

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# 'Something extra': In defence of an uncanny humanism

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## Abstract

This article proposes literature and psychoanalysis as forms of critical education, putting in urgent question the market-driven, instrumental models of learning that currently dominate higher education policy. In psychoanalytic terms, it argues, the primary mechanism at work in such a policy is what psychoanalysis calls splitting, which involves above all a kind of banishment of doubt and a rigid assurance in the rightness of the status quo that precludes meaningful change or transformation in the self and the world. The article goes on to identify in psychoanalysis and literature more 'unsplit' modes of thinking that refuse the reduction of the human being to a purely functional value. It ends with a reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as a critical meditation on this reductive tendency.

## KEYWORDS

humanism, Ishiguro, literature, psychoanalysis, uncanny

As I write, the senior management team of my university is targeting 14 academic posts (including my own) in the departments of English and Creative Writing and History, a proposal rooted in highly tendentious interpretations of student recruitment statistics by outside consultants with little knowledge of the relevant academic fields.

What is happening at Goldsmiths, the effective enlistment of the senior management of a humanities-focused institution in the government's ongoing agenda to denigrate and marginalise the humanities, is a small symptom of the radical instrumentalism that has taken hold in the UK and the USA. When, in May of this year, former Education Secretary Gavin Williamson talked up technical courses that fill gaps in the labour market while deriding 'dead-end

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university courses' (Hinsliff, 2021) that only pile on student debt, he was giving voice to an explicit conception of higher education as a feeder for industrial labour markets.

This agenda has the advantage of being self-fulfilling. The more a dominant rhetoric and ideology ties higher education to students' future economic prospects, the more we see the spread of what we might call a panic meritocracy, in which young people are tacitly coerced into signing up to a purely instrumental order of value. This is the climate in which enrolment on English literature degrees has fallen by a third in this country, and by over 20% in the USA, while recruitment to business degrees has risen exponentially.

The predicament has, of course, been chronically exacerbated by the severe impact of COVID-19 on university finances, providing an instant rationale for the kind of action we are seeing at Goldsmiths. There is a bitter irony to the way the pandemic has fuelled such drastic reactive panic measures; COVID might have offered the occasion to put in question the imperatives of productivity and profit. Instead, it is being used as the basis for the accelerated elimination of spaces for critical thought.

The impatience of the likes of Williamson with the arts and humanities is nicely coherent with the rhetoric and mode of governance of the so-called populist right. The vituperation of 'experts' and elites that fuelled the Brexit campaign drew on the same visceral appeal to common sense, represented in potently vague phrases like 'hard-working families', 'the left-behind' and the resurrected 'silent majority'. In these phrases, we hear an appeal to a gut wisdom, to a knowledge that is felt in the body with a force and clarity that requires no justification. As William Davies has recently put it, 'The nervous system, which produces pain, arousal, stress, excitement, becomes the main organ of political activity' (Davies, 2018, p. 16).

This 'nervous' model of knowledge is one in which convictions are verified from the inside, in an unassailable certainty felt at gut level, a kind of bodily repudiation of the facts and reasoning and analysis which suggest otherwise. This privilege of gut knowledge creates a public atmosphere congenitally inhospitable to doubt and uncertainty, to the 'dead-end course' of open, critical questioning.

An instrumentalist education policy is fully tailored to this mode of knowledge, in that its aim is to maintain both self and world as they are. This would explain its instinctive hostility towards imaginative life, which lives off the possibility that things might be other than they are. In learning so as to fill a gap in the labour market, I serve the needs of the world as it is, suspending in the process any role I might play in its questioning and eventual transformation.

Closely allied to this tendency is the increasing tendency of the global populist right to lay the blame for so much of the breakdown in 'traditional' social hierarchies and cultural values at the foot of critical theories. Across the USA, the key target of proliferating local hostility to proposals for anti-racist school curriculum and behavioural policy change is 'critical race theory'. In Brazil, Hungary and Poland, governments seek to mobilise popular fears for the creeping corrosion of family values and male authority by stirring up animosity towards 'gender theory'.

The campaigners against these specialised academic fields make no pretence of having read in them; on the contrary, only by remaining unread can they serve as the perfect projective screen for fantasies of a leftist conspiracy to indoctrinate children against their own whiteness and heterosexuality. The meaning of gender studies or critical race theory in this context is precisely the dangerous challenge it represents to the stability and authority of the existing order.

Labour market realism and visceral political rage against critical thought find common cause in the defence of the world as it is, or its restoration to a fantasy of what it was. And this block on worldly change implies in turn a fixed and resolutely incurious mode of selfhood. A narrowly vocational training (and there is no reason that a vocational training should be narrowly technical, devoid of reflection on, say, its own social and psychic meaning and function) is one that adds to the self's store of knowledge with no thought of changing it.

Cold instrumentalism and hot rage are both governed by that mode of thought psychoanalysis calls splitting (Freud, 1938). In a famous late fragment, 'Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence', Freud noted the ego's habit of responding to the apprehension of danger by splitting itself. On one side of this split, the danger is reluctantly acknowledged so that it can be denied or disavowed on the other. The ingenuity of this solution is that it affords simultaneous protection and exemption from the lurking menace.

Splitting carves out a space in the mind free from doubt or apprehension. In education, it promotes a mode of knowing rooted in factual and practical mastery. History, for example, is not an intricately knotted interplay of innumerable forces and actors, but a plodding sequence of successive events; on this model, its task can be framed as the establishment of an objective historical record or as a triumphal narrative of national and spiritual progress. In either case, it becomes a matter of splitting the facts from the ambiguities of interpretation and contestation.

This imperative to protect an accumulated body of knowledge from challenge or questioning goes hand in hand with a certain conception of the learning self, a kind of complacency in the self as it is, a renunciation of what Stanley Cavell provokingly calls (following Emerson) the *shame* of the self.

Shame has a particular and counter-intuitive function in Cavell's thought. He enjoins us to a process of perpetual self-examination and so of self-revision. This process is bound to confront us with feelings of shame, above all at our tendency to compliance, to accede passively to an external ideal of who we should be rather than take on the hard labour of discovering ourselves.

Cavell notes as a prime example the misleadingly Nietzschean resonances of the US Army's famous advertising slogan, 'Be all you can be'. The 'all' one could be in military training, he argues, is dictated from outside rather than discovered from within. Cavell may be too summarily dismissive of the potential transformative psychic effects of training as a soldier. But he is right to see in the ad campaign a conception of self-improvement as augmentation through the accumulation of skills, a prime instance of an additive rather than transformative mode of learning. Its aim is an expanded version of the self I already am, without much scope for being surprised by oneself.

Against such complacency, Cavell proposes what he calls a 'Perfectionism' that 'requires that we come ashamed in a particular way of ourselves, of our present stance... as a sign of consecration to the next self' (Cavell, 1990, p. 16).

It feels like an inopportune time to make a public case for either of the two regions of inquiry in which I've made my life: literature and psychoanalysis. Both practices are forms of insight and truth that cast perpetual suspicion on their own claims to insight and truth.

Precisely because she is set up by the very premise of psychoanalysis, namely, the curative effect of listening, as the one who knows, the analyst must keep constant watch over her claim to know. Roland Barthes suggests that literature inhabits the same tension. It is a language of lure, of spells cast by the invitation to listen to this story, this person, this image, this sound, this silence. And it invites the reader to doubt it, to resist its seductions, enjoy and dismiss it as mere literature. 'Writing', suggests Barthes, 'is the very discourse that unflinchingly baffles the arrogance of discourse' (Barthes, 2005, p.162); this it does not by renouncing that arrogance but by showing us the spell it has over us.

In an educational culture that prizes the arrogance of unquestioned convictions, the kind of thinking that casts doubt on the definitive claim to know assumes a surprisingly radical critical force. At stake is the question of which modes of learning can nurture the self's continued growth—and, by implication, which modes seek to fix the self in place.

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The split mode of knowledge is inhospitable to learning and to the very possibility of psychic health, precisely because it banishes the portions of the world it would prefer to know nothing of. Whatever force literature and psychoanalysis might have, I suggest, lies in their resistance to this compulsion to split.

Freud was interested from the first in the secret affinities between apparently opposed terms and concepts. In his short 1910 paper, 'The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words', he points to language as the medium that hosts these affinities. In archaic forms of various languages, opposite meanings can be signified by the very same word. He draws heavily on the 19th-century German philologist Karl Abel, who finds evidence in the history of language that the separation of 'two sides of an antithesis' was a fairly late development in the history of human consciousness. The Egyptians, for example, 'used to give one and the same phonetic vehicle to the most mutually inimical thoughts, and used to bind together in a kind of indissoluble union things that were in the strongest opposition to each other' (Freud, 1910, p. 157).

A similar development takes place in the development of the human being, whereby the clear differentiations and distinctions of adult consciousness cast into oblivion the indistinction of the infantile psychic life. Perhaps no thinker in psychoanalysis took up this theme more fruitfully than D.W. Winnicott in his theory of transitional space.

In his major essay, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena', first published in 1953 and revised in 1958, Winnicott offers an account of how an infant comes to discern a region of reality that is other to their own self. This comes about, he posits, through the discovery of transitional space, that is, a zone of experience that straddles psychic and external realities, that belongs neither to one nor the other but to both.

The 'transitional object' that famously inhabits this space, writes Winnicott, 'comes from without from our point of view, but not so from the point of view of the baby. Neither does it come from within; it is not a hallucination'. In other words, the object exists in an ambiguous space from which it should not be torn away prematurely. Rather than insist to the infant that they tell us if the object is real or imagined, we must respect the paradox of its existence between the two.

In declining to resolve the paradox, we sustain for the infant an imaginative life that will undergo so many evolutions in the course of their development, but that depends on the psyche's continued investment in a reality that is neither internal nor external.

For the infant, the transitional object is localised in a specific thing—a toy, a word, a blanket. As we get older, we progressively disinvest it; this is neither forgetting nor repression, but the 'diffusion' of transitional phenomena 'over the whole intermediate territory between "inner psychic reality" and "the external world as perceived by two persons in common", that is to say, over the whole cultural field' (Winnicott, 1958, p. 5).

The diffusion of transitional objects into the cultural field is the way in which the early forms of imaginative life are preserved and remade in the later forms. Culture is our means of remaining in contact with an 'unsplit' mode of experience. This isn't, of course, to endorse some regressive model of culture as a return to the primally undifferentiated; culture is not a retreat to the infantile mind, but the reminder of the insistence in us of a region of psychic life in which imaginary and real phenomena occupy the same space.

In the face of an education policy that splits the imaginary off from an impoverished reality, consigning it to the dead end of costly irrelevance, Winnicott's conception of illusion as an essential dimension of human experience takes on a surprising urgency. The steady demise of the arts and humanities through underfunding and rhetorical denigration won't merely compromise the intellectual and experiential range of future generations. It will help foreclose the possibility of education as an ongoing process of critical transformation of the self and the world.

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The relationship between education and the creative imagination is a recurring theme of fiction and poetry. I want to conclude this paper with a foray into the singular treatment of this relationship in one of the most acclaimed novels of this century.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) envisions an England of the late 1990s that has engendered a separate population of cloned humans whose organs are harvested during early adulthood, to be transferred into the bodies of naturally born humans suffering from disease. Its protagonists, the narrator Kathy and her friends Ruth and Tommy, have grown up as students in an experimental educational environment, the Hailsham school, where artistic creativity is prized above all other forms of achievement.

At the end of the novel, after Ruth has 'completed', or died following her last 'donation', Kathy and Tommy visit the founders of Hailsham and discover it has been closed down. Its former headmistress tells them that clones are now bred and raised in what are effectively human factory farms, with a view only to their strict function as a set of harvestable organs.

So surely Hailsham and the Cottages (where the students live after leaving Hailsham) and the real lives they facilitate are the preferable option? The ethical problem is that a life of this kind can only be structured by deceit. The students are encouraged to live as though they had an open-ended future, while knowing their true fate all the while.

'You see', says Miss Emily, 'we were able to give you something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by *sheltering* you. Hailsham would not have been Hailsham if we hadn't. Very well, sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you. Yes, in many ways we *fooled* you' (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 263).

The novel's devastating irony, in other words, is that its protagonists are able to live a semblance of a real life, with all its passions and ambivalences and pain and even joy, only through the effective simulation of a real life. The overseers of Hailsham do not tell its students that their lives are an elaborate fiction. Given that these lives will end alone, in the frequent agonies of multiple organ donation, we might see the perpetration of this deceit as the ultimate violation, damning Miss Emily and the Hailsham regime.

But perhaps matters are more complicated. After all, the deceit is hardly total. As they get older, the students become increasingly aware of the real purpose of their lives. Miss Lucy, one of Hailsham's 'guardians', feels they nonetheless remain prone to illusions about their futures. When she hears two students discussing becoming actors, she summons the senior class and tells them the unvarnished truth:

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. (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 80)

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this scene is the students' reaction, or rather the lack of it. Far from traumatising or outraging them, Miss Lucy's revelations go largely unregistered, inducing little more than mild embarrassment. When rumours of her talk circulate later, the focus is more on her state of mind than the content of what she's said—she must have 'lost her marbles' (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 81) or been coerced by Miss Emily into giving the talk.

In other words, when the clones are given the opportunity to live in the space of truth, to dispel the illusions they are living under, they decline it. Lucy's attempts to strip their world of fiction failed, because they were, Miss Emily says at the end of the novel, 'too *theoretical*' (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 262).

What does she mean? Lucy's attempts at truth-telling are rooted in an impoverished conception of truth, as though illusion were simply a discrete obstacle that truth could sweep from its path. In his book on religion, *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud, 1932), Freud dismisses religion as an effect of our unconscious fear of the fact of human helplessness; but he also says it cannot be for that reason swept aside, that illusion is integral to the texture of our experience. Lucy takes the first part of Freud's lesson but not the second; she tries to dispel illusion without understanding the structural place of illusion in the lives of clones—indeed, in the lives of all of us.

Which raises the question whether the clones of *Never Let Me Go* are an allegorical representation of 'the lives of all of us', as the critic James Wood, for example, has suggested. Wood sees the grimly utilitarian arc of clone life—bred in the service of power, permitted to live only for as long as they are useful—as a metaphor for our own lives as denizens of modernity, drained away in succeeding forms of drudgery until we finally give up and die.

While he may be right to suggest the clones offer a representation of our own lives, Wood misidentifies what they represent. It's worth noticing how, even in the absence of any prehistory or future, they repeat so many of the dramas and dilemmas of love, anger, fidelity, betrayal that figure in our own lives.

But rather than rehearsing some nihilist iteration of existentialism, the uncanny recognition the clones provoke in us is rooted in the fact that like us they live in a world of illusions and fictions. We live our actual selves alongside the unlive lives of our phantom selves, which the 'possible'—the imagined 'original' of the clone—embodies for the clone and which all kinds of 'possible' can embody for us: parents, siblings, friends, and... fictional characters. Isn't one of the seductions of fiction, of that peculiar readerly mechanism known as 'identification', that it allows us to feel ourselves into the emotional and experiential life of another?

Winnicott took Freud's idea of the structural place of illusion in human life and deepened it immeasurably. In transitional space, as we've seen, imaginative and factual lives co-exist in a state of delicate non-differentiation. The teddy is both a real bear with a history and autonomous power of speech and movement, and a stuffed toy. We preserve and

protect imaginative life by not insisting that the child chooses between the reality they create and the reality they find. That is why, says Winnicott, we never ask the question, 'did you create it or was it found?', that is, did you imagine it or is it real? The question itself does violence to the delicate and intricate weave of the illusory and the real in our everyday lives.

This is what Miss Lucy fails to understand in her well-meaning struggle to tell the students the honest, unvarnished truth about their futures. She is forcing them to decide for reality against illusion. Not for nothing is the illusion she picks on the ambitions of two boys to become actors, the ultimate purveyors of illusion.

The protagonists of *Never Let Me Go* are deprived of the developmental drama that comes of existing in the continuum between past and future. And yet reading the novel, unlike the horrified Madame, we experience these characters as fully human nonetheless. There is some dimension of the human that persists even in the absence of any transgenerational transmission—and the novel hints that this dimension is the imagination.

Somehow, even in the absence of the histories of previous generations and the inherited patterning of emotional interaction, the clones have a capacity to conceal their own motivations from, and to deceive, both themselves and one another. And this capacity is what, in a different context, we might call the unconscious.

This tension, between a kind of clonish flatness or anonymity, and the singular inner life of an individual, is also present in the style of the Kathy's narration. Many critics have commented on Ishiguro's predilection for narrators whose emotional range is restricted, whose language often tends to banality and cliché: 'Now I know my being a carer so long isn't necessarily because they think I'm fantastic at what I do' (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 3), she tells in the novel's opening—a chattily colloquial voice devoid of the lyricism or perceptual intensity we've come to expect of 'literary' fiction.

We can think of Kathy's voice as another instance of the imitative or mimetic tendency of the clones; she speaks with the exaggerated normalcy of some phantom 'average person'. But this mimetic tendency may also be one of the ways in which any sharp differentiation between clone and non-clone is troubled. Perpetually saturated by fictions of one kind or another, hasn't imitation become one of the great contagions of our age?

But while it might be persistently ordinary, Kathy's voice isn't interchangeable. The singularity of her own inner life—its insights, blind spots, pains and joys—at various points breaks through the smooth surface of her prose. When she recalls the discovery of Madame spying on her in her private reverie, singing and swaying to 'Never Let Me Go' as she holds an imaginary baby to her breast, she sees 'the same look in her eyes she always had when she looked at us, like she was seeing something that gave her the creeps'. But there is also something more, an excess in the gaze that seems new: 'this time there was something else, something extra in the look that I couldn't fathom' (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 71).

What is this 'something extra'? What Kathy sees in Madame's eyes is her own unfathomability. The idea of cloning humans in order to harvest their vital organs rests on a conception of them as reducible to bare biological life, a limited quantity. If there is 'something extra' to the clone, something that makes them more than a quantum of bodily parts, the entire project of cloning becomes impossible to sustain.

Kathy charges the song with a meaning she knows it doesn't support, grafting onto it the story of a woman imploring the baby she thought she couldn't have to never let her go. Years later, she puts to Madame, or Marie-Claude, that in bearing witness to her that day, she may have read Kathy's mind. But Marie-Claude replies that she's no mind-reader, and that she had read the scene differently, seeing rather a girl 'holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain' (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 267).

Both interpretations of the scene are, to use another of Kathy's pointedly mundane words, 'sad'; that is, they both read the scene as staging an experience of loss—for Kathy, a loss of her future (babies, but also the birth of her own self), for Marie-Claude, a loss of the past, of the 'old kind world', the stone mother of Hailsham that fooled its children into believing their lives had some value beyond the biological.

Both readings, of course, are fictions, an attempt to fix meaning to the bottomless ambiguities of words and gestures. In bearing witness to this loss, Kathy and Marie-Claude alike alight on this 'something extra' that arises

whenever and wherever a human being enters the scene, the unquantifiable excess that ensures that a person's, cloned or not, will always be more than biological.

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The human, Ishiguro suggests, is defined above all by an excess, a 'something extra' beyond capture or measure. *Never Let Me Go*, and perhaps his entire output, give voice to what we might call an uncanny humanism, a conception of the self as defined by its own excess, figured above all in creative life, which enables the clone to undergo change and growth in spite of the privations of past and future.

This is a stance strikingly close to what the Franco-Jewish philosopher Emanuel Lévinas called a 'Humanism of the Other Person' (Lévinas, 2005), that is, a humanism directed not towards the self already known and codified by biology, law, anthropology or any other discipline, but towards the fundamental alterity of both myself and the other.

Uncanny humanism might also be a name for the project of psychoanalysis, and for a counterfoil to the restrictive instrumentalism—a drive to productivity without meaning beyond itself—that increasingly weighs down all stages of education today.

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