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Nothing New under the Sun: Planned Obsolescence in Ishiguro's *Klara*

Adam Parkes

Abstract: In this article, I argue that Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) reveals obsolescence to be a central preoccupation of his fiction. Further, I contend, obsolescence not only furnishes Ishiguro's novels with content but also informs their narrative structures and language. A brief look at his two early novels, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), shows how their narrators are overtaken by the unplanned obsolescence that results from realignments of imperial systems in the time of postwar capitalism. But in *Klara*, as in *Never Let Me Go* (2005), the obsolescence experienced by Ishiguro's narrators is planned, that is, it is the fully expected outcome of contemporary social systems run on technocratic lines. After exploring, in detail, the formal and stylistic means by which *Klara* articulates its overarching theme, I suggest that Ishiguro's new book encourages us to ask searching questions about the state and status of the novel as a literary genre in a 21st-century culture of planned obsolescence: the means by which capitalism generates, sustains, and even expands consumer demand by producing commodities that, sooner or later, must be replaced or updated.

Key words: Ishiguro; novel; obsolescence; technocracy; capitalism

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标题: 太阳之下无新意：石黑一雄小说《克拉拉与太阳》中的计划性报废

内容摘要: 我在本文中指出，石黑一雄的小说《克拉拉与太阳》（2021）表明，“报废”概念是其小说里处心积虑关注的议题。此外，我认为“报废”概念不仅为石黑一雄的小说提供了素材，而且展现其小说的叙事结构和语言。简单扼要地回顾一下他早先的两部小说，《浮世画家》（1986）和《长日留痕》（1989），就能揭示两位叙事者如何因为战后资本主义时期帝国制度重新洗牌，结果被非计划性的“报废”所困扰。然而，

在《克拉拉与太阳》一书里，如同《别让我走》（2005）一样，叙事者经历的“报废”是计划性的，即它是预想中运作于技术官僚生产线的当代社会制度的产物。在详细探讨《克拉拉与太阳》如何运用形式和文体技巧来阐释其包罗万象的主题之后，我想提示，石黑一雄的新著鼓励我们针对小说作为 21 世纪计划性“报废”文化中的一种文学体裁，探索性地质疑其现状与地位。所谓计划性“报废”文化指的是资本主义利用一系列手段来生产迟早必须要替换或更新的商品，进而创造、维持、甚至扩大消费者的需求。

关键词：石黑一雄；小说；报废；技术官僚；资本主义

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“I guess you may not be here when I get back. You’ve been just great, Klara. You really have” (K 297). Those are almost the last words that the American teenager Josie Arthur offers the narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro’s new novel, *Klara and the Sun* (2021). A few years earlier, Klara had been purchased to serve as Josie’s AF, or Artificial Friend, supposedly in order to provide company for a lonely girl who is often sick, but also to learn how to model her patterns of conduct, thought, and feeling – her entire personality, in fact – so that when Josie dies, as is anticipated, Klara will be able to take her place. The point, as is explained to Klara once she is apprised of the Arthur family’s secret, is not to replace Josie but to “continue” her (210). The body swap is meant to be seamless, so much so that even Josie’s mother (who would be the real beneficiary, after all) wouldn’t be able to tell the difference. When Josie makes an unexpected recovery, one that Klara attributes to the “special nourishment” provided by the Sun (205), the plan is shelved and, soon afterward, so is Klara as she is rendered redundant once Josie leaves for college. As we learn shortly before her narrative closes, Klara has been telling her story while languishing in the Yard, the technocrat’s updated version of the knacker’s yard. In the bland euphemistic language of modern corporate bureaucracy, she has become obsolete.

Klara and the Sun discloses obsolescence as an abiding concern of Ishiguro’s fiction. Not only does obsolescence provide subject matter for several of his novels, it also shapes their narrative form and style – is, indeed, a key motive informing his stylistic decisions. In *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), two novels of the late 20th century that look back to the pre-war period from a post-war vantage, the obsolescence that overtakes the protagonist-narrator is unplanned. The changes experienced by Masuji Ono, the Japanese painter who narrates Ishiguro’s *Artist*, and Stevens, the butler-narrator of *Remains*, result from unforeseen and, perhaps, unforeseeable realignments in the global-imperial world system. In Ono’s case, Japan’s defeat in World War Two exposes him to the scrutiny of

a new post-war generation that regards him and his work – highly valued under the imperial regime – as politically suspect. In *Remains*, Stevens' iron fidelity to his aristocratic employer not only blinds him to the latter's Nazi sympathies, but also leaves him ill-equipped for the post-war world, in which his only remaining function is as much to play the *part* of butler for Darlington Hall's rich new American owner as actually to *be* a butler. In each novel, the narrator's loyalty to (and willing collaboration with) an imperialistic and rigidly hierarchical social order leaves him badly exposed when the old regime falls away, as was the case with Britain and, even more emphatically, Japan. While Ono and Stevens focus on questions of personal responsibility and guilt, their stories imply wider historical narratives about the consequences for individuals of large systemic changes, over which they exert no direct control. But the obsolescence that afflicts them at the time of narration (1948-50 in *Artist* and 1956 in *Remains*) is an accident of regime-change, one detail in a broad landscape of collateral damage. Although it might look inevitable in retrospect, no one planned it, or planned for it.

In contrast, the forms of obsolescence conjured in Ishiguro's 21st-century fiction are planned. *Never Let Me Go* (2005), a contemporary variation on Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), is the story of clones who are bred in order to supply vital organs for transplant operations for contemporary England's non-clone population. It is expected that most clones will die, or "complete" (N 3), after three procedures; the clones know this as well as the non-clones. Planned obsolescence, in other words, is a widely recognized and accepted component of life in the late-capitalist post-industrial world – the realm of what Foucault called "bio-power" (140), by means of which political institutions regulate and control all aspects of human existence. One of the most interesting implications of Ishiguro's exploration of such issues in *Never Let Me Go* is that by raising the question of what makes us human, he asks us to consider how, if at all, the laws of bureaucracy and instrumentality might distinguish between the human and the non-human. And if such a distinction can't be sustained (a conclusion reached by readers who end Kathy's narrative feeling that clones are no less human than ourselves), then on what grounds are non-clones to be imagined as protected from the predations of late-capitalist instrumentalism?

In *Klara*, Ishiguro poses similar questions, but he also takes another step. Unlike the earlier novel's clones, who are manufactured from genetic material, the AFs encountered in his new book are fabricated in a very literal sense: they are made from textiles and other non-human components. Is it possible, then, to replicate humanity by using nothing but entirely non-human materials? Is it possible, moreover, that everything we take to be human is actually, inescapably material? And that, if we want to look for a critical vantage-point from which to examine such prospects, cultural materialism will cover it?

The novel itself stages such questions, sometimes quite pointedly. Shortly after learning the real purpose of her acquisition by the Arthurs, Klara finds herself deep in conversation

with Josie's father, Paul, who is having doubts. "Do you suppose you can pull it off?" he asks Klara. "Perform this role" (K 215) When Klara offers her cautiously affirmative reply, he persists in his own inquisitorial role:

Do you believe in the human heart? I don't mean simply the organ, obviously. I'm speaking in the poetic sense. The human heart. Do you think there is such a thing? Something that makes each of us special and individual. And if we just suppose that there is. Then don't you think, in order to truly learn Josie, you'd have to learn not just her mannerisms but what's deeply inside her? Wouldn't you have to learn her heart? (215)

The doubts driving these questions originate in a familiar humanist discourse that also circulates in *Never Let Me Go* among the "guardians" (N 5), the non-clones who debate whether clones have souls and employ student art as a means to adjudicate the question. In the passage I have just quoted from *Klara*, the questions matter to the person asking them, in part because he himself has been made redundant: an expert engineer and formerly a "rising star" at a nearby chemical plant, Paul has been "substituted. Like all the rest of them," and has since joined a separatist community of similarly displaced professionals who have been spat out by the very system that produced them (K 99). His early obsolescence is such a sensitive subject that he's reminded of it even by his estranged wife's car, which he had helped her choose: "For a while she was keen on a German car, but I told her this one would be more dependable. Well, I wasn't wrong. At least, it's outlasted *me*" (212).

To Henry Capaldi, the scientific expert overseeing the surely formidable though barely specified process of replacing Josie with Klara, both the psychology underlying Paul's anxieties and the ethics behind his misgivings belong to a "sentimental" discourse on humanity that is itself rendered obsolete by ever-escalating advances in science and technology. When Chrissie Arthur, Josie's mother, asks if Klara really will be able to "continue Josie for me" (K 207), Capaldi reels off a reply that reads like a prepared statement:

"Yes, she can," Mr. Capaldi said. "And now Klara's completed the survey up there, I'll be able to give you scientific proof of it. Proof she's already well on her way to accessing quite comprehensively all of Josie's impulses and desires. The trouble is, Chrissie, you're like me. We're both of us sentimental. We can't help it. Our generation still carry the old feelings. A part of us refuses to let go. The part that wants to keep believing there's something unreachable inside each of us. Something that's unique and won't transfer. But there's nothing like that now. *You* know that. For people our age it's a hard one to let go, Chrissie. There's nothing there. Nothing inside Josie that's beyond the Klaras of this world to continue. The second Josie won't be a copy. She'll be the exact same and you'll

have every right to love her just as you love Josie now. It's not faith you need. Only rationality. I had to do it, it was tough but now it works for me just fine. And it will for you." (207-8)

Change the names and other specific points of reference, and who hasn't encountered such reasoning before? Not only are there echoes of, say, Lord Darlington's rationalization of the decision to fire his Jewish maids in *The Remains of the Day*, but also the key terms of the argument to which Capaldi refers – science and reason versus faith and feeling – have shaped every Western debate about technological modernity since the Enlightenment. Capaldi by name, Capaldi by nature: possibly deriving from *caput* (head),^① which may also suggest *baldy* and its anagram *badly*, Ishiguro's scientist—in *Klara*'s rendering—delivers the placid words expressing placid thoughts appropriate to a character whose name is an anagram of *placida* (close, in turn, to *placebo*). These are not only the ideas of the machine-age. They are spelled out in language that feels as if written by algorithm like the automated financial reports now widely used by news agencies.^②

This sort of writing confronts the reader with several difficulties. One is bound up with the problem of narrative reliability, which is already so familiar to readers of Ishiguro's fiction that it may seem that the only way to solve it would be to invent an artificial friend who is incapable of lying – except that, like any fictional narrator, *Klara*, too, has her limits, as Ishiguro makes clear by giving her a perceptual apparatus that arranges the visual field in boxes. And, as is the case with Stevens, Kathy H., and every other Ishiguro narrator, *Klara*'s knowledge is full of gaps and low on organizing frameworks—is, in other words, unmistakably human, a recognition that feels inescapable once we notice her exceeding her much-remarked capacity for observation and absorption by snooping about Capaldi's office complex and eavesdropping on his conversations with Josie's parents. That is to say, *Klara* proves to be another variation on the Ishiguro theme of unreliable narration, a theme that has precipitated a series of novels structured in very similar ways, each part adopting a different temporal point of view as the narrator works cautiously and often indirectly over memories of a troubling past. It seems plain that Ishiguro is making it peculiarly difficult for himself to achieve what Ford Madox Ford (78) identified as one of a novelist's most important goals: surprise. For if *Never Let Me Go* clones *The Remains of the Day* in various ways, it has found its own clone in *Klara and the Sun*, another narrative divided into multiple parts. This time, however, Ishiguro refrains from offering even a vague reference to decade, which presumably signifies that conventional markers of historical time register still less with an AF than with a clone.^③

The double familiarity of theme and structure is reproduced by the extended debate between heart and head carried on by Paul Arthur and Henry Capaldi in their respective conversations with *Klara* and *Chrissie*, each of whom serves as a temporary sounding board for

a domineering male character. Capaldi speaks for the head, as we have seen, and Paul for the heart; and Klara, herself in search of sympathy, responds with especial favor to the “poetic sense” of the latter’s appeal (*K* 215). Yet the debate scene is a staple of the Western philosophical novel, one that itself has a long history of comic parody originating in the drama of Aristophanes and winding through the satirical fiction of Thomas Love Peacock to such moderns as Aldous Huxley and Samuel Beckett. It’s long been so familiar, in other words, that it would be a cliché to call it a cliché. Consequently, Ishiguro’s reader faces another difficulty, which is to say another form of over-familiarity. The form is familiar, the content is familiar, the language is familiar. Is there nothing new under the sun? The long shadow of obsolescence not only looms over this fiction, whose narrator remarks early in her tale on the shared expectation that AIs are eventually replaced by new models. Obsolescence seems to be encoded in the narrative itself and even in Klara’s sentences.

Echoing the well-known flatness of Kathy H.’s language in *Never Let Me Go*, Klara’s narration gives that flatness new prominence by converting it into a mechanism for producing stylistic obsolescence. The mechanical quality of Klara’s speech, which we have already observed, manifests itself early on:

Rex went on smiling until after the customers had left, and even after that, showed no sign of being sad. But that’s when I remembered about him making that joke, and I was sure then that those questions about the Sun, about how much of his nourishment we could have, had been in Rex’s mind for some time. (*K* 7)

The double repetition of the preposition “about” enacts the very redundancy that shapes the horizons of expectation within which Klara operates. She isn’t always a smooth operator, of course, and when we see her trip over her own syntax, as she does a few pages later, we may want to interpret such moments simply as signs of her difficulties in learning to use the English language, or possibly as indices of distinct personhood: “At first I wanted Rosa to do as I was” (19), Klara says, rather than “do as I was doing” or “do as I did.” Yet the syntactical stumble is a well-recognized part of the narrative landscape of Ishiguro’s novels. We see it in *Never Let Me Go* when, for example, Kathy characterizes Tommy’s expression as one “almost of wonder, like I was a rare butterfly he’d come across on a fence-post” (*N* 195). And in *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens’ excessively cautious mode of address quickly betrays itself into stylistic infelicity: “The idea of such a journey came about, I should point out...” (*R* 3). Infelicity and redundancy, we might add, and as the circumlocutions and qualifiers accumulate, infelicity itself begins to register as a language of redundancy. Typically, the syntactical detours and stumbles of Ishiguro’s narrators express anxiety and stress, but by the time we encounter Klara’s version, the sense of familiarity feels like over-familiarity. Ishiguro is not only chal-

lenging us to deny that we have heard it all before; he is asking us to admit that we, too, have done this before – to recognize ourselves as readers of an Ishiguro novel. He makes us feel like our own clones, or reading machines.

The encoding of this pervasive sense of obsolescence in the novel's narrative form merits further consideration. It accounts not only for the terms of the head-heart debate, but also for the equivocations expressed by the participants and even the structural resemblances their doubts assume in the book as a whole. Paul's technical expertise has given way to express technophobia, but if the biblical associations of his name imply that he has seen the light, it seems far from clear what light might mean when he confesses to hating Capaldi "because deep down I suspect he may be right":

That what he claims is true. That science has now proved beyond doubt there's nothing so unique about my daughter, nothing there our modern tools can't excavate, copy, transfer. That people have been living with one another all this time, centuries, loving and hating each other, and all on a mistaken premise. A kind of superstition we kept going while we didn't know better. That's how Capaldi sees it, and there's a part of me that fears he's right. (*K* 221)

However much Josie's mother wants Capaldi's plan to work, Paul continues, she's just too "old-fashioned" to accept it. "But I'm different," he says:

I have ... a kind of coldness inside me she lacks. Perhaps it's because I'm an expert engineer, as you put it. This is why I find it so hard to be civil around people like Capaldi. When they do what they do, say what they say, it feels like they're taking from me what I hold most precious in this life. (222; original ellipsis)

Klara deduces from all this that Capaldi's proposal "is never put to the test" (222), and therefore enlists Paul's help in sabotaging what she calls the Cootings Machine, which she blames for making Josie ill by polluting the environment. Paul obliges by draining some "P-E-G Nine solution" from Klara herself, a modest quantity of which he estimates will be enough "to incapacitate a middle-market machine such as that one" (223). And so the 21st-century Luddite abandons the science in which he really believes for the anachronistic role of romantic rebel, one that never really suits a character whose conformist instincts betray themselves in his initial response to Klara's request: "what you're proposing would count as criminal damage" (221). Like his habitation among other disgruntled obsolescents, Paul's rebelliousness itself seems a kind of conformism that is already factored into the very technocratic system by which he was produced and then excreted. Hence the familiarity, to contemporary American

eyes and ears, of Paul's community, which an Arthur family neighbor describes as appealing to his naturally "fascistic leanings" (228). Armed, all-white, drawn from "the ranks of the former professional elites," and hostile to "different groups" in a society that is said to be "naturally divided" (229), Paul Arthur and the "very fine people" he counts as his "new friends" (228) bear some resemblances to the gun-toting white supremacist militias that Donald Trump defended after Charlottesville.^④ They are certainly far from being the king and knights of a new Camelot.

As well as turning the tables on Paul's vaunted anti-authoritarianism and anti-instrumentalism, Klara's narrative records a similar inversion of Capaldi's self-conception or self-image. Only a few years after occupying the van of technological progress, Capaldi himself encounters widespread public criticism, implying his own potential obsolescence. Now that AFs are the object of widespread suspicion, which means that their market-value is on the slide, the genetic engineer faces going out of business, leading to a desperate new plea couched, disingenuously, in the language of principled resistance:

Klara, the fact is, there's growing and widespread concern about AFs right now. People are saying how you've become too clever. They're afraid because they can't follow what's going on inside any more. They can see what you do. They accept that your decisions, your recommendations, are sound and dependable, almost always correct. But they don't like not knowing how you arrive at them. That's where it comes from, this backlash, this prejudice. So we have to fight back. (K 293)

As his character makes this self-serving case, Ishiguro intimates that as soon as technological modernity meets consumer skepticism, let alone hostility, it appropriates the language of social justice and resistance as an instrument of renewed self-promotion. Capaldi's professed aim is to win Klara's assent to premature termination for the sake of science: "We've already succeeded in opening a number of black boxes," he tells her, "but we really need to open up a whole lot more. [...] I know you'll be uniquely useful to us. Please, will you help?" (294). What he is proposing, however, is another version of "completion" in *Never Let Me Go*.

Whereas the earlier book's clones usually try to extend their lifespan as far as possible and even hope for "deferral" (N 153), the idea this time is to prolong a scientific experiment – and, crucially, its commercial viability – by accelerating the subject's demise. This macabre and utterly self-interested proposition is framed, predictably by now, as altruism: "This is a chance for her to make a lasting contribution," Capaldi pleads when Josie's mother objects that he's departing from what they had agreed (K 294). But Chrissie Arthur, insisting Klara "deserves her slow fade," tells Capaldi to "resist [...] elsewhere," which reduces him to the banalities of personal slight and resentment: "I just did my best to help you [...] that's no rea-

son for you to be so mad at me all the time” (294-95). And so the romantic clichés of political resistance lapse into the even softer clichés of hurt feelings. Just as the obsolete engineer's rhetoric of the heart belies his underlying faith in scientific rationalism, a figure representing the generation that superseded him reverts to the very same language when it, too, faces the prospect of obsolescence. But the deeper point here is that while both participants in the head-heart debate employ the same rhetorical manoeuvres, any seeming complications in the positions they take appear to be already accounted for by an all-encompassing instrumentalist logic of perpetual creation and destruction. Not only, then, does Ishiguro's novel suggest that everything new is destined to grow old, but it also makes clear that the cycle itself simply enacts a mechanical species of repetition. Intimations of obsolescence turn into a routine. Nothing new to see here, in other words, and that's the point. It is, in fact, the plan.

None of this is to say that *Klara* disables humanist readings entirely, but this new novel does make them more difficult to launch and to sustain. Just as *Never Let Me Go* shapes the situation of its clones as a “metaphor for the human condition” (Ishiguro, quoted in Parkes 180), so too *Klara and the Sun* asks us to consider the AF as a new figure for humanity stripped down to some essential functions including, preeminently, functionality itself. In the same way as comedy shows us as better than we are in order to suggest that we might aim higher than we are used to, and as satire shows us as worse than we are in order to suggest that we *must* aim higher while implying (especially in its Juvenalian form) that it isn't in our nature to do so, Ishiguro shears away much of the conventional stuff and stuffing of literary realism to reveal a barebones model of human life. We are made by means unknown to ourselves; we start to breathe, feel, see, think, talk; others help us; we help others; they move on to the next phase of their lives, and we are no longer needed; we may meet a sudden end, but more likely is a “slow fade” (*K* 294) that lets us wind down, sift through our memories, perhaps tell our story, if we're lucky find someone to listen; and then, at some point unknown to ourselves, we stop altogether. Such is Klara's life; such is our life. It's just that the situation Ishiguro describes here involves accelerating some parts of the story, editing or truncating others, in order to sharpen the sense that we are being “squeeze[d],” as James Wood puts it in an astute observation on the metaphysics of *Never Let Me Go* (25). In *Klara*, Ishiguro squeezes hard again by probing once more the possibility of an artificially manufactured humanity.

In *Klara*, as in *Never Let Me Go*, moreover, Ishiguro transposes his metaphysics, together with ethical concerns about sympathy and identification, onto the plane of literary style, which again closely resembles a kind of anti-style. Indeed, if Kathy's style in *Never Let Me Go* is flat, Klara's is even flatter, and more consistently so. Previously, I have proposed that in Kathy H.'s narrative, Ishiguro's writing “exaggerate[s] its own plainness” in order to maximize the pressure on the habitual readerly tendency or desire to sympathize with a narrator whose situation is undeniably and painfully unjust (Parkes 174). In this way, I argued, Ishiguro opens

a gap between ethics and aesthetics that challenges his reader either to find a new way to reconcile them or to accept the consequences of their separation. Further, I suggested that even when accesses of lyricism seem to close the gap – a reading that feels especially tempting at the end of Kathy’s narrative when she sees “acres of ploughed earth” (*N* 287) – we may also read such episodes as knowing imitation or cloning of a mainstream novelistic mode that Zadie Smith has characterized as “lyrical realism” (74).

If a sense of stylistic familiarity colors our response to the final moments of Kathy’s story, making us hesitate about the degree of our identification with her plight, Ishiguro places us in a similar situation at the end of *Klara and the Sun*. The last event narrated by Klara concerns a visit from the woman who ran the store from which the Arthurs purchased her in Part One. Manager, as Klara calls her, has also become obsolete, and for her pains now has a limp that in some fashion mirrors Klara’s own state of disrepair. Confessing that she “like[s] to collect little souvenirs” (*K* 301), Manager has nothing new to say, repeating the same old lines about Klara’s “remarkable [...] observational abilities” and “unusual insight” that we heard earlier (300). Klara, by contrast, has learned to say new things. She realizes, in particular, that it would have been impossible to “continue” Josie: “I believe now there would have remained something beyond my reach. The Mother, Rick, Melania Housekeeper, the Father. I’d never have reached what they felt for Josie in their hearts” (301-2). She rejects Capaldi’s materialistic theory of reproducible selfhood, because “he was searching in the wrong place. There *was* something very special, but it wasn’t inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her” (302). Echoing Paul’s language of feeling, Klara reformulates it by displacing the heart from the singular person to the several other subjects in whom Josie inspires various and variously compromised forms of love. Expressing affective imagination, Klara also demonstrates some sort of intellectual agency.^⑤

The extent of that imagination and the degree of agency are held in check, not only by what Klara says next, but by the familiar shaping of the narrative frame in which this closing episode occurs. Klara’s final words to Manager insist once again on the kindness of the Sun, in which she invests a faith that her and Josie’s friend Rick has already attributed to what he calls “AF superstition” (*K* 287). Again, the limits of Klara’s perspective seem transparent. And then, exchanging farewells, she describes Manager’s departure in cool, controlled language that evokes Kathy H.’s more emotionally-charged vision of the ploughed field, with its “cluster of three or four trees” and “two lines of barbed wire” adorned with scraps of “strange rubbish” (*N* 287-88):

She reached down to the metal crate she’s been sitting on, and dragged it back to its original position, making the same unpleasant noise. She then walked away down the long passage between the rows, and it was noticeable how she walked differently to the

way she had in the store. With each second step, she would lean to her left in a way that made me worry her long coat on that side might touch the dirty ground. When she was mid-distance, she stopped and turned, and I thought she might look back one last time at me. But she was gazing at the far distance, in the direction of the construction crane on the horizon. Then she continued to walk away. (*K* 303)

This passage hardly invites us to speak of “euphonic elevation,” a phrase David James (498) applies to Kathy’s closing epiphany in *Never Let Me Go*. But in their subdued manner, Klara’s last words do invite imaginative engagement “in the poetic sense,” as she puts it earlier (*K* 216), echoing Paul’s invocation of the heart. Two figures, both in physical disrepair; a metal crate; a long coat, a dirty floor; machinery in the background: it’s like a stage-set for a Beckettian drama of “dehiscence” that reduces even the “most complacent solidities” to a state of “irreparable dissociation” (Beckett 82).

Manager, like Klara and industrial machinery, proves susceptible to material breakdown, but minds don’t necessarily fare better than bodies. What is the quality of Manager’s gaze “at the far distance, in the direction of the construction crane on the horizon” (*K* 303)? Is she looking at anything in particular – the crane, illustrating materiality; or the horizon, suggesting aspiration as well as limitation; or even the sky, conventionally associated with wonder and, in post-romantic literature, lyrical self-transcendence? Or is she merely looking vaguely, emptily, in a certain “direction”? And what about Klara? The objects of her perception, unlike Manager’s, are concrete, but what is she thinking or feeling as she watches Manager walk away? She notices Manager’s limp; she expresses “worry” (whatever that means here) that her coat might get soiled; she seems to hope that Manager will “look back one last time.” But while “thought” may imply hope or yearning, it may mean no more than what it says: thought without affective content. If there are any points of elevation on the level plains of Klara’s discourse, they must be sought between the lines on the printed page. Even more than in *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro’s prose challenges a common post-romantic presumption that pauciloquence translates into vitality and authenticity, or that silence, rather than vacuous, may be richly evocative. It’s hard not to feel that the reader is being asked to work harder than the narrator only to find that we’re repeating interpretative processes that have been reactivated numerous times before. Which is a little flattening.

What makes all the difference here is precisely this apprehension of over-familiarity in a fictional world without an awful lot of room for wonder. Haven’t we been here before? That the question itself no longer feels new may tell us something important about the arc of Ishiguro’s larger project. It may also tell us something important about Ishiguro’s sense of the novel both as a literary form and as a material object of cultural production at a very late stage of capitalism, when the industrialization of the novel – a source of self-reflexive repre-

sensation one hundred years ago in Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) – is moving at an increasing speed from physical to digital space. And not only that: shortly after I began drafting this article, I watched a recording of a television program about so-called synthetic media, or “deepfakes,” manipulations of digital media that compete with images of real people (*Sixty Minutes*). As a literary form centrally concerned with the lifelike representation of humanity, the novel (like drama) has already faced serious competition from photography, film, and television, but has managed to turn each crisis into a new opportunity for innovation, a point forcefully made by such critics as Nancy Armstrong and Jonathan Foltz. Competing not merely with cinematic and photographic representations of fictional people, but now with live images of actual people, deepfakes seem to exacerbate the difficulties of the novel's historical situation. Or, at least, to invite an even higher degree of historical self-consciousness and self-questioning in a literary form that retains much of the considerable prestige it enjoyed in Western culture one hundred years ago.

What do we want from the novel now? What do we want from it that we haven't had before? Or is the point that what we want is precisely what we have had before? But if that is so, isn't novel reading in danger of becoming obsolete, and with it the form of the novel itself? Dating back at least as far as the writings of Ortega y Gasset and Walter Benjamin in the modernist period, and frequently repeated ever since,^⑥ intimations of the death of the novel are even older than those of the death of the author. Ishiguro himself has often been associated with the rejuvenation of a form that seemed to be flagging – especially in Britain. What this thumbnail history indicates is not that the novel really is in danger of dying but that at various historical junctures it has succeeded in transforming apprehensions of its own imminent demise into material for further production.

In any case, as Kathleen Fitzpatrick has argued in a trenchant study of contemporary American fiction, declarations of the death of the novel in the media age often express a writer's underlying anxiety about waning significance combined with an ambition to construct an embattled outpost of authentic literary value amid the conflicting forces of modern democratic culture. In Pynchon, DeLillo, and Franzen, for example, Fitzpatrick (7) finds that the mythical death of the novel expresses the “self-protective and potentially elitist impulses” of white male authors who feel threatened by television audiences assumed to be predominantly female and often non-white: the sort of impulses that Ishiguro satirizes by transplanting them to the non- or post-literary context represented by Paul Arthur's community of redundant professionals in *Klara and the Sun*.

That satirical counter-impulse feels especially telling in an author who had earlier been associated with a resurgence of fictional creativity in a literary form that struck many observers as on the backfoot. With the publication of *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) the year after Salman Rushdie's Booker winning *Midnight's Children* (1981), followed by *An Artist of the*

Floating World in 1986, Ishiguro appeared to many critics, then as later, as “leading an energetic new wave in English fiction” at a time when it seemed to have become a safely middle-class genre (Vorda and Herzinger 69). Ishiguro himself contributed to that account of the late 20th-century scene, by observing in a 1990 interview that the “sleepy, provincial, cozy, inward looking” fiction written in Britain during the 1970s had looked like the “preserve” of a very small stratum of British society: “We all had this image of contemporary British novels being written by middle-aged women for middle-aged middle-class women” (77). Yet Ishiguro’s 21st-century fiction has attained a different – and differently gendered – level of literary and historical self-consciousness. He has never been a technophobe, noting in the same interview that the “exciting things [...] happening [...] in the creative arts” of his youth had included rock music, cinema, and television, as well as theater (69).

But having written about obsolescence during much of his career, Ishiguro’s later meditations on the theme invite further reflection on the fate, as well as the function, of writing and reading in the age of digitization, synthetic media, and generative adversarial networks. What does reading a novel about artificial friends offer that digital avatars or deepfakes do not? What does writing such a novel offer? Are writers and readers destined merely to reenact the same roles, repeat the same routines? Has Ishiguro himself turned out to be another avatar of Ono, Stevens, Kathy, or Klara? Do his novels project an image of the reader as the author’s own Josie – or his Manager, happy to revisit an old friend, collect a few souvenirs, but inevitably walking away?

Perhaps, the real question here – Ishiguro’s question about his work and his readers, but also about the 21st-century novel in the culture of planned obsolescence – concerns what will run out first: supply or demand? But, then, the very act of asking that question, and that question framed in that way, may be to miss what Ishiguro is really implying about the fears of exhaustion and replacement that intimations of obsolescence also express. Isn’t it the case that during a long career many authors write the same novel over and over, just as a poet may write and rewrite the same poem? Does that mean that a literary or any other cultural form (the television series, the pop song) is inherently threatened – or is it simply a precondition of and spur to further creativity, as well as a means of regenerating an audience? In *Klara of the Sun*, Ishiguro has taken some considerable risks, not least that of alienating his admirers. But that may just be his way of asking us what we want, and why we want it.

While the mid-career Ishiguro looked back on his earlier work as part of a revival of a flagging literary form that was itself the index of general cultural stagnation, the later Ishiguro has turned the rhetoric of decline and renewal against itself – against himself, even. The return to the narrative mode that had earned him a global audience – the mode of *Pale View* and *Artist* – seems to be signaled so overtly that it inevitably raises the question of redundancy. We have another novel that reminds us of *Never Let Me Go* – and what a relief to those

of us for whom *The Buried Giant* (2015) was not what we were hoping for. But now that we have it, do we really want it? Or do we feel newly alienated? Alternatively, we might ask if our hunger for the same has been exposed as craven desire for repetition for its own sake. Has readerly desire merged with – or been absorbed by – industrial processes of production and consumption? Has the art of reading, like that of writing, finally met the specter of its own obsolescence? It takes a peculiar genius to write a book that risks almost everything by seeming to risk so little. That is what Ishiguro has done in *Klara and the Sun*.

Notes

- ① “The name is of Southern Italian origin. It may be a derivation from *caput* ‘head’” (Capaldi).
- ② See “Automated Journalism”; Miller; Naughton.
- ③ In a digital age, where every transaction occurs in a fraction of a fraction of the blink of an eye, time matters more than ever, but also less than ever – virtually not at all. When speed is all that counts, time on a human scale, the time of history, evaporates. In a novel whose spatial and temporal coordinates are vague even by Ishiguro’s standards, Klara’s precise calculations of the ages of non-AF characters – Josie, for example, is correctly estimated to be “fourteen and a half” at the beginning of the novel (*K* 11) – offer small comfort to readers clinging to some semblance of historical time. No wonder, Klara, likely prompted by her programming, puts her faith in the restorative powers of the Sun and the repetitive rhythms of nature. “As the seasons – and the years – went by,” she remarks early in Part Six (285): in the time of advanced technological modernity, years signify so little that we might as well get back onto the seasonal cycle.
- ④ “You had a group on one side and group on the other and they came at each other with clubs – there is another side, you can call them the left, that came violently attacking the other group. You had people that were very fine people on both sides. Not all those people were neo-Nazis, not all those people were white supremacists” (quoted in Jacobs and Laughland). The obvious difference between the fictional and the real here is that the elites making up Paul’s community hardly loom large among Trumpian militias and are, on the contrary, one the primary objects of their anger and resentment.
- ⑤ John Paul Riquelme has drawn attention to Klara’s agency, both in a Harvard Novel Theory Group discussion of *Klara* (Oct. 7, 2021) and in an email to the author.
- ⑥ For a recent iteration, see Self; for an even more recent rebuttal, Flood.

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