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Reversed Conspiracy in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and *When We Were Orphans*

Since the undisputed Man Booker Prize success of *The Remains of the Day* in 1989, Kazuo Ishiguro has had his ups and downs with the critical reception of his fiction. He has been both praised for the predictability of his quietly restrained style and chided for it. His latest two novels, *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*, published in 2000 and 2005 respectively, stirred commendations unheard of since 1989, and yet also some rather spiteful remarks from critics and reviewers. Both were shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, but both also inspired ironic reviews, with *The New York Times* calling *When We Were Orphans* “disappointing”¹ and *The Guardian* commenting on *Never Let Me Go* as “a triumph of style over substance.”²

The similarities between the novels go further, however, than the comparable mixture of critical responses to them. Firstly, they are both very much in the vein of all previous, Ishiguro's writings: their first person narrators look back upon their lives in unhurried recollection, which little by little reveals more details as much to the narrators themselves as to the readers. In one way or another, the narrators are deliberately kept in the dark – figuratively and literally too as the narrative colours are grey and the atmosphere can be described as poignant and “Kafkaesque.” *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go* are then even more closely connected by the theme of a lost childhood which, as Ishiguro admits himself, resonates with his own past experience

¹ Michiko Kakutani, “Detective's Delusions,” *The New York Times*, September 19, 2000, accessed September 1, 2007: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E04E3DF173BF93AA2575AC0A9669C8B63>.

² John Crace, “Digested Read: *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro,” *The Guardian*, 28 February 2005.

as a five-year-old Japanese boy growing up in England.³ All of this, naturally, contributes to the popularity his fiction enjoys and the appeal of Ishiguro's novels lies in his flair for composing elegant and subtle narratives of gradual revelation, shrouded in an oneiric air reminiscent of the style of classical Japanese fiction. We follow his narrators who revisit their pasts and re-construct their worlds. What should seem familiar emerges as but a mask and both his narrators and his readers are brought to realize that the apparent is a protective camouflage under which, however, lurk layers of further illusions. The only sure thing is that nothing is ever fully justified or explained and this creeping and disturbing realization is as much present in Ishiguro's fictional worlds as it is in the world of our actual experience. In other words, the point so often made by Ishiguro, which I wish to investigate here, seems to be that not only do we live in a world abounding in deceptions, but, more importantly, in order to make sense of it or indeed to survive in it, we construct our own personal pretences and conspiracy theories.

Seen from this perspective the latest two novels by Ishiguro appear as instances of reversed conspiracy fiction. In both we witness conspiracies constructed as protective camouflage which, contrary to conspiracy fiction, are directed inwards, not outwards. That is to say their secrets are predominantly hidden not so much from the outside world, as from the novels' protagonists. Christopher Banks, the narrator of *When We Were Orphans*, attempting to discover the truth behind the disappearance of his parents in pre-war Shanghai, unconsciously composes a personal conspiracy which gradually gives his life a sense of mission. Once the ordinariness of what had happened to his parents is revealed and thus once the supposed conspiracy is disclosed as non-existent, he experiences the loss and senselessness that practically deprive him of his own identity. Kathy H., the narrator of *Never Let Me Go*, is, as a matter of fact, an unconscious member of a secret society herself, but the ghastly truth about it remains hidden from her and not from the outside world. In both these cases Ishiguro seems to be saying that what his characters do not know is what saves them from the self-destructive awareness of the pointlessness of their lives.

Secrecy and confessional ambience are the most conspicuous marks of the two novels. Christopher Banks of *When We Were Orphans* is Britain's most celebrated detective whom we first see as solving case after case and rising to fame in its 1930s society. And yet not only

³ Tim Adams, "For me, England is a mythical place," *The Observer*, 20 February 2005, accessed 1 September 2007: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,1418285,00.html>.

will we never learn the details of the apparently spectacular murder mysteries he so effortlessly solves, but, which is quite paradoxical, he is unable to solve the ultimate case that has haunted him from childhood, that of the disappearance of his parents. The narration takes us back in time to the idyll of Christopher's boyhood spent in the International Settlement of Shanghai where his father worked for one of the British companies dealing in opium, while his mother, engaged in social duties, simultaneously campaigned against that very business. The family bliss is broken by the mysterious disappearance first of Christopher's father and later of his mother, which becomes the formative reason behind Christopher's wish to become a private investigator. Still a boy, he is taken to England where he grows up looked after and provided for by a distant relative. Christopher, first studying at a boarding school and then at Cambridge, cherishes his childhood fantasies of finding his lost parents. When two decades later he returns to Shanghai as a celebrated detective he is the talk of the town and, in a rather unclear addition to the tale, high hopes are placed on his quest as it is supposed to avert some major international disaster. Just what it is and how Christopher might be able to do it by finding out the truth about his parents is again never made clear. He eventually learns what has happened to them, but it is merely imparted to him by the childhood family friend who decides to break his silence. The banality of what Christopher learns brings about an almost complete devastation of his former self, and an even more disturbing awareness that what he hears about his parents and about his life might in fact be another deception.

If towards the end of *When We Were Orphans* Ishiguro wanders off into quite a surreal and twisted atmosphere, *Never Let Me Go* is even more distanced from any pretence of reality. Its narrator, Kathy H., also embarks on a futile search for lost parents and for her true identity, and the novel has the form of a confession or what Keith McDonald calls a "speculative memoir."⁴ Recounting first her life as a girl and then a young woman in the fictional world of late-90s Britain, Kathy H. takes us on a journey which begins with half-blurred memories of her growing up at a boarding school, with its intricate world of subtle intrigues, relationships, fantasies, daydreams and eventually affairs fabricated and formed between the young boarders. Gradually, and the gradual revelation is Ishiguro's masterly achievement here, we realize that there are no parents, that the teachers and tutors are referred to as "guardians" and that there exists no contact between the residents

⁴ Keith McDonald, "Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as 'speculative memoir.'" *Biography*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2007), pp. 74–83.

of the school and the outside world. The school turns out to be a place resembling some cross between an old-fashioned educational institution and a concentration camp. It serves the purpose of teaching those who, in fact, are human clones, bred for the benefit of society, which is eventually going to consume them in the grotesque piecemeal acquisition of their vital organs for medical transplantation. Kathy H. and her friends slowly begin to understand that they are destined to die before they grow old and that before this happens they are going to serve their turns as carers, nursing their older colleagues and watching them in between murderous operations with a gruesome consciousness that they are also gazing at their own future. If this does not sound hideous enough, the horror is intensified by the overturn of language: thus, instead of teachers and tutors, we read about “guardians,” the human sacrifice that is demanded of their charges is a “donation,” the places where the organ donors await their surgeries are “recovery centres,” and the deaths of their inmates are “completions.”

What transpires from these short outlines of the two novels is their lack of realistic pretensions – a point that some of Ishiguro’s critics take as indicating his stylistic weakness. What are these novels, reviewers seem to be asking? We find in them fragments of styles: detective novel, science-fiction, social dystopia, which appear only to be abandoned several pages later, leaving the reader baffled. The novels are as if deliberately incoherent and their incoherence is based precisely on their disregard for realism, most strikingly the disregard for the psychological realism of their protagonists. In both *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go* the characters reminisce about their childhoods, which, albeit differently, were characterized by the tendency to fantasize and play out imaginary roles, inventing their own conspiracies, plots and secrets. While this is naturally to be expected from intelligent children, the style in which it is done is anything but childish and does not even try to recreate the mind of a child. *The Spectator*’s Philip Henscher spoke of it as “inconsistent and implausible.”⁵ Christopher Banks simply does not manage to convince us of his insightfulness when it turns out how wrong he was about his perception of his parents’ mystery. And Kathy’s childhood memories are remarkable because of the heightened sensitivity that she and other students reveal, despite being raised at an institution. We know next to nothing about their earliest years and all the students are identified

⁵ Philip Henscher, “School for Scandal,” *The Spectator*, 26 February 2005, accessed September 1, 2007: http://www.spectator.co.uk/archive/books/21309/part_2/school-for-scandal.html.

by initials instead of surnames, as if signifying the fact that, as human clones, none of them actually had parents. Yet they all possess deep emotional insight, highly developed imagination, artistic skills and, not least, the capability to feel empathy and form lasting and loving relationships. All these are among the most conspicuous features of the emotional type of intelligence, which, more realistically speaking, would have had to be hampered in the children's formative years because of the absence of parental love.

And still, within the powers of the emotional insight displayed by *Never Let Me Go's* characters, Ishiguro has included even more contradictions. Firstly, however much education and humanist training the students of *Never Let Me Go* receive, they all lack the natural, it would seem, awareness of the injustice done to them, and lack the natural need for rebellion. Later, once they begin their employment as carers, they lack any desire to escape from the life they were born into. In this they indeed appear inhuman, or rather dehumanised, like Girard's scapegoats, possibly in the manner resembling the victims of twentieth century concentration camps, gulags and other centres for ethnic segregation. One of the early recollections that Kathy mentions is a memory of such dehumanisation: of how she and other children sensed the disgust they would arouse in a woman called Madame, one of the school's supervisors, who visited it regularly to collect the children's artwork. It is later revealed that Madame did this in order to prove the humanity of the cloned children to the public, futilely demanding fairer treatment of the donors. Kathy, nevertheless, remembers her as involuntarily flinching at the sight of the children: "I can still see it now, the shudder she seemed to be suppressing, the real dread that one of us would accidentally brush against her. [...] She was afraid of us in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders."⁶ This moment for Kathy and her peers is an almost Lacanian realization of their otherness, marking a bitter awareness of the loss of childish innocence, yet they all appear to accept it without any truly significant misgivings. *When We Were Orphans* is permeated by a similar sense of pointless resignation to one's fate, too. Little by little Christopher Banks abandons everything he once held dear: the love of the woman he earlier yearned for, his childhood friend whom he met in war-torn Shanghai, the chance to take his revenge on the man who reveals himself as instrumental in the disappearance of his mother and, most unbelievably, even his mother whom he finally finds many years later. "For those like us," Christopher says towards the end of the novel, "our

⁶ Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 35.

fate is to face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadows of vanished parents.”⁷

If Ishiguro does not allow his characters to rebel, then one might at least expect them to rationalize their position. Again, however, we face here instances of psychological unrealism in the novels. Even if we hear that Christopher Banks’s mission upon his return to Shanghai is of paramount importance in preventing a world catastrophe, he forsakes it. And given all the humanist training that the *Never Let Me Go* students receive and given their future duty of freeing mankind from the fear of death, from the “letting go of life,” it is curious that neither Kathy nor her friends ever speak of their temporary existence as a saving mission. They could undoubtedly think of themselves as saviours, again in the Girardian sense of the term, yet neither does Kathy try to vindicate her future by resorting to the idea of ridding the so-called “normal” people of otherwise incurable illnesses and afflictions, nor does Christopher ever really save anyone.

While, as I said earlier, a considerable part of the engagingness of both novels is indeed formed by the slow unveiling of the truth, this unveiling is conducted with some reluctance; it lacks resistance and evaluative or even emotive thinking. It seems, then, that contrary to the central idea of conspiracy fiction, neither Christopher nor Kathy wish to discover the truth for themselves. They may be apparently striving for it, but in effect all they wish for is the preservation of their illusions. For Christopher it is the supposedly heroic fate that befell his parents, for Kathy the conviction that she might be one of the few among her kind who could defer the inevitable end. And, again in a reversal of the idea of conspiracy fiction, all of their actions resemble rather inaction, or are at least branded by the wish to procrastinate and postpone the inevitable. It is only years after the completion of his studies and after establishing material independence that Christopher sets off for Shanghai looking for his parents. And it does not even cross Kathy’s mind to escape or to oppose the merciless system of organ donations, even though, after leaving school, she seems free to travel the length of the country.

What is then the source of the logic of resignation in Ishiguro’s characters, which may be seen as additional evidence of the weakness or repetitiveness of his fiction? And is it not tempting to treat the novels’ obvious illogicalities as clues to their understanding, just as we may take the illogicalities that their protagonists believe in as clues to their

⁷ Kazuo Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 313.

identities? To treat *When We Were Orphans* as a detective novel would probably be as simplistic as to regard *Never Let Me Go* as a warning against the uncritical trust in science or a dark memento to the self-complacent societies of the West. Interviewed about *When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro seemed to be fully aware of the novel's potentially confusing air:

Although many dimensions of the novel sort of worked themselves out as I went along, I had to make a decision before I even started work on the novel as to what extent the setting would be that strange, unrealistic world and to what extent it would be closer to realism. In other words, I had to decide where to position it on that spectrum between a weird world and a recognizably realistic, everyday world. This is something that I was forced to think about consciously to some extent because these issues had been raised by *The Unconsoled*, not just by me but by its readers. I decided to start the new novel off relatively close to reality, but not too close [...]. My idea was that this novel, rather than remaining static in this respect, would move slightly from occupying one kind of world to occupying another kind of world – that we would slide toward the stranger world rather than go bang into it [...]. You might say that Banks narrates at different points in his life, and that each time he narrates, his consciousness has slid further, deeper into his head or something. So that eventually the world he portrays becomes a sort of internal world.⁸

Ishiguro evidently had comparable apprehension about the way the latter of the two novels might be received. In an interview with an Irish journalist, Sinéad Gleeson, Ishiguro mentions the idea of cloning as merely a narrative framework to *When We Were Orphans*:

I had the idea years ago and I have a big folder containing notes for what I called “The students novel.” I wanted to write about a group of young people living in wrecked farmhouses who were students, but there was no university and I knew that some bad fate hung over them. I knew what I wanted them to stand for but I couldn't figure out the framework. Originally I had played around with the idea of nuclear weapons but recently there's been

⁸ Brian W. Shaffer, Kazuo Ishiguro, “An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro,” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2001), pp. 3–4.

much debate about cloning and I knew that the framework for this story could come from there.⁹

This sounds similar to the inspiration behind the fabric of Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, where the threat of an atomic war functioned as a fictional backbone opening a discussion of moral issues. It is thus no surprise that *Never Let Me Go* has been compared to other dystopian novels, in particular to those which make use of the theme of bioconsumerism, like Huxley's *Brave New World* and Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*.¹⁰ But the resigned sense of *Never Let Me Go* and of *When We Were Orphans* can also be attributed to what I see in them as an amalgam between the features of a science-fiction dystopia; a late Victorian *Bildungsroman* and a novel of manners, sentimentally similar to Francis Hodgson-Burnett's *The Little Princess* or *The Secret Garden*; and the Japanese style, so vividly present in *A Pale View of Hills*, Ishiguro's first novel (1982), and possibly reminiscent of Haruki Murakami.

Murakami is clearly the most popular contemporary Japanese writer in Europe, with many of his novels appearing on the list of bestsellers. His *Norwegian Wood*, translated into English in 1989 and then again in 2000, is, like *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*, full of the sense of loss, nostalgia and impossibility, but, more importantly, it is characteristically permeated with an acquiescent and subdued attitude to suicide, similar to that in *A Pale View of Hills*. The deaths of the donors in *Never Let Me Go* can, as a matter of fact, be called suicidal because none of them even attempt to oppose or escape from the system. Murakami's suicides, populating his *Norwegian Wood*, are almost as inevitable. It is a matter of conjecture whether the stylistic similarity between the two novels, even though culturally tempting, is intentional. However, the exceptionally resigned attitude to death, and more precisely to suicide, which is common to them both may result from the latter's specific tradition in Japanese culture. In Japan suicide has often been a much more romanticised and socially acceptable concept, and, as Barbara Romanowicz notes, it is often conceived of as a masochistic act of self-sacrifice.¹¹ Ishiguro, who was born in Nagasaki less than ten years after it was branded by the death of so many thousands, may be recreating this very attitude in both the

⁹ Sinéad Gleeson, "Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro," *The Sigla Blog: Sinéad Gleeson's Blog*, 4 April 2005, accessed September 1, 2007: <http://www.sineadgleeson.com/blog/2005/04/04/sigla-kazuo-ishiguro-interview/>.

¹⁰ McDonald, "Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*...", p. 76.

¹¹ Barbara Romanowicz, "Umrzjemy razem, przyjaciele," ["Let us die together, young friends"], *Polityka*, 2488, 2005, pp. 62–63.

silent compliance of *Never Let Me Go*'s donors and the resigned and withdrawing attitude of the detective from *When We Were Orphans*. Interestingly, Kate Fox, in her very popular anthropological study of Englishness, notes a number of cultural similarities between the people of England and Japan, wondering at the same time whether they might be geographically, socially and historically attributable to a common, as she half-jokingly puts it, "smallish-overcrowded-island factor."¹² Can such similarities lie behind the ongoing popularity of Ishiguro's novels in Britain and behind the logic of resignation of his characters? This question is not, perhaps, entirely groundless.

There is possibly one more trait of Ishiguro's style in *Never Let Me Go* that may be at least partly indebted to Japanese fiction, namely the combination of his idiosyncratic elegant subtlety, with which his characters are endowed, and the unreal element. This combination can be encountered in classic Japanese fiction, for instance in the style of the father of Japanese short story, Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892–1927), best known in Europe for his "Rashomon," a Japanese version of what is generally known as magical realism. As in Akutagawa and in tales of magical realism in general, the fantastic elements of *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go* do not dominate the novels narratively; instead they are innocuously present and sometimes only half-mentioned, resembling the manner in which the novels' characters learn the truth about what lies behind and ahead of them. The way Miss Lucy, the only one of *Never Let Me Go*'s guardians with at least some moral qualms, outlines their situation and their future is also an apt comment on how unreal elements enter the two novels: "The problem is, as I see it, that you've been told and not told. You've been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some people are quite happy to leave it that way. [...] Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do. [...] You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided."¹³ This morbid statement about "being told and not told" and then about "being told, but not understanding" vibrates with universal and existential truth, but I also see it as speaking to the idea of magic in literature in general, and, in particular, as perversely referring to conspiracy fiction.

When We Were Orphans and *Never Let Me Go* in their essence, form and style mirror the narratives they portray: they are multiple

¹² Kate Fox, *Watching the English* (London: Hodder, 2004), p. 413.

¹³ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, p. 80.

camouflages underneath which we find even more layers of uncertainty and deception. The search for truth, so characteristic of conspiracy fiction, is thus only seemingly present in both novels. What is perhaps most psychologically convincing about them is the fact that it is reversed into a wish to uphold fantasies and delusions. The novels avoid closure for the same reason that their protagonists avoid facing the truth and desperately cling to the life-supporting conspiracies they had been drawn in. They never let go of the illusion of the past, even if the past has long since orphaned them. And hence when John Crace ironically called *Never Let Me Go* a “triumph of style over substance”¹⁴ he might have been more accurate than he intended, for both novels dishearteningly proclaim the realization that the camouflage of the deceptions we live on is often triumphant and more important in itself than what it hides.

¹⁴ See note 2.

Rafał Borysławski

**Odwrócone poczucie tajemnicy
w powieściach *Nie opuszczaj mnie* i *Kiedy byliśmy sierotami* Kazuo Ishiguro**

Streszczenie

Narracje Kazuo Ishiguro zbudowane są wokół subtelnej stopniowania tajemnicy, przypominając tym samym oniryczność klasycznej prozy japońskiej. We wszystkich jego powieściach, poczynając od *Pejzażu w kolorze sepii*, a kończąc na *Nie opuszczaj mnie*, czytelnik podąża za narratorami, którzy powracają do swojej przeszłości i z wolna ją przed nim i sobą odkrywają. To, co powinno wydawać się znajome narratorom Ishiguro, jest dla nich samych i dla czytelnika ochronną maską i kamuflażem, pod którymi pojawiają się warstwy kolejnych iluzji. Jedyną pewną rzeczą jest to, że nic nigdy nie jest w pełni wytłumaczone i wytłumaczalne – zarówno w prozie Ishiguro, jak i w świecie rzeczywistym. Artykuł podejmuje te właśnie aspekty widoczne w dwóch powieściach anglojapońskiego pisarza *Kiedy byliśmy sierotami* i *Nie opuszczaj mnie* i przedstawia je jako przykłady prozy opartej na konstruowaniu świata stworzonego z ułudy i zwodniczości. Aby w nim przetrwać, narratorzy sami budują swe osobiste fikcje i złudzenia, zwodząc samych siebie. Powoduje to wrażenie, że owe dwie najnowsze powieści Ishiguro dokonują konstrukcyjnego przewrotu w prozie bazującej na poczuciu tajemnicy i spisku. Dla Ishiguro bowiem – co jest szczególnie widoczne w *Nie opuszczaj mnie*, kafkowskiej wizji współczesnej Wielkiej Brytanii – tajemnica i spisek są ochronnym kamuflażem, których odkrycie nie stanowi celu samego w sobie i nie jest też celem czytelnika, skrywają one bowiem prawdę zbyt przykrą, by dało się ją znieść bez osłony, którą zapewniało jej utajenie.

Rafał Borysławski

**La sensation de secret renversée
dans les romans *Auprès de moi toujours* et *Quand nous étions orphelins* de Kazuo Ishiguro**

Résumé

Les narrations de Kazuo Ishiguro sont construites autour d'une gradation subtile du secret, en rappelant par cela l'onirique de la prose classique japonaise. Dans tous ses romans, en commençant par *Lumières pales sur les collines* pour finir avec *Auprès de moi toujours*, le lecteur suit les narrateurs qui reviennent à leur passé et la dévoilent lentement devant lui et eux-mêmes. Ce qui devrait être familier aux narrateurs d'Ishiguro, est pour eux, et pour le lecteur, un masque protecteur et un camouflage, sous lequel des couches d'illusions successives apparaissent. La seule chose sûre est que rien ne serait jamais entièrement expliqué ni explicable, de même dans la prose d'Ishiguro, que dans le monde réel. L'article aborde ces aspects, visibles dans deux romans de l'écrivain anglo-japonais *Quand nous étions orphelins* et *Auprès de moi toujours*, et les présente comme exemples d'une prose basée sur la construction du monde à partir de l'illusion et la fausseté. Pour survivre, les narrateurs construisent leurs propres fictions et illusions, en se trompant eux même. Cela crée l'impression que les derniers romans d'Ishiguro ce omettent un renversement de construction dans la prose qui base sur la sensation de secret et de complot. Pour Ishiguro, ce qui est particulièrement visible dans *Auprès de moi toujours*, une vision kafkaïenne de la Grande-Bretagne contemporaine, le secret et le complot sont un camouflage protecteur, dont le dévoilement ne constitue pas le but en soi et ne l'est non plus pour le lecteur. Ils cachent une vérité trop pénible, pour qu'on puisse la supporter sans protection, garantie par le secret.