (Carrington 2004; Sim 2010).<sup>7</sup> As Howard points out, the novel is once more the exploration of “an unresolved sense of homelessness, displacement, and loss of cultural continuity” (2001: 410). The setting of present and past events in *When We Were Orphans* shifts from London to the city of Shanghai at the beginning of the second Sino-Japanese war and the Japanese invasion of Shanghai (1937). This war lasted throughout World War II

<sup>5</sup> One of Arendt’s main goals was to explain (and understand) the political and cultural reasons for, and the meaning of, the Nazi regime and the tragedy of the Holocaust; what she called “the problem of evil”.

<sup>6</sup> Lynn Wilkinson reminds us that these literary references “are attributed to ‘Isak Dinesen’, the British and American *nom de plume* of the Danish writer known as Karen Blixen in Denmark, although no source is given” (2004: 77).

<sup>7</sup> Another famous literary character that underlies the origin of Christopher Banks’ personality is Sherlock Holmes. Hélène Machinal demonstrates how the genre of the detective novel and Conan Doyle’s famous literary detective are a point of reference in Ishiguro’s book: “*When We Were Orphans* directly invokes the narratological traditions and expectations of classic detective fiction, and above all the familiar figure of Sherlock Holmes . . . In ending Banks with something of the aura and esteem of Sherlock Holmes, he establishes his narrator’s credentials as, by profession and temperament, trustworthy and humane” (2009: 80-81).

(July 1937-September 1945), a moment in contemporary history that we know to be meaningful to Kazuo Ishiguro. The book is divided into seven parts which are ordered chronologically; however, within these sections the narration follows the order of Banks' memory and corresponds to the notes he takes in the first person and not to the chronology of the events that he narrates; in this sense, Beedham indicates that the "notebook format, established in part by the detailed dates and places provided at the beginning of every chapter, is continuously overrun by the narrator's memories" (2010: 133).

Christopher Banks is a fairly well-known detective in London. At the time the story begins, he returns to Shanghai —where he spent the first ten years of his life in the International Settlement— in order to search for his parents, whose disappearance has traumatized and haunted him throughout his adult life. After their disappearance, he was sent to England to be educated as an English gentleman. As indicated earlier, the readers follow the story through the notes that Banks makes. The events that are recalled in the notebooks are based on his memory, meaning there is a certain degree of uncertainty in relation to the story, as the information related is only his interpretation of what happened. In spite of this, and unlike the narrators of Ishiguro's previous four novels, Christopher Banks is actively engaged in his own personal quest to overcome his feeling of orphanhood. As he narrates, however, he does not suspect that the end of the story is not the one he expects —not even the story of his parents' disappearance matches the one he has constructed in his mind. His search for his parents and for closure leads him to discover a truth that is much more traumatic than he had imagined: his parents were not kidnapped by Chinese rebels and kept prisoner in the old quarter of Shanghai. In fact, his father had run off with his mistress and died a couple of years after he eloped. His mother, an activist who fought the drug market and the warlords running it, had been kidnapped by one of them, Wang Ku, and then agreed to become his concubine in order to save her only child and finance his education in England. Christopher discovers all of this during his visit to Shanghai in a conversation with an old family friend, whom he calls Uncle Philip, who, in reality, is the man who betrayed his mother. It is at this point, when, as an adult, he discovers the truth, that Christopher becomes a real orphan. Following this revelation he painfully makes his way towards real closure, which leads him at the end of the novel to say to his adopted daughter Jennifer (another orphan): "Perhaps there are those who are able to go about their lives unfettered by such concerns. But for those like us, our fate is to face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadows of vanished parents. There is nothing for it but to try and see through our missions to the end, as best as we can, for until we do so, we will be permitted no calm" (2000: 335-36).

From the beginning of the novel, Ishiguro focuses Banks' storytelling on the phantasmal presence of the notion of orphanhood; it is actually this trauma that alters his vision of the past. In an interview with Cynthia Wong, Kazuo Ishiguro explains what he means when he defines Banks as an orphan: "There was a metaphorical direction in this condition of being orphaned. What I was interested in exploring here was the journey that

we all must have made out of a protective childhood bubble where we didn't know about the harsher world . . . . When I say 'orphan' it's in that very broader sense of having left the protective world of childhood that I am referring to" (2005: 319-20). Shao-Pin Luo suggests that Ishiguro's orphans suffer from a life-long injury that cannot be mended and that they invent fictional lives and families in order to survive their grief (2003: 59-60). It is just this psychological attitude that forms the backbone of the story and lies at the origin of Banks' need to redefine his family romance. He tells (writes) his story to compensate for the feelings of loss and death that haunt him. In the reconstruction of the events that Banks describes in his notebook, his childhood and his childhood home are associated with security and protection. The feeling of orphanhood that will be with Christopher Banks throughout his (late childhood and) adult life originates at this point, that is to say, when his parents disappear from his life and his sense of protection and safety is shattered. He will be on a childlike quest almost up until the point when the truth about his life hits him with all its violence and cruelty.

The novel, as critics have observed and as mentioned above, is indebted to Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Its Dickensian realist mode of narration is intertwined with a dreamlike atmosphere that overlaps with Banks' process of psychological growth. The cathartic entry of the narrator into adulthood takes place in the central part of the narration, while he is in the old quarter of Shanghai —a part of town virtually in the hands of Japanese soldiers— and in the middle of a terrible battle. Banks is certain that his parents are being held prisoner there and rushes to hunt for the house where he supposes them to be. The reality is altogether different. He finds only death and destruction and, amazingly, meets Akira, his old childhood friend from the International Settlement, now grown-up, and a Japanese soldier. Thus, Banks does indeed find a part of his past, but it consists of his long-lost friend rather than his parents.

In an eerie and frightening atmosphere where past memories mix with an improbable present, Christopher Banks' experience transforms the official records of history (the Sino-Japanese war) into a collective tragedy. The memories of loss and suffering are centred on individuals and not on historical events, and individual memories become once more pretexts to denounce violence, war and its effects on human beings. The destruction surrounding the narrator and his encounter with his past evolves into the discovery of the truth about his life and the painful redefinition of his (real) family romance. Akira's unlikely presence provides both a guide to the past and a door to the present. Through him, Banks discovers that the past he remembers is a lie that has only ever been real in his mind.

Banks has lost his imagined parents and his illusory childhood. But within his personal trauma, the trauma of growing up, unlike Etsuko, Ono, Stevens or Ryder, he faces the truth and painfully moves on to his future. It will take Banks fifteen more years to come to terms with his grief, achieve closure, and redefine his family romance in order to overcome the trauma of his parents' disappearance and his consequent move to England. Once he sheds light on the truth, he can at last reconstruct his life. The phantasmal past he had

created in his mind through his unreliable memory has finally materialized into his actual present and he is able to accept his story and his 'orphanhood'. Banks' personal identitarian reconstruction ends thirteen years after the end of the war, in 1958, when he finally finds his mother in a mental institution in Hong Kong. Although she does not recognize the middle-aged man in front of her as her child, she does remember her ten-year-old boy (2000: 327-28). Finally, Christopher Banks is at peace with his past and his memories. He has stepped into true adulthood through a painful process of storytelling. But, as suggested before, unlike the narrators of Ishiguro's earlier novels (Etsuko, Ono, Stevens and Ryder), he projects himself into the future by adopting Jennifer and establishing a caring relationship with her. The ending of the novel thus becomes a call for love as a redeeming force and for a new tomorrow.

*Never Let Me Go* is narrated in the first person by Kathy H.: "My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I have been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year. That'll make it almost exactly twelve years" (2005: 3). So begins an uncanny story about a group of students who live and study at Hailsham, a boarding school in the British countryside. The reader soon learns that these young people are clones who are educated to accept their destiny as organ producers and to envisage an early death. Despite what one might think, the story is not set in a dystopian future but rather in England at the end of the 1990s.

Ishiguro uses no scientific language and mentions no laboratory. The closest we come to a medical structure in the novel is a health facility, a "recovery centre" (2005: 4) where clones go after each operation either to complete (die) or to recover before the next operation, and where other clones act as carers. Kathy H. is one of them, and she helps her fellow clones during the transitional period between donations. The fourth donation is the final fatal one, although some of the clones complete before. In spite of the bleakness of the plot, no violence is ever mentioned openly, and a special invented jargon is substituted for a more scientific vocabulary. The use of language in the novel is evidently not casual and, according to Keith McDonald, it serves as a reminder "of the ways in which language can normalize atrocities deemed necessary in a given ideology" (2007: 78). This linguistic strategy also helps to define a melancholic environment and a constellation of different feelings in order to humanize the characters and help the reader to identify with them. Critics such as Britzman (2006) or Toker and Chertoff (2008) suggest that even the name of the school is a reminder of the ontological orphanhood of these clones, as "Hailsham is a 'sham' which people 'hail'" (2008: 165). Deborah Britzman is one of the few critics to approach the novel from a psychoanalytical perspective, an outlook that, through the thinking of Klein and Arendt, underlines how language helps to characterize the clone's finite ontological position.

McDonald, in a paper that has partially inspired my reading of the text, demonstrates that the narrative strategies and techniques used in the novel originate within the genre of autobiographical memoir (2007: 75). When Kathy reflects on her past, she cannot avoid

thinking of her life as intertwined with her friends'. Her autobiography becomes their biography to the extent that it is impossible to tell one from the other. She constructs what has been called a "family memoir as relational autobiography" (Eakin 1999: 85). The organizing of the novel as a memoir humanizes the situation of characters who are not even thought of as being human. The insights it provides of Kathy's and her friends' inner emotions, love stories and childlike desires allow the reader to empathise with them. As MacDonald suggests, we can view 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" (2007: 76). Kathy's storytelling helps to preserve, in auto/biographical terms, the memory of a group of people whose humanity is denied in order to silence society's sense of guilt. Two main topics are at the foundation of the novel: one is nostalgia and the other is the human capacity of facing one's own finitude and death.<sup>8</sup>

*Never Let Me Go* is a novel in which the literary use of the auto/biographical narrative voice creates a relational text and underlines the author's determination to examine how individuals react in the face of their mortality. The narrator's storytelling then acts as a strategy to fight back against the traumatic discovery of mortality and/or the proximity of death. Indeed, "putting painful experiences into language can be a therapeutic process that has the potential to help the sufferer cope with trauma" (Levy 2011: 10). As Ishiguro himself has declared in relation to his novel, he does not seek to analyze the concept of cloning in ethical or scientific terms; rather, he uses it strategically to delve into the ways in which human beings face their own death:

I suppose, ultimately, I wanted to write a book about how people accept that we are mortal and we can't get away from this, and that after a certain point we are all going to die, we won't live forever . . . I wanted the characters in *Never Let Me Go* to react to this horrible programme they seem to be subjected to in much the way in which we accept the human condition, accept ageing, and falling to bits, and dying. (Matthews 2009: 124)

In the last part of the book, Kathy H. and Tommy, her lover by now, manage to find out where one of their old guardians, Miss Lucy, lives. As Tommy's first donation approaches, he and Kathy decide to visit her and seek an explanation and to ask for a deferral of their destiny as donors. During the conversation with Miss Lucy, they discover the truth about their life and destiny and about Hailsham: the school was founded as a social experiment, which, by the time the conversation takes place, has failed. Its aim was to educate the clones, who are always referred to as students, in order to demonstrate to society the cruelty of the project to use clones as simple producers of human organs. Art and art classes at Hailsham, Miss Lucy explains, were used to prove to the outside

<sup>8</sup> A great amount of stimulating critical work has been published on this novel (Robbins 2007; Seaman 2007; Jerng 2008; Toket and Chertoff 2008; Black 2009; Griffin 2009). This particular reading of *Never Let Me Go* is grounded in Ishiguro's declarations concerning his approach to the notion of nostalgia and to a post-Freudian understanding of the human soul.

world that these students did have a human essence. After this conversation, and after the discovery that their destiny cannot be deferred, Kathy and Tommy become fully and hopelessly aware of their fate. They realize that Tommy's time is coming to an end, a truth that most living beings discern at some point in their life. Just before Kathy and Tommy leave for good, Madame, the art dealer and Miss Lucy's partner, says farewell to them with a heart-wrenching phrase that summarizes the human situation when facing mortality: "Poor creatures. I wish I could help you. But you're by yourselves" (2005: 272).

In an interview with Carlos Alfieri in 2006, Kazuo Ishiguro explains, "When I wrote this novel, I was reflecting mainly of the euphemisms used to talk about aging and death . . . . What I tried to explain is the meaning of our journey from adolescence to mature age" (2006: 129-30).<sup>9</sup> The feeling of finitude, the materialization of the presence of one's own death within one's life and the epistemological questions related to these issues, are acutely present in the conversation between Tommy and Kathy in the last pages of the novel (279). The central question, to which neither of them has an answer, is: what is next?

Kathy H.'s storytelling draws a picture of her and her friends' childhood, teenage and final years. Her tale merges with the stories of other students, the only family she has ever had, in such a way that her narration becomes a relational text, which comprises both her own autobiography and Tommy's and Ruth's biographies. As Keith McDonald points out, "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 . . . a symbolic binding takes place in which pathography acts as an elegiac act of witness and testimony" (2007: 80). Kathy H. seeks reconciliation through her friends' destiny as she faces her own finitude. She wants to keep her friends with her, therefore she needs to remember them: "I won't be a carer anymore come the end of the year, and though I have got a lot out of it, I have to admit I'll welcome the chance to rest to stop and think and remember. I'm sure it's at least partly to do with that, to do with the preparing for the change of pace, that I have been getting this urge to order all these old memories" (2005: 37).

But where does the necessity of negotiating with our past and telling a story originate? According to Giovanni Storace, this urge occurs when an event breaks the rhythm of our life and opens a fissure in our everyday existential routine (2004: 54). A working body, for example, helps to compensate for possible weaknesses in our mental balance, but when the body fails we become aware of our fragility and of the possibility of dying. John Eakin insists on this idea and declares that our body image "anchors and sustains our sense of identity" (1999: 11), that "consciousness is 'self-referential,' and that the baseline of consciousness, of memory, of identity, is the body image" (19). First her friend Ruth's and

<sup>9</sup> This interview was originally published in Spanish: "Al escribir esta novela yo pensaba esencialmente en los eufemismos que rodean al envejecimiento y la muerte . . . . En realidad, lo que intenté explicar es el viaje que hacemos desde la adolescencia a la edad madura". The translation into English is mine.

then Tommy's passing away are instrumental in waking the need that Kathy feels to give life back to them. Their death is not sudden; they have parts of their body stolen until they are physically empty and Kathy's words aim to refill this void.

Once Kathy decides that she wants and needs to re-enact her story through memories and storytelling, she goes back to her friends and their precious collections of objects: "You each had a wooden chest with your name on it, which you kept under your bed and filled with your possessions . . . I can remember one or two students not bothering much with their collections, but most of us took enormous care, bringing things out to display, putting other things away carefully" (2005: 38-9). The items that were part of these collections came from the "Exchanges", an event that was organized at Hailsham three or four times a year and where students would exchange mostly the objects created during art classes. The issue of collections is an important one within the theoretical frame I am using to read *Never Let Me Go*. Indeed, personal identity is also defined by personal belongings such as toys or clothes, for example, to which we give a symbolic meaning; portions of our life keep on living through them (Duccio 1996). This phenomenon is what Peter Raggatt calls "landmark attachments" (2006: 21) or "constellation of attachments" (22). Storace suggests that the objects we collect during our lifetime change their meaning for us depending on the moment we are living, and that collecting them is a way of defying our mortality and trying to live forever (2004: 83).

### 3. THE CLOSURE

On the one hand, like Walter Benjamin's storyteller, Christopher Banks and Kathy H. tell their story to construct a bridge between their past and the present time. Their storytelling deals with a past marked by tragedy and death and transforms it into a meaningful present. Their active agency in their narration is fundamentally different from that of Etsuko, Ono, Stevens or Ryder in Ishiguro's earlier novels and the tales of Christopher Banks' and Kathy H.'s lives and of the people who surround them are used as a means to come to term with truth and reality. This process is particularly true in the case of Kathy H. because, as Titus Levy suggests, "Recounting the past through narrative organization also allows Kathy to make sense of certain moments of her life, to contextualize individual instances of confusion into the stabilizing body of a coherent storyline" (2011: 11). The act of autobiographical storytelling, Duccio indicates, is deeply literary, as it needs three key moments to materialize into a tale: the moment of retrospection, the moment of interpretation and the final moment of creation ("they belong to the syntax of literary production" [1996: 18, my translation]). Thus, if art has not succeeded in demonstrating the clones' human nature, then Kathy's storytelling certainly does.

However, on the other hand, and following Arendt's line, storytelling becomes not only a way for the narrators to enter the public realm of speech, but also a way to publicly defy their ontological situation as victims. The key to understanding this process is the Arendtian notion of "speech", as it is through speech that a human being stresses his or her

uniqueness, his or her right “of living as a distinct and unique being among equals” (Arendt 1998: 178). The storyteller is able to fill the gaps between the past and the future with his or her story and to build up a present based on action, and we can categorize telling a story as action: “A life without speech and action . . . is literally dead to the world . . . . With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, *and this insertion is like a second birth*” (Arendt 1998: 176, emphasis in original). If we consider Arendt’s insights into the functions of *speech as action*, then Christopher Banks’ and Kathy H.’s auto/biographical stories can be read as strategies which positively resist their victimization as a lifelong identitarian condition.

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