

# RESPONSES TO VULNERABILITY IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *KLARA AND THE SUN* (2021)

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Kazuo Ishiguro regularly points out in interviews that his subject matter does not change much from book to book: “Just the surface does. The settings, etc. I tend to write the same book over and over, or at least, I take the same subject I took last time out and refine it, or do a slightly different take on it”. (Jordison 2015: n.p.) The thematic echoes between *Klara and the Sun* (2021) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005) should therefore not surprise the reader. Both novels are dystopic fictions in which the function of, respectively, clones and robots (called Artificial Friends or AFs) is to serve others. In the earlier novel, clones are human beings programmed to donate their organs in order to save other human beings, some of the clones (including the homodiegetic narrator) being “carers” for their declining companions. In *Klara and the Sun*, Artificial Friends are meant to alleviate the loneliness suffered by children who have been genetically enhanced (or “lifted”) and sometimes become mortally sick because of this; the androids are discarded when their presence is no longer needed, which is the ultimate fate of the first-person eponymous narrator. *Klara and the Sun* thus continues to explore some of Ishiguro’s favourite themes such as human failings, fragility, relationality, care and the inevitability of death. It deploys multiple forms of vulnerability (physical, emotional, relational, social, economic, textual), which affect not only human beings but also nature, robots and the text itself. In the wake of such contemporary British novels as David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2005), Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (2009) or Ian McEwan’s *Machines Like Me* (2019), *Klara and the Sun* addresses the question of what it is to be human by staging sentient humanoid automatons (drawing from what is called “affective computing”) and interrogates the implications of Artificial Intelligence and gene-editing. While such manipulations raise crucial philosophical and ethical interrogations, this paper will not specifically dwell on the post-human or other-than-human condition of the AFs and the bioethical issues this entails as these have been thoroughly examined in relation to *Never Let Me Go* and are the focus of some of the first published papers on *Klara and the Sun*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Yuqing Sun (2022). “Post/Human Perfectibility and the Technological Other in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun*”. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 2022: DOI:

Instead, I will consider the figure of the robot as a literary tool deployed by Ishiguro to prolong and diversify his exploration of vulnerability. An examination of Ishiguro's creative process reveals, as mentioned by Laura Colombino, that the writer's

*modus operandi* consists in starting from an idea (questions about the human condition he wants to pose), then continue working at the human interactions that will make it apparent, and lastly finding a spatio-temporal context and a narrative form to stage them. (Colombino 2018: 205)

Thus, "the sci-fi speculative surface" of *Never Let Me Go* "was the last piece of the jigsaw [...] almost like a device to make the thing work",<sup>2</sup> and the robots in *Klara and the Sun* may be considered as just such a device, a "ploy", with Artificial Intelligence and gene-editing as the "backdrop" to the story, as Ishiguro himself highlighted. (Ishiguro 2021b: 4'06" and 2'47") The author's archives and his numerous interviews confirm that the setting and literary genre of his novels are secondary to his themes and the metaphor chosen to develop these. Thus, when writing *Never Let Me Go*, he was "looking for a metaphor for how we face mortality", (Ishiguro 2010: 3'07"-3'10") which was encapsulated in the clones, while in his preparatory notes on *The Remains of the Day*, he imagined the butler's life "as a metaphor for the frustrations of ordinary people who feel the important moves of life are taking place in a world beyond their reach", and wrote: "this is not a book *about butlers*, but a book about people like *us*, it's saying we are all like BUTLERS when it comes to the world stage".<sup>3</sup> In *Klara and the Sun*, Ishiguro again wanted to "get the reader with their defenses down [...]" so that suddenly they realize this person they've been reading about isn't so alien. I want them to realize: "This is us. This is me". (Harvey 2021: n.p.) The vulnerability of butlers, clones or robots is therefore also our own, and these literary devices are developed to probe our own world, our human condition and emotions, and the ways in which we deal with our vulnerability and that of others.

As several theoreticians, including Carol Gilligan, Marianne Hirsch, Joan Troto and Jean-Michel Ganteau, have argued, vulnerability, while "dependent on existing norms of recognition" to quote Judith Butler, (Butler 2004: 43) is an ontological human condition. For Sandra Laugier, "dependence and vulnerability

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<sup>2</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro (2010). "Kazuo Ishiguro discusses his intention behind writing the novel, *Never Let Me Go*". *Film Independent*. [www.Youtube.com/watch?v=\\_jCB59pPG7k&t=2s/](http://www.Youtube.com/watch?v=_jCB59pPG7k&t=2s/). 1'05" to 1'16".

<sup>3</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro (1985-86). *Kazuo Ishiguro's Papers*. Manuscript Collection MS-05377. Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. Box 17, folder 3, 9<sup>th</sup> December 1985 and 14<sup>th</sup> August 1986.

are traits of a condition common to all, not of a special category of the ‘vulnerable’”. (Laugier 2020: 10) In its different forms, vulnerability elicits a variety of responses from individuals and from society: it may lead to violence, abuse or neglect of the vulnerable other, but also to the deployment of care, solidarity and solicitude. My aim in this paper is to examine the multiple forms of vulnerability presented in *Klara and the Sun* and the type of ethical (or non-ethical) responses they bring out in individuals, in society but also in the readers themselves. I will first show how vulnerability in the novel is placed within a context of interdependence in which the vulnerable subject relies on the responsibility of others to take care of them, and their vulnerability can be a mirror of the others’ own vulnerability. In this context, vulnerability may not only be considered in its conventional meaning as a weakness but also as a dynamic and creative force which can open the way for an ethics of relationship. However, interdependence and forms of care vary according to one’s position and social status, and the dystopic society depicted in the novel, which can be seen as an allegory of contemporary Western societies, adopts different responses to vulnerability depending on the group or community to which one belongs, depriving some categories of the care and solicitude granted to others. This will lead me to consider responses to the vulnerability of the text itself and the way in which Ishiguro may have deliberately chosen a vulnerable form for his novel.

### *Vulnerability and Relationality*

In *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, Erinn C. Gilson argues against endorsing the narrow “dictionary definition of vulnerability as susceptible to injury and the simple interpretation of its etymology [from the Latin *vulnus* which means “wound”] as the ability to be wounded”. She remarks that in addition to these negative connotations, “vulnerability can have positive manifestations and value, enabling the development of empathy, compassion, and community”. (Gilson 2014: 8) If vulnerability is commonly associated with notions of passivity, dependency or fragility, the responses it elicits from others can create a web of agency based on relationality and therefore a positive interdependence. As noted by Jean-Michel Ganteau in *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability*, vulnerability has “often been associated with the ethics of care” (Ganteau 2015: 2) and with the ethical responsibility of human beings to take care of others, support them and protect them. This conception goes against the perception of the subject as autonomous and self-sufficient, and places vulnerability within a context of interdependence that promotes such values as attentiveness to the other, solidarity and solicitude. This “ethical relational model” creates what Jean-Michel Ganteau calls “a loop of vulnerability, in that it is premised on vulnerability to the vulnerable other, vulnerability being both the condition and expression of interdependence”. (Ganteau 2015: 11) Vulnerability can there-

fore be viewed as a force that may allow for an empathic opening to the other's vulnerability as a reflection of one's own vulnerability. In that context, theorists do not consider vulnerability "as weakness or victimhood but as a space for engagement and resistance emerging from a sense of fundamental openness, interdependence and solidarity". (Hirsch 2015: 30)

Such a positive and ethical response to vulnerability may be perceived in *Klara and the Sun* in which a physically vulnerable teenage girl, Josie, is the recipient of solicitude from the people who surround her and are themselves in a position of vulnerability for a variety of reasons. Josie suffers from bodily vulnerability following genetic modification, which is already what killed her sister Sal. The dystopic society depicted in the novel has produced such cases of vulnerability by implementing the dual system of "lifted" and "unlifted" children. The adults who decide to have their children genetically enhanced ("lifted") so that they can benefit from a better education make these children vulnerable by exposing them to the risk of illness and death if the procedure is not successful, while the parents lay themselves bare to emotional distress should this happen. This is what befalls Josie and her parents but because the teenager comes from a privileged social background, care is provided for her by a network of people. In the same way that the clones who donate their organs in *Never Let Me Go* are accompanied on their painful trajectory by "carers", in *Klara and the Sun*, Josie is "well looked after" (Ishiguro 2021a: 115) by her Artificial Friend Klara, her parents, her housekeeper and her friend Rick. All these characters gravitate around Josie, offering solicitude, love and support, aiming to "help", "save" and "protect" the "fragile" teenager (Ishiguro 2021a: 96)—verbs that are recurrently used by the first-person narrator but also by other characters in direct speech.

Through the care they offer Josie, individuals willingly make themselves more vulnerable emotionally or physically, more susceptible to injury. The most extreme case occurs when android Klara, like the human donors in *Never Let Me Go*, donates some of her "P-E-G Nine solution" (Ishiguro 2021a: 226) to destroy the Cootings Machine which produces pollution because she believes this might save Josie. To take up the common definition of vulnerability, the subservient and docile robot exposes herself to the possibility of being harmed by letting Josie's father extract the liquid from her—she significantly asks if he wants to "damage" her (Ishiguro 2021a: 227)—and her cognitive abilities are impaired after that. The repetition of the expression "get damaged" in the novel is emblematic of the risk of injury Klara faces and simultaneously reveals the variety of responses triggered by her vulnerability: while some characters ignore this fragility, reducing Klara to her robotic identity and to a mere commodity in a utilitarian system—Rick's mother asks Klara if she should treat her "like a vacuum cleaner" (Ishiguro 2021a: 145)—, others display degrees of care, as though recognizing in Klara an element of their own human vulnerability. The first group includes the boys at the children's interaction who

insist that Klara will not “get damaged” if she is thrown over onto the sofa, the scientist Mr Capaldi who is willing to open her black box and thus terminate her, in order to understand “what’s going on inside” and the housekeeper who is generally hostile to the robot and threatens to “dismantle” her and “shove [her] in garbage”. (Ishiguro 2021a: 76, 297, 178) However, even some of the characters who treat Klara as a dispensable object are careful to ensure that she does not “get damaged”, for instance when the housekeeper tells her to put on her seat belt in the car or when Rick waits for Klara in the field after her expedition to the barn. (Ishiguro 2021a: 93, 168)

Although generally adopting a utilitarian attitude towards Klara, Josie’s mother Chrissie refuses to let Mr. Capaldi open Klara up when the android is no longer needed for her daughter. Chrissie’s ambivalent care is subtly conveyed through bodily gestures as she steps in front of the scientist “as though to shield” Klara who notices that “the rear of her shoulder was almost touching my face” and becomes conscious of “the smooth woven fabric of her dark sweater”. (Ishiguro 2021a: 298) What could have been a “smooth” caress of Klara’s face reminds the robot of the moment when the mother had “reached forward and embraced [her]”, (Ishiguro 2021a: 298) confirming María Puig de la Bellacasa’s suggestion that “touch exacerbates a sense of concern”. (de la Bellacasa 2017: 99) It also recalls what Levinas wrote about touching as a way of encountering the other while maintaining a certain distance in proximity (here emblemized by the adverb “almost”), “as though the skin were the trace of its own withdrawal”. (Levinas 1998: 90) For Levinas, “[a] face approached, a contact with a skin [...] are already absent from themselves”, because a gap persists “between approach and approached”, (Levinas 1998: 89-90) between the self and the other, even in the moment of utmost proximity as in the example above. However, Klara is alert to the minute details that reveal the mother’s care at a time when the now-useless android is most vulnerable to the exploitation of others.

It is significant that Ishiguro did not choose to portray an all-powerful autonomous robot with greatly enhanced qualities compared to humans but one whose vulnerabilities mirror the frailties of her human counterparts, thereby blurring the boundaries between the human and the other-than-human. Although Klara has a limited and relatively repetitive range of feelings<sup>4</sup> (worry, fear or sadness<sup>5</sup>), these feelings bring her closer to human beings in their own vulnerability and demonstrate her disposition for empathy as “a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect”. (Keen 2007: 4) The robot’s fragility is evidenced in the vocabulary she uses as a first-person narrator. On the first page of the novel, she remembers how, when

<sup>4</sup> On Klara’s limited repertoire of emotional reactions, see Stacy Ivan (2022). “Mirrors and Windows: Synthesis of Surface and Depth in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun*”. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*.

<sup>5</sup> When Josie’s mother says she envies her for having no feelings, Klara replies: “I believe I have many feelings”. (Ishiguro 2021a: 97)

she and her fellow solar-powered robot were new and waiting in the store for a customer to buy them, they used to “worry” they would “grow weaker and weaker” for lack of sun. (Ishiguro 2021a: 1) She also notes that robots are vulnerable to the desires of children and parents who might or might not choose them in the store so that an AF who grows lethargic because he has been deprived of sunlight starts “to worry there was something wrong with him, that he had some fault unique to him and that if it became known, he’d never find a home”. (Ishiguro 2021a: 5) The words “weak”, “wrong” and “fault” all highlight the frailty of the robots when the reader might have expected the machines to epitomize resistance and autonomy. In addition, the frequent use of “worry” and “worried” in the novel, not only in relation to human beings but also to Klara, testifies to a general insecurity shared by both human and non-human groups, as well as a common concern for the vulnerable other. Josie’s mother tells her daughter: “Worrying about you, Josie, that’s my work. [...] Klara’s work too”. (Ishiguro 2021a: 85)

Klara’s vulnerability is also caused by the partiality of her knowledge, which places her in a situation similar to that of a child. Far from being an omniscient robot, she finds it difficult to understand her surroundings and the reactions of human beings, so that the adjectives “puzzled”, “puzzling”, “surprised” or “uncertain”, expressions like “I don’t understand”, “hard to fathom”, or “hard to predict”, but also variations of “a fear had entered my mind” (Ishiguro 2021a: 40, 41, 70, 92, 96, 100, 156, 233, 271) are regularly used. Ishiguro—who first conceived the novel as a young children’s book (Ishiguro 2021b: 1’06”)—explained in an interview that he deliberately imagined Klara as “quite childlike”: “I wanted some of that childlike freshness and openness and naivety to survive all the way through the text in her”. (Gross 2021: n.p.) The words chosen by Ishiguro suggest that Klara’s vulnerability is not considered as a weakness but as a positive disposition which allows her to consider the world around her without preconceptions or prejudices. This transformation of what might be a shortcoming into a force extends to her use of language: while her limited vocabulary condemns her to sometimes tedious repetitions, she can also be noted for her creative invention of words to replace the ones she does not know (“machine birds” for drones, “overhaul men” for roadworkers...).

The child’s and the robot’s vulnerabilities in *Klara and the Sun* are complemented by that of Josie’s parents who are still mourning the death of their first daughter but nevertheless decided to put their second child’s life at risk through gene-editing. As they fear losing Josie, their emotional vulnerability becomes apparent, even when Klara’s perspective displaces it onto comparisons or hypallages. For instance, on seeing Josie’s mother for the first time and her coat moving with the wind, Klara thinks of “the dark birds that perched on the high traffic signals even as the winds blew fiercely”. (Ishiguro 2021a: 22) Although the birds (like the mother) resist the fierceness of the wind, their position high up is

precarious. Likewise, when the teenager seems on the verge of dying, an observant Klara notices how her mother's dressing gown "displayed the fragility of her neck". (Ishiguro 2021a: 227) Chrissie's vulnerability does not condemn her to passivity but prompts her to act, although this would entail an unethical sacrifice of the vulnerable android. To cope with her anticipated grief at the probable death of her second daughter, the mother has indeed agreed to a scheme through which Klara will "continue" Josie after the teenager dies by letting go of her own exterior shape and self. Chrissie's pathetic pleading with Klara to renounce her own self so as to "*become*" Josie (Ishiguro 2021a: 209)—"there's going to be no other way for me to survive" (Ishiguro 2021a: 212)—shows her readiness to expose her raw vulnerability to the non-human other.

Vulnerability is thus repeatedly presented in the novel as a shared condition and Josie's parents, AF and friends make themselves vulnerable to the vulnerable child, creating a network of care and interdependence around her. This web of care leads Klara to understand at the end of the book that what was special about Josie was not inside her but "inside those who loved her". (Ishiguro 2021a: 306) However, this ethical response based on relationality does not extend to just any vulnerable other and the novel also portrays various groups (the unlifted, the post-employed, homeless people, immigrants, androids) who do not benefit from the solicitude granted to Josie. As noted by Judith Butler, "[a] vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter". (Butler 2004: 43) The lack of recognition (by individuals and by society) prevents any ethical encounter and this is what several characters experience in the novel.

### *The Lack of Response to Vulnerability*

In an interview in 2021, Ishiguro remarked:

One of the assumptions we have in liberal democracies is that human beings are intrinsically of value [...] each person is unique and therefore worthy of respect and care regardless of what they can or can't contribute to our joint enterprise. (Harvey 2021)

And yet, in *Klara and the Sun* as in our contemporary societies, forms of vulnerability and forms of care vary depending on one's position and social status. In Ishiguro's novel, vulnerability only opens onto an ethics of relationship for a certain category of characters while others fail to be recognized, which reflects the way contemporary society distributes care unevenly, excluding or discrediting some of its members. (le Blanc 2011: 34-35) For instance, Rick's mother Helen, whose physical vulnerability is probably caused by alcoholism, does not benefit from the same solicitude as Josie. Although she is looked after by her son and

can rely on a few individual friendships,<sup>6</sup> she receives very little care from society because she does not belong to the right caste or category (Josie cryptically tells Rick: “your mom, she doesn’t have *society*”). (Ishiguro 2021a: 129, emphasis in the original) As Rick’s parents decided not to take the risk of genetically modifying their son—one neighbour asks if they “[l]os[t] their nerve” (Ishiguro 2021a: 67)—Rick belongs to the caste of the “unlifteds” (Ishiguro 2021a: 130) and cannot receive a proper education. As a consequence, he and his mother suffer from what Nathalie Maillard calls “relational and social vulnerability”. (Maillard 2011: 198-99) Rick is treated like a pariah during the social interaction at Josie’s and Helen is denied any assistance from a former lover who could have helped her son get admission into a good school. She confesses to him: “I’ve become... fragile. So fragile that I’m liable to break into pieces in a puff of wind. I lost my beauty, not to the years but to this fragility”. (Ishiguro 2021a: 253) The aposiopesis marked by the suspension points offers a graphic transcription of Helen’s vulnerability even as her ex-lover proves insensitive to her plea.

In his Nobel Prize lecture in 2017 (delivered at a time when he had started working on *Klara and the Sun*), Ishiguro remarked that “[a]dvances in artificial intelligence and robotics” may “create savage meritocracies that resemble apartheid, and massive unemployment, including to those in the current professional elites”. (Ishiguro 2017: 41) This is precisely what is depicted in the novel through the binary system of ‘lifted’ and ‘unlifted’ children, and the exclusion of the ‘post-employed’, skilled workers who have been ‘substituted’ by androids and now live on the margins of the city. Like “the excluded” living “on the edge of humanity” that Guillaume le Blanc writes about in *Que faire de notre vulnérabilité?*, (le Blanc 2011: 38) these former workers have no place in the city anymore and are condemned to drifting and to a social death. (le Blanc 2011: 13) Their social and economic vulnerability has led them to unite and gather force from their existence as a group of dubious status,<sup>7</sup> but this solidarity is the consequence of their having been discarded (and made vulnerable) by society. Outside a theater, a man with a “white-painted face” asks Josie’s mother if she would “care” to sign his petition to protest the “proposal to clear the Oxford Building” where 423 post-employed currently live, with no “reasonable plan” having been offered “regarding their relocation”. (Ishiguro 2021a: 239-240) The choice of the verb “care” is significant as no form of care (or “recognition” in Butler’s terms) is given to the vulnerable man, either by society or by the individuals whose attention he is trying to catch: Klara fails to “hear any more” of what the protester says and loses

<sup>6</sup> As she is about to ask for help from a former lover, she tells Josie’s family: “Rick and I are so grateful you’re all here to lend moral support”. (Ishiguro 2021a: 233)

<sup>7</sup> Rick’s mother names the members of this community “fascist”, “all white people and all from the ranks of the former professional elites” who have had to arm themselves “against other *types*”, but the Father says they “have no aggressive agenda beyond defending [them]-selves should the need arise”. (Ishiguro 2021a: 232, emphasis in the original)



contact with his face as Josie's father, moving in front of the robot, addresses the mother and redirects her attention to their daughter. (Ishiguro 2021a: 240) The face-to-face encounter which, for Levinas, underpins the ethical relation and one's responsibility to the vulnerability of the other, has been missed. The expelled man (and the 423 anonymous and similarly vulnerable people he speaks for) is unheard, silenced and obscured from view: the face in the Levinasian sense has been "defaced" (Butler 2004: 143) and the man, defeated in his "struggle for recognition", (Butler 2004: 44) disappears from the scene a few lines after having been introduced.

Klara, the narrator and focalizer of the scene, who has just been made more vulnerable by the extraction of some of her P-E-G Nine solution, has failed to recognize the vulnerability of the post-employed, just as, when she was still in her store, she had failed to recognize that of the homeless man lying on the ground. When she believed that Beggar Man and his dog had passed away, despite her sadness, she declared it "a good thing that they'd died together, holding each other and trying to help one another". Her naivety and partial understanding prevented her from reflecting on the lack of solidarity of passers-by who may "notice" the homeless man "and pause, but then start walking again". (Ishiguro 2021a: 37) The image Klara conjures up to refer to Beggar Man and his dog is an apt description of the way they (and the underprivileged groups they stand for) are perceived by society: "from our side you could have mistaken them for the bags the city workers sometimes left behind". (Ishiguro 2021a: 379) Beggar Man and his dog (like the post-employed) are dispensable and discardable items, left behind by capitalist society. (le Blanc 2011: 38-41) Such an example exposes the limits of a positive view on vulnerability as opening the way for interconnection and solidarity.

At the end of the novel, Josie's "carers" are also discarded. We learn that Housekeeper Melania, an immigrant from Europe with a clumsy command of English, has left for California, "hoping to be accepted by a community there". (Ishiguro 2021a: 292) The support she may receive within that community suggests she may not have been able to get it outside of it because of her status as a lower-class immigrant. However, the most intense pathos in the novel is derived from what happens to Klara once Josie is cured. In the store at the beginning of the novel, sentient Klara was made aware of the vulnerability of the robots, whom human beings may ignore, despise, mock or discard. The Manager had warned her about the fickleness of children who might promise to choose an AF and then never come back, or "the child comes back and ignores the poor AF who's waited, and instead chooses another". (Ishiguro 2021a: 33) Klara had also noticed the scene of an AF walking three paces behind her child because "he wasn't loved by the girl"; she realized that "an AF could be with a child who despised him and wanted him gone". (Ishiguro 2021a: 16) Although here the situations involve machines, such scenes can bring to mind situations about

human beings in love relationships and the “vulnerability inherent in the possibility of losing the object of one’s feelings”. (Ganteau 2015: 14) After Josie is cured, grows up and makes friends, Klara is no longer needed and understands her “presence wasn’t appropriate as it once had been”. (Ishiguro 2021a: 293-94) Her vulnerability may be compared to that involved in love, friendship, a parent-child relationship, or in economic situations when immigrant workers are encouraged to join a country when their workforce is needed and then asked or forced to leave when their presence is no longer “appropriate”. As Klara becomes “dispensable”, (le Blanc 2011: 39) she first relocates to the Utility Room and then is dumped in the Yard where she places her memories in the right order while experiencing her “slow fade”, (Ishiguro 2021a: 298) a scene which overflows with pathos and encourages the reader to empathize with her vulnerability.

*Klara and the Sun* thus represents various responses to vulnerability, covering a wide spectrum that ranges from attentiveness to the other and solicitude for the other, to neglect, indifference or deliberate exclusion of the vulnerable other. As Ishiguro, in this novel but also in his oeuvre as a whole, entices the reader to reflect on their responses to the vulnerability of the other (and to their own vulnerability), he also exposes the vulnerability of his own text by choosing a form which does not provide the comfort of closure.

### *The Vulnerability of the Text*

While very largely praised by critics, *Klara and the Sun* prompted a few guarded comments from reviewers, more particularly from Leo Robson in *The New Statesman* whose first appraisal was to judge the novel “glacial and abstract, and written in a repetitive vanilla prose”. (Robinson 2021: n.p.) By opting for a form with a minimal plot (as in previous novels), a genre (science-fiction) which still suffers from a lack of legitimacy and a conclusion that Robson called a “non sequitur”, Ishiguro embraced the risk of disconcerting his readership. This exposure to the reader’s desire and judgment is a vulnerability every writer imposes on themselves when publishing a book. Graham Swift, for instance, defined himself as “a vulnerable human being [writing] for other vulnerable human beings”. (Swift 1994: 30) In the case of Ishiguro, this exposure is sometimes accompanied by an open admission of what he considers to be possible defects in some of his writings.

The writer’s archives and interviews reveal that Ishiguro is often dissatisfied with what he has achieved in his writing, as he told Giles Harvey: “Most of the time, after I finish a book, I’m left with the feeling that I didn’t quite get down what I wanted to. [...] I don’t ever feel I’ve written the thing I wanted to write”. (Harvey 2021: n.p.) The sense of failure that often pervades his novels and their characters is thus one that the writer himself is acutely aware of, and, according

to Sandra Laugier, a component of everyday life: “The point is to *see* the human form of life as vulnerable, defined by a constellation of possibilities of failure”. (Laugier 2020: 35-36) As Ishiguro’s first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, was about to be published in February 1982, he wrote notes on his impressions which were relentlessly negative (“too much dialogue—too many ‘stage directions’—narration too flat”; “[t]oo many things crammed in”. (Ishiguro’s Papers, Box 1, folder 2. January 1982) In his Nobel Prize speech, he recalled the “niggling sense of dissatisfaction” (Ishiguro 2017: 18) that had set in barely a year after the publication of that first novel and in an interview in 1986, admitted: “The mode is wrong in those scenes of the past. They don’t have the texture of memory”. (Shaffer and Wong 2008:5)

Another writer might have kept these harsh judgments secret, leaving his doubts to the obscurity of his archives, but Ishiguro regularly exposes his authorial vulnerability by sharing his uncertainties about some of his achievements in interviews. In 2017, as he was writing *Klara and the Sun* and being awarded the Nobel Prize, he presented himself as “a tired author, from an intellectually tired generation” and disarmingly wondered if he had “something left that might help to provide perspective, to bring emotional layers to the arguments”. (Ishiguro 2017: 42) There is a part of modesty in Ishiguro’s self-deprecating attitude but it may more generally stem from his willingness to open himself to the possibility of failure. In the late 1980s, after having published three tightly-structured novels, he decided to take the risk of following a different trajectory as he confided in an interview with Graham Swift in 1989. He asked: “I sometimes wonder, should books be so neat, well-formed? Is it praise to say that a book is beautifully structured? Is it a criticism to say that bits of the book don’t hang together?” He felt it was time for him to explore “the messy, chaotic, undisciplined side”, (Shaffer and Wong 2008: 41) which led him to write *The Unconsolable*. Literary critic James Wood conceded that “[i]t was bold of Ishiguro to abjure facility and to exchange it for difficulty” before brashly declaring that the book had “invented its own category of badness”. (Wood 2000: 44)

We may wonder if what Wood perceived as “badness” is not the very vulnerability Ishiguro was trying to explore when aiming for a “messy” book. The writer’s archives include the painstaking experiments he humbly conducted over a whole year “to test out the ‘dream techniques’ in the run-up to *The Unconsolable*” (Ishiguro’s Papers, Box 48, folder 4) and they reveal that several of these devices (such as “unwarranted emotion”, “unwarranted relationship”, “odd postures”, “weird venues”, “unwarranted recognition” or “distorted logistics”) were meant to reflect the main character’s lack of control over his situation and surroundings, which was to be exposed in the vulnerable form of the text itself. Turning to *Klara and the Sun*, could one acknowledge that “bits of the book don’t hang together” without this being perceived as “a criticism” but as the sign of the

vulnerability of a text that deliberately refuses the tight closure of a self-sufficient and autonomous narrative and opts instead for the instability of openness? Ganteau has defined “a vulnerable form” as “a form that is not closed and totalising but opens up to the risk of failure”, (Ganteau 2015: 1) a form whose aim is “to welcome contradiction, to promote the failure of understanding, and to privilege openness”. (Ganteau 2014: 97) As mentioned by Catherine Bernard,

[f]or Jean-Michel Ganteau, a text’s capacity to take the risk of failure is also a way to truly, radically undo the hegemony of coherence. Thus, vulnerability works against the ideology of the autonomous, self-enclosed text to delineate what is defined, after Levinas, as ‘positive vulnerability’. (Bernard 2016: n.p.)

In *Klara and the Sun*, a few convoluted plot developments may leave the reader “puzzled” (to use Klara’s vocabulary), as, for instance, the android’s damaging of the Cootings Machine, her expeditions to Mr McBain’s barn or Mr Capaldi’s attempt to replicate Josie, while symbolic figures such as the bull in the field or some of Klara’s dystopic visions may remain cryptic. By denying the reader the comfort of closure, causality and reassuring interpretations, Ishiguro treads on fragile territory, running the risk of alienating the reader through excessive estrangement, but he is thereby reflecting in the very form of his novel the vulnerability which is at the heart of the book. Ishiguro may even be metatextually playful when he has Josie’s friend Rick write in the bubble above one of her drawings: “The smart kids think I have no shape. But I do. I’m just keeping it hidden”. (Ishiguro 2021a: 126) Ishiguro might have anticipated some readers’ perception of his book as lacking “shape” and encouraged them to look beyond the deceptive surface. Finally, while parts of the novel have been judged by some critics as deliberately unsentimental, unemotional and cold, (Alam 2021: n.p.) the final scene of Klara fading in the Yard, with its heavy reliance on pathos and sentimentality, relinquishes the earlier sense of a tight control maintained over emotions. By letting affect and the sentimental invade the text in its final portrayal of a discarded and declining android, Ishiguro implements what Jakob Winnberg, in his book on Graham Swift, called an “aesthetics of vulnerability” because it flaunts beliefs that are “fragile and vulnerable to scepticism as well as cynicism” on the part of readers and critics. (Winnberg 2003: 4) This baring of the text to scepticism seems a risk Ishiguro was willing to take.

Although *Klara and the Sun*, like *Never Let Me Go*, depicts a dystopic universe, it is not very different from our contemporary world and the forms of vulnerability it exposes resemble those experienced by many individuals. If vulnerability is an ontological condition of human existence, which therefore cannot be eradicated, individuals and societies have the ability to try and attenuate it (through an ethics of care, responsibility and relationality) or they can be complicit in creating or maintaining vulnerability (by declining to recognize the other’s vulnerability and denying them an ethical encounter). *Klara and the Sun* not only provides

evidence of the wide spectrum of responses to human and other-than-human vulnerability, but also “performs the vulnerability that it thematises” (Ganteau 2013: n.p.) by adopting a form that may unsettle and estrange the reader. As an author exposed to the reactions of his readers, Ishiguro himself takes part in the general “loop of vulnerability”. (Ganteau 2015: 11) *Klara and the Sun* thus confirms the wide-ranging scope of vulnerability and proposes tentative answers as to what we may “do with our vulnerability”. (le Blanc 2011)

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