‘They built a whole lot like that in the fifties and sixties’: Ishiguro and the ghosts of English institutions’

Article (Accepted Version)

Dean, Dominic (2021) ‘They built a whole lot like that in the fifties and sixties’: Ishiguro and the ghosts of English institutions’. Textual Practice. ISSN 0950-236X

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/101266/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk
Title: ‘They Built A Whole Lot Like That in the Fifties and Sixties’: Ishiguro and the Ghosts of English Institutions’.

Author Name: Dr Dominic Dean (Sole author)

Affiliation: University of Sussex, UK

Email: d.dean@sussex.ac.uk

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, England, twentieth-century British fiction, twenty-first century British fiction, institutions, privacy
‘They Built a Whole Lot Like That in the Fifties and Sixties’:

Ishiguro and the Ghosts of English Institutions

Abstract

Throughout Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels, his characters have obsessive relationships with institutions that endure as ghosts long after their original functions have ceased. Though such institutions appear in Ishiguro’s work from Japan to Shanghai to central Europe, this essay argues that the ghosts of English institutions register Ishiguro’s subtle yet deeply-rooted critique of the British state’s particular modern crises, exposing its attempts to replace political plurality and historical contingency with an essentialist ideal. Ishiguro’s institutions are themselves repeatedly complicit in such attempts, whether oriented towards racial nationalism in The Remains of the Day or the ‘Originality’ that governs Never Let Me Go - ideologies that ultimately destroy the institutions that try to negotiate with them. The circumstances of that destruction nevertheless expose, ironically and elegiacally, the institution’s lost potential.

This essay argues that despite the compromised status of these institutions, they have a real - albeit ambivalent - ethical value and even subtle radicalism in haunting Ishiguro’s uncanny alternative history of the British state’s development from the pre-state landscape of The Buried Giant to the late modernity of Never Let Me Go. Beginning by identifying this ethical and political potential, proceeding to describe how it registers through the agency and institutional access enjoyed by Ishiguro’s protagonists, and ending by exploring Ishiguro’s
provocative response to Britain’s history and contemporary predicaments, this essay offers a renewed account of Ishiguro’s English institutions and a revised interpretation of their collective significance.

**Keywords:** Kazuo Ishiguro, England, twentieth-century British fiction, twenty-first century British fiction, institutions, privacy
I still see things that will remind me of Hailsham [...] those pavilions. I spot them all over the country, standing on the far side of playing fields, little white prefab buildings [...] they built a whole lot like that in the fifties and sixties.¹

And the odd rumour will go round sometimes about what Hailsham’s become these days - a hotel, a school, a ruin.²

1. **The remains of the institution**

Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels are thoroughly haunted by lost institutions; some of the most haunting of these are distinctively English in style and significance. Their ghosts inscribe, I argue here, Ishiguro’s subtle yet far-reaching critique of modern Britain and its long history of state development through suppression of institutions: from medieval monasteries to the ‘prefab buildings’ of post-war education, the English landscape is replete with the remains of abolished and abandoned institutions.

This essay begins by discussing two novels dominated by such institutions, *The Remains of the Day* (1989)³ and *Never Let Me Go* (2005). These institutions, Darlington Hall and Hailsham, are compromised by complicity in ideological commitments that ultimately destroy their own purpose and status; yet the very circumstances of the destruction nevertheless expose each institution’s lost potential. These institutions have a real - albeit ambivalent - ethical value in haunting Ishiguro’s uncanny alternative history of the British state’s modern crises - which, I argue, are linked by a persistent kind of anti-institutionalism as the doppelgänger of an organicist nationalism.
My frames here involve both a radical reading of British history and contemporary theoretical responses to conflict over the proper roles of institutions, and to their function in mediating public and private life alongside globalised capitalism and resurgent nationalisms. Although *The Buried Giant* provoked a renewed scholarly focus on issues of British and English nationhood within Ishiguro’s work, this has not been primarily or specifically directed towards English institutions, nor closely connected to Ishiguro’s longstanding concern with the political, affective and material borders of public and private life. Yet Ishiguro establishes an ethical value for the institution precisely in mediating between public and private realms - a mediation profoundly unwelcome to the organicist ideology that continues to dominate the politics of British nationalism. This is the ideology evoked in Boris Johnson’s definition of the Brexit project as ‘a manifestation of this country’s historic national genius [...] in keeping with Britain’s deepest instincts’. Just as this rhetoric is invested in denying that Brexit was in fact a highly contingent historical change, so too Ishiguro’s English institutions must work within ideologies that call for manifestations of original and essential realities, rather than acknowledging either historical contingency or the agentic action, artificial rather than organic, implied by division of public and private realms.

I use ‘institution’ here to indicate an organisation directed towards a particular ethos and purpose, housed in spaces with defined boundaries, and which deliberately creates a distinct moral and material environment. The institution establishes a time and space apart, protecting a distinct internal order that nevertheless possesses the potential, and sometimes the intention, of producing something that will change the external polity or
society, acting within history in order to re-shape it. This is a status that Ishiguro’s institutions possess, though in conflicted and fragile forms.

***

*Never Let Me Go (NLMG)* traces the rise and fall of an institution that holds huge power over the novel’s characters. Their life experiences are almost entirely shaped by the legacy of Hailsham’s structures and programme; yet eventually Hailsham remains only as spectral memories, afterimages, and scattered leftover objects. Though its institutional category is never explicitly defined, Hailsham functions as a boarding school, providing accommodation alongside a programme focused upon character-building and personal creativity. It occupies a former country estate, echoing the scenography of *The Remains of the Day*.

In *NLMG*, opening in ‘England, late 1990s’, the characters travel, but certainly never leave Britain, and apparently not even England. Hailsham and Darlington Hall both function, in fact, as circumscribed microcosms of an idealised, hierarchical England, with a boundary each respective narrator fears to transgress and which structures their psychic state long after they are eventually pushed over it. They become ghostly entities - revenants of lost futures, repressed pasts, and suppressed institutions - and they persistently haunt the protagonists. Mr Stevens, in *Remains*, and Kathy H, in *NLMG*, compulsively recall these institutions whilst travelling elsewhere; this compulsive haunting gives both each novel and each protagonist the mnemonic drive shadowing their physical driving through England.

As *English* institutions, based on specifically English models of country estate and boarding school, the fraught relationship Hailsham and Darlington Hall have with the British
state re-inscribes such English institutions as historical entities even whilst, ironically, their spaces often encapsulate organicist and ahistorical fantasies of nationhood.\textsuperscript{10} Although the equation of England with Britain classically functions to support a unitary Anglocentric nationalism, in Ishiguro this gesture has ironic consequences, ultimately exposing a split where a unity was imagined. Stevens’ definition of British identity through the ‘greatness’ of the supposedly organic English landscape (characterised by its serene and quietist stability, its ‘calmness’ confirming its immutability) is ultimately undermined by the differences he finds between the English institution of Darlington Hall and the country outside it.

This, however, provokes the tricky question of where exactly the British state operates in Ishiguro’s novels. A reader might expect that Hailsham will be exposed as a local agency of that state; but according to the revelations from its former head and patron shortly before the novel’s conclusion,\textsuperscript{13} Hailsham was an autonomous, albeit complicit, institution. A well-regulated order of social exploitation underpins NLMG’s Britain, yet no true officials of this system appear; no national leaders are mentioned; no government department managing the clone population is named.\textsuperscript{14} This is an organised yet in some respects curiously de-institutionalised state, practising an informal and quotidian totalitarianism; and the institution at the novel’s centre eventually - appropriately - disappears from its landscape. NLMG’s ‘England, late 1990s’ frame encourages us to read this disappearance as an uncanny version of real recent English and British history. This history is one of lost institutions and of various attempts, now abandoned, at building alternative futures. In their common orientation towards the future, all Ishiguro’s
institutions are, like Hailsham, engaged in some form of educational project; and for all, the future being built through that project eventually becomes a ghostly one.

Institutions like Hailsham and Darlington Hall act as autonomous places, with protected private spaces, that eventually produce something of public value (and their primary product is the ‘character’ of their protected inhabitants). They are also organised interventions against dominant political trends, and thus they are genuinely ‘institutions’ - purposeful, formalised, deliberately structured and professionally sustained - rather than primarily domestic spaces. It is, in fact, these characteristics of Ishiguro’s institutions that provoke the attempts to contain and ultimately abolish them - and thus to eradicate the fractures they risk between the late modern British state and its claims to organic authority.

These characteristics also instigate my argument that Ishiguro’s English institutions possess political and ethical value, albeit compromised. This argument differs in emphasis from most other analysis of Ishiguro’s institutions,15 which understandably focusses on the severe political and psychosocial damage in which they are implicated. I shall describe how these institutions’ value emerges, however, through the agency they sustain for those who enjoy the times and spaces they provide: an access that depends on a confidence in the institution’s own efficacy for the future. I shall argue that the decline and ultimate failure of this confidence - and thus of the institution itself - mirrors the British state’s real development, from early to late modernity, through the suppression of institutions. I shall finally explore the latter theme within The Buried Giant’s venture into the deep history of England and Britain.

2. Darlington Hall
Lord Darlington attempts to secure a reactionary peace to counter democracy and prevent war; Madame and Miss Emily seek to protect some life experience for Hailsham’s students before their destruction. These aims become effective through being institutionalised; the institution thus, on at least a basic level, demonstrates the possibilities of political change and plurality. However, this potential is internally compromised: both Hailsham and Darlington claim authority by affirming an organic social order, rather than primarily from their own institutional functions. Lord Darlington believes that the world would naturally bend towards peaceful stability, if only international relations could be freed from naïve egalitarianism and malevolent clandestine agents; Madame and Miss Emily believe their students could experience lives approximating those of the Originals without disturbing the social order that fundamentally serves the interests of Originals alone.

Stevens’ narration gradually reveals that Darlington’s pacific-patrician aims produced an operation of influence intended to secure appeasement of Nazi Germany. This operation eventually leads to the Hall’s transformation into a transnational commodity; *Remains* is framed, like *NMG*, by a narrator mourning an institution that endures only as the haunted shell of its former existence. Even this shell, though, is not quite devoid of institutional infrastructure: the need for a staff plan gives Stevens cover for a partial second chance with his own life, an attempted recovery of personal ethical potential that ironically echoes the political potential the Hall possessed (in just one of the ironic movements between intimate and global scales that exemplify Ishiguro’s style). That political potential was evident in Darlington Hall as an autonomous institution, whose owner hoped to re-make the external world in its image:
[...] His lordship was working [...] with a view to conducting an ‘unofficial’ international conference [to] discuss the means by which the harshest terms of the Versailles treaty could be revised [...] and] to be of sufficient weight so that it could have a decisive effect on the ‘official’ international conferences. 19

Although Darlington Hall is a residence, its status as a great estate, underpinned by the professional operations led by Stevens, mean that it always has had institutional characteristics; and these become explicit when Lord Darlington increasingly uses it to stage various gatherings intended to influence world events. Lord Darlington’s goal is to make the public (formal, democratic) order concede to the greater reality and essential authority of the private (informal, aristocratic, quasi-organic) order, and thus ultimately to make politics itself organic, hierarchical, and singular, rather than plural and contingent. (Paradoxically, Darlington has to pursue this aim by separating from mainstream politics to establish a secretive operation, thus tacitly creating the plurality he despises.) The institutions of democratic politics, which Darlington regards as absurdly unnatural and artificial, must give way to the allegedly natural authorities of race, nation, and class.

Overall, the 1923 conference is apparently successful, but dissent emerges from Mr Lewis, an American Congressman 20 (representing a public, formal and democratic institution contrasting with Darlington’s aristocratic enterprise). Lewis brutally diagnoses Darlington as ‘a gentleman [...] an amateur [...] You here in Europe need professionals to run your affairs’. 21

Lewis is overheard by exactly the professional who does run Darlington’s affairs, Stevens. Ironically, this home-institution actually is a highly professional organisation - albeit
one where the silver-polishing is rather more professionalised than the international negotiations\textsuperscript{22} - yet this professionalism must remain obscured, ideally invisible: Stevens prioritises the ‘illusion of absence’\textsuperscript{23} in service: the more important the politics negotiated within the Hall, the more invisible its institutionalised infrastructure must be.\textsuperscript{24} Darlington’s (and Stevens’) complicity in political harm is dependent upon, and emerges through, the calculated denial of this institution’s own status as institution, of its artificiality and contingent historicity; of the fact that Darlington’s enclosed world is not simply a condensed and perfected version of the natural order (as Stevens is eventually forced to acknowledge when he finally travels outside).

For Stevens, the purpose of his avowedly apolitical professionalism is, paradoxically, to support his employer’s political influence, in the belief that Lord Darlington’s position and character organically justifies such influence. \textit{Remains’} narrative is driven by the slow, painful unpicking of these assumptions - in such episodes as Stevens being humiliated by a group of aristocratic guests who, to prove their case against democracy, mockingly ask his political opinions,\textsuperscript{25} and later in his reception by villagers who assume he is himself an upper-class power-broker.\textsuperscript{26} Through their subversive, often cruel, irony, these incidents imply that any firm distinction between Stevens’ complicit professionalism and Lord Darlington’s destructive amateurism depends upon obscuring the reality of their co-dependence - a co-dependence that betrays the contingent and artificial nature of Darlington’s political enterprise, despite its affirmation of an organic order.

Under Stevens’ management, the Hall’s infrastructure invisibly sustains a beautiful fantasy of such an order, and underpins Lord Darlington’s larger-scale concealment of his private operation of influence - which has, in fact, precisely the conspiratorial characteristics
he baldly projects on to ‘Jewry’. Darlington’s hypocritical anti-Semitic phobia of secretive influence suggests a displacement and abjection of the *inorganic* division between private and public orders that is in fact the repressed reality of Darlington Hall itself. It is a division that again implies historicity, contingency, plurality (and moral responsibility), all conditions that Darlington and Stevens collude to obscure and erase.

This tendency is heavily implicated in the disparity between the aspirations for the future that Darlington Hall embodies and the actual future it produces. In *Remains* (whose title itself evokes a denuded future), the ghosts of lost futures appear in the dead and exiled young people who haunt the novel— including the dismissed Jewish servants, the ‘fine young lads’ of Moscombe killed in the war, and young Mr Cardinal. Stevens’ maladroit attempt to convey ‘the facts of life’ to Cardinal parallels, in a bizarre juxtaposition, the organicist worldview driving Lord Darlington’s political machinations; yet it is so reliant on analogies to nature that the uncomprehending Cardinal rightly, but ironically, regards the absurd conversation as a distraction from the political discussions inside.

Darlington Hall nevertheless gives Stevens, its *de facto* manager, some real agency, which even survives its post-war sale. The Hall allows Stevens the private time and space (primarily his pantry) in which to reflect, relax, strategise, and ultimately ‘to make [my] own small contribution to the creation of a better world’. Unintentionally undermining Lord Darlington’s organicist fantasy of unifying the interior world of Darlington Hall with the larger world outside, Stevens emphasises rather the Hall’s value in splitting public and private spaces. This division is, however, not only in subtle conflict with Lord Darlington’s vision; Ishiguro also hints that it conflicts with the organicist nationalism beneath post-war British social democracy as rehearsed by Harry Smith and the villagers of Moscombe, who
(in mistaking the well-spoken butler for an aristocrat) believe Stevens is an authentic representative of a stable ruling class rather than the artificial, consciously-constructed public product of a particular institution.

In a rather anti-Foucauldian turn, the institution’s public value emerges here as defined by its protection of privacy for those who have access to it: just as the institution’s political purpose indicates a kind of historical split, an inorganic and agentic intervention, so too the person living within such an institution is a split subject; they have a public face and a private space, and Stevens himself asserts that the former crucially depends on the latter.31

The institution protects such private space as a pragmatic necessity, but also because of its confidence that those granted access will serve its broader historical purpose. This confidence is strategically withdrawn from Darlington’s Jewish staff members, as eventually it is from the clone population in NLMG. While it sustains its confidence, though, the institution is neither organic nor transparent: and as we shall see, this profoundly offends the politics of late modern Britain.

3. Hailsham

Whereas Darlington Hall ends as an ambiguous survivor, at the end of NLMG Hailsham - the institution that dominates the consciousness of the narrator, Kathy H, as Darlington Hall does for Stevens - has been wholly abandoned. Kathy cannot even accurately locate Hailsham’s site as locus of mourning; it survives only as an uncanny spectre on the margins of vision.32 During her time there, Kathy fulfils the formal demands of Hailsham’s programme, but also uses the institutional allowance of private time and
space to develop her relationships and ambitions. Despite operating some basic control mechanisms, Hailsham allows a significant amount of unmonitored time and space for its students.\textsuperscript{33}

When Kathy, thinking she is alone, mimes holding a baby as she moves to a song called ‘Never Let Me Go’, she reveals her desire for forms of living, and a future, denied to her - and thus unwittingly exposes this institutionally-protected space’s latent political and ethical potential: Kathy reveals to Madame’s gaze a potential to use private time and space to fantasise, perhaps to formulate, a future beyond her predetermined boundaries. Presumably the later, apparently brutally inhumane,\textsuperscript{34} replacements for Hailsham remove such clandestine opportunities along with abandoning the broader institutional purpose of which Kathy’s privacy and agency are uncanny by-products.

Kelly Rich argues that ‘Hailsham’s great trick is to refuse its infrastructural status’,\textsuperscript{35} whilst ‘the cultural attachments it offers are merely palliative’\textsuperscript{36} and it is ultimately ‘unlivable infrastructure no different from any other vast government home’.\textsuperscript{37} Despite the truth within this analysis, I suggest that Hailsham is nevertheless meaningfully different to its later replacements, and that the obscuring of its function within the state infrastructure indicates an \textit{institutional} status that is fraught and conflicted, yet real. I also argue that the interior and interpersonal lives of the Hailsham students facilitated by this institution are more than the byproduct of a cynical palliative care (as, indeed, they exceed the boundaries of such care in Kathy and Tommy’s eventual request for a ‘deferral’).\textsuperscript{38}

The rise and fall of Hailsham, a failed progressive experiment whose facilities are casually framed by Kathy’s remark\textsuperscript{39} that ‘they built a whole lot like that in the fifties and
sixties’, uncannily mirrors post-war Britain’s optimistic social institution-building, the progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and the conservative reaction emerging into 1980s Thatcherism. These parallels are not, of course, a direct reflection of real history, but rather operate as an uncanny refraction of it, as has been widely recognised in critical analysis.40 *Never Let Me Go* functions as a spectral doppelgänger to the history of post-war British institutions from their apogee to their suppression and dissolution, until it eventually becomes a phantom future never to be realised, and a past understood too late.

For its alumni, however, Hailsham’s legacy is materially and psychologically essential. It gave them protected space and time for their own development, offered a broad curriculum including arts,41 sports,42 and social skills,43 and nurtured a sense of agency over their futures. The latter was, however, always compromised: its programme is caught between affirming its institutional role in educating students into (even limited) agency, and an acceptance of latent natural order, where any education serves merely to reveal an organic hierarchy of relative human status. A tendency to compulsive gazing from the ‘Guardians’ towards the students betrays, in its hectic surveillance,44 an underlying anxiety that the students’ embodiment of humanity can never quite be secure, partly for the ironic reason that the institution itself is generating their supposed demonstrations of human essence - their artworks - artificially rather than organically.45

Although Hailsham inclusively positions the clones as at least adjacent to human status, this ideological positioning does not alter their eventual exploitation. Yet Hailsham’s value is clarified when Kathy and her friends depart for ‘the Cottages’, a facility marked by a distinct lack of institutional characteristics: ‘We arrived at the Cottages expecting a version of Hailsham for older students’;46 but to their initial shock, there is no organised programme
of activity, or even maintenance, there; nor are there enforced boundaries. Although the former students have much more free time at the Cottages, their experience of this relative freedom is heavily constrained: deprived of the institution’s protected time and space, the clones all increasingly obsess over both their origins and their futures, and these obsessions gain a more deterministic hold on their imaginations, activities, and relationships than they held before. (Tellingly, Kathy becomes resentful of Ruth for supposedly not holding on to Hailsham’s memory closely enough.)

Even though the opportunities for interpersonal relations and creativity at Hailsham were both often clandestine and perverted by the institution’s political complicity, they nevertheless possessed a psychosocial reality and an imaginative range. At the Cottages, these qualities gradually decline, replaced by accelerating anxiety over the future, as seen in the grim comedy of Kathy claiming she is flicking through a porn magazine for sexual stimulation, only for Tommy to recognise that she is actually hunting for her Original. This scene is an uncanny and perverse repetition of the earlier scene with the tape; both show Kathy being caught in attempts to participate in a reproductive relationship that is affectively and ethically meaningful, but now her role is reversed from that of mother facing the future to abandoned child abjectly seeking her lost past. At the Cottages, the clones obsess over their ‘Originals’, searching for what is now the only possible sign of their human potential, in the absence of the institutional security they previously - temporarily - experienced.

With their rustic conditions, rural location and commune-like living arrangements - with overlapping, semi-polyamorous couples - the Cottages are (in contrast to Hailsham’s public school and country house associations) reminiscent of 1960s and 70s
countercultures. (Given that Kathy H is thirty-one in the late 1990s, having begun her career as a carer eleven years earlier,\textsuperscript{53} the time spent at the Cottages must have taken place in the early to mid-1980s, when the counterculture was in reality facing strong conservative reaction). Hailsham, the progressive post-war institution, is succeeded by this quasi-countercultural place in the clones’ lives.

Despite the lack of institutional order at the Cottages, the reader realises that they must be part of the state-organised system for management of the clone population. Although this system’s presence is almost invisible here, it is yet stronger than it was at Hailsham. The sinisterly invisible yet pervasive role of the state in the Cottages’ pastoral isolation, a haunting and repressed presence underneath their apparent organic self-sufficiency, uncannily evokes and inflects a Romantic tradition of the English pastoral idyll concealing the operations of violent power involved in its production, a tradition that finds in the landscape an embodiment of tranquil ethno-national essence (of, in NLMG’s terminology, Originality). For Ishiguro, this version of England - the same pastoral England Stevens seeks in Remains - is a fantasy of the natural and organic, and NLMG’s ‘Originality’ is subtly synonymous with it: the population of Originals whom the system serves are the British.

The English pastoral displayed, in different forms, both at the Cottages and the country estates of Hailsham and Darlington, is a product of the extension of British state power, and of that state’s modern growth from the profits of slavery, colonialism,\textsuperscript{54} and industrial capitalism.\textsuperscript{55} All these forces involved the exclusion or active removal of labouring and ‘foreign’ bodies from the idealised, fetishised pastoral landscape their work sustained, in an ironic parallel to how the clones are ideologically and temporally excluded from the
'original' England/Britain in *NLMG* (though not, in their case, from its pastoral scenography). As former country estates, behind both Darlington Hall and Hailsham also lies the history of the British state’s development through the institutional suppressions of the early modern Dissolution of the Monasteries and Reformation,\textsuperscript{56} and of the related\textsuperscript{57} long process of Enclosure, all of which supported the development of the English pastoral as a materialised fantasy of organicist authenticity.

Intensified state power requires exclusion of the foreign and the inauthentic precisely because the organic reality from which it claims affective authority - like the vision of British ‘greatness’ Stevens finds in the restrained southern English landscape\textsuperscript{58} - *cannot* in fact be self-sufficient; it relies on (excluded and exploited) labour elsewhere. *NLMG* has echoes of the Romantic tradition of Blake, Wordsworth and Clare, of elegiac mourning for the lost and exiled within the pastoral landscape. It also has much more contemporary resonances: the obscuring and exiling of the nation state’s exploited victims and hidden workers is in recent British history increasingly directed towards migration (and Docherty appropriately finds echoes of the predicaments of migrants in the position of *NLMG*’s clones).\textsuperscript{59} Contemporary British migration control regimes are driven by a conservative politics that traditionally fetishises a supposedly organic social reality embodied in the harmonious qualities of the rural English landscape (as expounded by rightwing intellectuals such as Roger Scruton),\textsuperscript{60} and which amounts to an anti-historicist and, in a sense, anti-institutional\textsuperscript{61} conservatism.

Ishiguro’s responsiveness to this tradition of organicist conservatism and its recent manifestations recognises the late modern British anxieties over migration, globalisation, and transnational institutions that eventually would be decisively embodied in the ‘Brexit’
vote of 2016. Brexit is itself a project that seeks to render British institutions as quasi-natural expressions of organic national identity and thus neither historical, political - nor even, in the way I use the term here, institutional - at all.\(^6\) Brexit has also been tied, by both proponents and opponents, into the mythology of an organic island nation; and it has been specifically characterised as a second English Reformation,\(^6\) the late modern re-eruption of an earlier modern nationalism, evoking the destruction of institutions, the unification of the state, and the rise of modern capitalism.

By the end of *NLMG*, institutions that recognise their own historical and contingent (hence unnatural) status are vanishing, becoming ghostly ruins like the monasteries long before them. The transition from Hailsham to the Cottages thus reflects, with haunting irony, both a recent post-war history and a longer, deeper past; and the Cottages even subtly extend this history beyond the political Right, drawing an implicit connection between countercultural and conservative tendencies to seek to retrieve an organic ideal rather than to build historically contingent institutions. Originality becomes a unifying trope combining all essentialisms that map from the real late twentieth-century Britain to its doppelgänger in *NLMG*.

4. **Entrance tests and free gifts**

Caught between their political missions and organicist denials of their own institutional status, Darlington Hall and Hailsham both end as ghostly revenants in the English landscape. Despite their self-destructive complicity, the latent value of these lost institutions emerges via Ishiguro’s typically uncanny moves between large and intimate
scales, where the institution’s capacity for historical intervention registers through the individuals who enjoy access to its protected times and spaces.

Access to such private times and spaces depends on a kind of confidence: Stevens’ and Kathy’s institutional access is granted on the basis that they will indeed contribute, however modestly, to the securing of a better future. Their institutions’ structures reflect a tacit acknowledgement (contrary to their ostensible acceptance of an organic and undivided reality) that, as Stevens insists, such effective contributions in public can only be secured by a private space that remains unobserved. This acceptance of a division between private self and public life implicitly accepts that real value is not merely to be revealed, but must be created institutionally. When a society refuses this, reality and its value are conceived as transparent, permanent rather than contingent; the future, no longer meaningfully different from the past. NLMG’s Britain reaches this situation by the 1990s, with political change replaced by biopolitical continuity.

These are the stakes behind a recurrent dilemma for Ishiguro’s institutions - the question of whether access is to be given as a free gift, in the confidence that the institution itself will create a worthwhile future; or as subject to an entrance test, in the belief that the institution’s purpose is the recognition of an essentially unchanging reality, which the individual may or may not sufficiently embody - as the unfortunate Jewish staff at Darlington discover.

Hailsham’s programme initially appears to assert the institution’s own potential to nourish the agency of those who benefit from its protection. Yet it turns out that the clones must retrospectively justify their entrance to Hailsham by producing art that supposedly
reveals their essential latent humanity (their ‘souls’) even whilst their access to the materials for such creativity - like Kathy’s tape, but also simply the time and space offered by Hailsham itself - is clearly a practical precondition for producing this apparent revelation - one that is historically contingent, and abolished by the novel’s end.

When the adult Kathy and Tommy attempt to use Tommy’s artwork to gain a ‘deferral’, they are seeking to pass an entrance test to retrieve some institutionally-protected time and space, the ‘sheltering’ gift of opportunity to focus on other things beyond their eventual fate, as Miss Emily defines Hailsham’s purpose. In the organicist worldview, the economy of institutional access, determining the distribution of material things and of the times and spaces in which to use them, becomes a matter of perceived moral desert, producing the obsession with recognition between the Originals and the clones that runs throughout NLMG. Who should receive material benefits when their use could jeopardise the values those benefits are provided to serve? Someone who promises to authentically reproduce those values - and no one else. Hailsham tries to capture that reproduction in visually recognisable form, in the children’s artwork, yet such institutions actually produce human and political consequences that are not immediately transparent, as Kathy and Tommy’s case shows.

This situation resonates with the real late twentieth-century United Kingdom. Notably, an economy of authenticity continues to operate in Remains’ post-war period, even though it has been transformed into a commodified fantasy (the ‘real old English butler’ and ‘genuine grand old English house’ Farraday purchases), authentic (or ‘original’) value endures as fetish - and obscures the specific content of Darlington Hall’s recent history, a history of it operating as an institution.
In *NLMG*, the condition for access to the institution is being proximate to Originality, a humanist yet inhumane category that generates constant anxiety over its proper limits. Hailsham negotiates this anxiety, buying time for the children to develop by satisfying the demand to *immediately* demonstrate that they are born at least adjacent to Originality, gaining something of its status by association; temporal immediacy and visual transparency code a faith in the organic and essential. Tommy problematises this, by being unable to produce suitable artwork as a child and then eventually doing so, too late, as an adult (in an awkward legacy of Hailsham’s free gifts of time and space). Time to develop and private space coincide as necessary conditions for any meaningful productivity, innovation or intervention introducing a difference, a split, in time - for any political and historical act, offensive to essentialist and organicist fantasy. Kathy and Tommy’s request for a ‘deferral’, a request for renewed access to the private time and space that would make this kind of act possible, is itself also an ironically modest instance of such an act. In the uncanny, perverse version of 1990s England in which the novel concludes, it is refused.

5. **English institutions and British history**

The trajectories and crises of Ishiguro’s institutions mirror the real conflicts of late modern Britain; they also evoke longer and deeper British and English histories.

Ishiguro’s chronology for Hailsham’s decline (approximately between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s) coincides with, and uncannily echoes, the real history of Thatcherite rolling-back of post-war and progressive institutions via hostile government interventions towards schools and education authorities, universities, the BBC, public arts organisations, and even churches. The strongest attacks targeted those institutions
deliberately distinct from the social mainstream, and which sought significant changes between the future and the past; Thatcherite anti-institutionalism was rooted in an essentially organicist worldview, combining neoliberal economics, social conservatism and revived nationalism in claiming to restore a quasi-natural state of British greatness. Nevertheless, as already noted, post-war institution-building itself does not have an unambiguously benign presence in Ishiguro. Harry Smith explicitly legitimates post-war British democracy, and by association the institutions of its welfare state, through the essential racial value of the British, asserting the ethno-nationalism that continues to encircle surviving post-war institutions in Britain today. The roots of failure for Ishiguro’s English institutions evoke Thatcherite anti-institutionalism, but also the organicist nationalism that post-war institution-building never fully escaped.

Ishiguro’s ghostly English institutions are distinctly his own, but also reflect popular cultural motifs contemporaneous with his adolescence and early career. Some 1970s British films (which Ishiguro, an enthusiastic cinemagoer, likely saw) aggressively dramatise failed optimism, institutional decline, and elegiac nostalgia for an organic past. Stanley Kubrick’s adaptation of Antony Burgess, A Clockwork Orange (1971) portrayed failing post-war institutions from which the protagonist, Alex DeLarge, and his gang make violent escapades into the countryside, including to two modernist versions of the English country house. Derek Jarman’s Jubilee (1977) and The Tempest (1979) portrayed British institutions (including, in the latter, another country house) as denuded and ghostly entities, but also as spaces of powerful, if ambivalent, desire for an organic past, located well beyond the political Right and expressed as an English pastoral: a theme on which Ishiguro began to develop his own subtly provocative perspective.
The attempted recuperation of a reality secure from destructive social and economic change - which Ishiguro’s Stevens and Kathy H, echoing those earlier motifs, seek by looking anxiously into the English countryside - reflects a crisis of faith in history as beneficially or meaningfully changeable by institutional intervention. In Ishiguro, such a crisis can involve the threatened end of any optimistic forgetting or ‘moving on’, whilst a restrictive, essentialist version of the past is restored. This is precisely the crisis emerging in The Buried Giant (TBG), where violent attempts to restore ethnic purity threaten to end a biopolitically-enforced forgetting of previous conflict. A similar dynamic, though in a different context, has arisen at the close of NLMG, where the origins of the clones become their exclusive destiny, abandoning Hailsham’s limited attempt to build an amended future by encouraging temporary ignorance of their predicament. Here confidence in any future meaningfully different from the past is severely threatened, and powerful forces advocate for the acceptance of an essentialist organic past - or origin, or ‘originality’ - as a permanent present. Yet this recuperation is also an erasure of certain other pasts - including those of the English institutions that survive only as revenant remains - and an attempted erasure of history itself as product of contingent human agency.

TBG opens with: ‘You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated.’ Unlike the Romantic narrator who might lament for lost eco-social harmony, this voice tragically mourns for a national pastoral that has not yet emerged; the effect is to ironically, uncannily, re-historicise an essentialist fantasy of the English pastoral. In a reversal of the image of late modern Britain with which NLMG ends, here purposeful institutions thrive, but no state survives, in a landscape filled with ‘castles containing music, fine food, athletic excellence;
monasteries steeped in learning’. Even the community in which Axl and Beatrice live, a ‘warren’, is itself an institution with shared resources and social spaces, regulations, and hierarchies of authority. Like Kathy H and Stevens, Axl and Beatrice enjoy their own protected private time and space within their institution; like them, they must leave it behind.

Early in their journey, Axl and Beatrice shelter in an abandoned Roman villa, where they encounter an elderly woman in conflict with a ‘boatman’, another character who grips tightly upon the ghostly remains of a cherished institution:

On our rest days, we each have a special place to go, and this, friends, is mine. This house where I was once a carefree child. It’s not as it once was, but for me it’s filled with precious memories, and I come here asking only the quiet to enjoy them. Now consider this. Whenever I come […] this old woman will enter […] and taunt me […] she’ll bring with her a rabbit, or some such small creature, so she can slay it and pollute this precious place with its blood.

Yet the woman has a seemingly valid grievance: she recounts how, when she and her husband sought passage to a certain island, this boatman cruelly (and permanently) separated the couple. This island seems to be a heavenly realm, and also echoes allegories of England as sacred island, like Arthur’s Avalon. The boatman justifies his separation of the migrant couple on the basis that he put their love to a fair and transparent test (echoing Kathy and Tommy’s attempt to qualify for a deferral), and the woman failed this entrance test. In the boatman’s parallel attempt to exclude the woman from the ruined villa, access
to a ghostly institution is jealously guarded and sought, governed by a fantasy of a harmonious past and sustained by a cruel access regime.

In contrast, access to the monastery in which Axl and Beatrice and their companions stay is freely given, though it turns out to be another compromised and complicit institution. The monastery’s openness derives ultimately from its faith in Christian salvation, a form of confidence operating in contrast to - and, in principle, in separation from - the surrounding society’s anxieties over the future, with the emerging threat of renewed genocide. The power of institutions against such genocide is acknowledged - whilst deploring it - by the Saxon warrior Wistan, who was taken as a child and brought up by Britons:

In a well-guarded fort [...] we boys, twenty or more, were trained morning till night to become warriors in the Britons’ ranks. I grew to feel great affection for my companions of those days [...] we lived like brothers [...] I feel shame even now remembering the affection I had for them.\textsuperscript{91}

Wistan acknowledges the role of the institution’s protected time in facilitating a future that is built and governed historically, rather than through revealed racial essentialism; he promises to destroy such institutions, and build England, the Anglo-Saxon nation (which would eventually, ironically, be succeeded again by ‘Britain’).

The monastery’s ambivalent, threatened role within the stateless Britain of \textit{TBG} foreshadows England’s single greatest loss of institutions to developing modern state power: the mid-sixteenth century Dissolution of the Monasteries and absorption of the Church under state control. This mass suppression of institutions was central to the
development of the pastoral landscapes of *Remains* and *NLMG*, as it was to the modern state with which they interact. Over recent decades, scholarship has increasingly recognised the scale of institutional loss that the Reformation represented, and Ishiguro subtly (probably unconsciously) incorporates a sense of this distant yet revenant loss into his own ghostly institutions. If Darlington Hall and Hailsham are haunted by their former roles as functioning English country estates, such estates were, in cultural and literary tradition, haunted by revenants of the monastic institutions destroyed during the seeding of the capitalist Protestant British state; the ghosts the students believe to live in the woods on the edge of Hailsham sustain this gothic tradition. Stevens and Kathy H live in institutions that echo the monastic in that their institutional purpose relies upon separation from the surrounding society, and on their mission of building a distinct alternative future.

6. Institutions, Privacy, and Productivity

The monastery embodies a core value of institutions for Ishiguro’s protagonists: the protection of time and space for the private life from which public agency can be achieved. This function is also of significant interest for contemporary theory. Josh Cohen, drawing on Hannah Arendt, has articulated the vulnerability of the private life as a defining late modern phenomenon, in *Not Working* (2018). Cohen develops this to argue that late capitalist ‘productivity’ is aggressively opposed to any private, protected time and space for living with no transparent purpose; yet it is ironically on exactly this that genuine creative productivity or ‘innovation’ (or historical intervention) must depend. Stevens would agree:

If operations are to be conducted in a smoothly co-ordinated way [...] the butler’s pantry must be the one place in the house where privacy and solitude are
guaranteed. [...] There is [...] one situation only in which a butler who cares about his
dignity may feel free to unburden himself of his role; that is to say, when he is
entirely alone.⁹⁶

Stevens articulates the institution’s spatial obscuring of his ‘real’ self as essential for
meaningful productivity. His room, a drab bachelor’s space from which Miss Kenton is
banished,⁹⁷ echoes a monastic cell; and Cohen suggestively locates a pre-modern model for
the relation between work and private space in a medieval monastic context, noting that
monastic discipline allowed for institutionalised separation between the activity of work and
the purpose of living.⁹⁸ Cohen argues that the growth of Protestantism and western
capitalism (marked in England by two major institutional losses, the dissolution of the
monasteries and the related⁹⁹ enclosure of common land) erased the importance of private
time and space as necessary conditions for meaningful purpose.¹⁰⁰ Cohen’s work (which also
echoes Docherty’s attacks on ‘transparency’ as a defining phenomenon of late modernity in
general and post-Thatcherite Britain in particular)¹⁰¹ resonates powerfully with how
Ishiguro’s institutions disrupt the conception of productivity as organic, ahistorical and
transparent, before they are ultimately shut down.

Even though such disruptive capacity at Hailsham and Darlington is compromised by
complicity in fantasies of the organic and essential, these institutions nevertheless
unavoidably constitute, as I have argued, a historical intervention (or ‘innovation’) through a
deliberate programme, produced by human agency. This is itself a ‘productivity’, though not
one based on constant reproduction of a transparent and single source of value (the
common logic of late capitalism and late nationalism, their common fetish of Originality).
From within their institutions, Kathy H and Stevens themselves are highly productive and, eventually, creative; Kathy produces art objects to fulfil the formal demands of Hailsham’s programme, but uses her possessions and private fantasies to develop her aspirations and relationships, whilst Stevens uses his managerial efficiency to engineer an excuse to contact Miss Kenton. Stevens and Kathy enact the paradox that the most genuine creative productivity depends on time and space with no expectation to produce anything - a free gift. The result of all the relationships produced by this gift to Ishiguro’s protagonists is a demand on the institution both to survive and to change - the demand implied by Stevens’ desire for Kenton to return to Darlington Hall and by Kathy and Tommy’s requested deferral, with its desired restoration of Hailsham’s protections. All these productive workers are, however, betrayed by the organicist fantasy in which both they and their institutions are complicit. Following Cohen and Docherty, we can locate the deep roots of this situation in modern and late modern capitalism; reading Ishiguro, we should also locate it in the development of the British nation state and its long destruction of any institutions that would qualify its own power through offering any alternative historical project, just as the menacing ephemeral state in *NMG* destroys Hailsham.

The combination of the fantasy of an organic British/English nation with the idea of productive work as constant and natural was central to Thatcherism as a proximate context for Ishiguro’s early writing. In the contemporary United Kingdom powerfully affected by globalisation, migration, and intergenerational conflict, the same ethos results in increasingly frantic attempts to protect the supposedly organic nation from the real sources of its economic base and from its changed historical position - attempts visible, for example, as a political obsession with limiting migrant access to state organisations like the National
Health Service (NHS). The resulting access control regimes, in their paranoid determination to avoid giving any free gift, generate entrance tests that are highly affective in style,\textsuperscript{102} demanding transparent exposure of intimate lives, much like the tests Kathy and Tommy, and Axl and Beatrice, attempt to pass in order to gain institutional protection for continuance of their shared lives. For those with insecure citizenship in contemporary Britain, individual rights often depend on supposedly transparent demands for affective and economic ‘productivity’, on exposing intimate life to gain institutional access.\textsuperscript{103}

When Axl and Beatrice finally face the boatman’s test, the heavenly island to which they attempt to gain admission is a time and place with a gatekeeper who regulates access; yet it is also, simultaneously, a fantasy of a timeless England, to which the characters who live in the ‘real’ pre-England desire to escape. In this reality, though, their society moves inexorably towards the violence of ethnic cleansing and developing early state power, away from protected spaces like Wistan’s fort and towards his fantasies of a unitary England established and naturalised by blood (blood as metonym for both violence and ethnic purity).

Ishiguro uses the ghosts of English institutions to render uncanny and disturbing the anti-institutionalism, ahistoricism, and essentialism that persists in late modern British politics, thereby producing a subtle picture of the ethical potential of plural institutions, and of the private time and spaces they might provide. This potential value is obscured because all the institutions in Ishiguro’s work are significantly compromised. However, as we have seen, Ishiguro equally often locates their ethical and political guilt in their failures to act as institutions, and in their complicity in fantasies of the organic and essential.
In the contemporary United Kingdom, migration, globalisation, and intergenerational change all threaten to expose institutions and their relationship to the state and nation as not organic, provoking ever more aggressive attempts to prove the contrary. Ishiguro’s ghosts of English institutions subtly but powerfully haunt this frantic and fractured Britain with their elegies for lost futures. Perhaps some hope lies in how those ghosts are at least tragically persistent, stubbornly refusing to die for those who are marked by them; at least, until those people die themselves - as Kathy, narrating from the late 1990s, would have done by the time of NLMG’s publication in 2005.
Notes

2 Ibid, p.280.
8 Ishiguro, *NLMG*, epigraph.
9 Hailsham’s emphases on personal responsibility and good conduct, and the formality of student-Guardian relationships, associate it with a British establishment conservatism (although, as noted above, in some respects Hailsham is relatively liberal).
10 British country estate landscapes often reflect the naturalistic movement led by Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown (c.1715-1783), identified as the horticultural equivalent of Burke’s organicist politics in Phibbs, John. *Capability Brown: Designing English Landscapes and Gardens*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2016, p. 17.
12 Ibid, p.29.
14 These omissions strikingly remove the sinister state nomenclatures so characteristic of other dystopian fiction.
16 Hailsham was one of several institutions with related but varying agendas. Ishiguro, *NLMG*, pp. 256-258.
18 Ibid, pp.5-10.
19 Ibid, p.78.
20 In a shrewd plot condensation, the 1993 film adaptation merged this character with the American (the novel’s Farraday) who later purchases Darlington Hall. *The Remains of the Day*. Directed by James Ivory. Merchant Ivory Productions, 1993. [Film]
22 Ibid, pp.42-44.
23 Ibid, p.75.
24 Ibid, p.77.
25 Ibid, pp.204-206.
26 Ibid, pp.196-197.
27 Ibid, pp.154-155; 158.
28 Ibid, pp.198-199.
29 Ibid, pp.86-88; 93-94.
33 Ibid, p.33; p.43; p.70.
36 Ibid, p.635.
38 The discourses around exchanges of artwork and other objects at Hailsham also suggest ideological tension rather than just cynical control.
41 Ishiguro, *NLMG*, p.19.
43 Ibid, p.108.
44 Ibid, pp.43-45.
45 Miss Emily later acknowledges this paradox: Ibid, pp.255-256.
50 Ibid, p.93.
53 Ibid, p.3.


Scruton likely would not have accepted this; but within my opposition between the historical/institutional and the organicist, he clearly falls into the latter category.

The naturalising rhetoric of Brexiteers towards the NHS, Britain’s enduring post-war institution, called for a restoration of an organic national entity being artificially denuded by a parasitical foreign institution. This rhetoric is explored in Kettell and Kerr, ‘The Brexit Religion and the Holy Grail of the NHS’.

This became a common conceit in media commentary, for example: Kettle, Martin. ‘How the Reformation Sowed the Seeds of Brexit’. *The Guardian*, 17th October 2017.

This question appears repeatedly in Ishiguro, including in Mrs Banks’ home-institution in *When We Were Orphans*, where she is encouraged to enforce racial criteria for access control: Ishiguro, Kazuo, *When We Were Orphans*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p.59.

Ishiguro, *NLMG*, p.255.

Although the drawings with which Tommy hopes to merit the deferral were seemingly created later, their subjects and style react to his earlier attempts at Hailsham (Ishiguro, *NLMG*, pp. 176-177).

*Ishiguro, NLMG*, p.255.


*Ishiguro, NLMG*, pp.176-177.


Ishiguro is familiar with Kubrick, whose 2001: A Space Odyssey appears explicitly in The Unconsoled (pp.93-94).

82 A Clockwork Orange. Directed and produced by Stanley Kubrick, 1971. [Film]
83 Jubilee. Directed by Derek Jarman. Produced by Howard Malin and James Whaley, 1978. [Film]
84 The Tempest. Directed by Derek Jarman. Produced by Guy Ford and Mordecai Schreiber, 1979. [Film]

86 Ishiguro, The Buried Giant, p.3.
87 Ibid, p.4.
88 Ibid, p.5.
89 Ibid, p.23.
91 Ibid, pp.239-241.

93 Ishiguro, NLMG, p.50.
96 Ishiguro, Remains, p.174; pp.177-178
98 Cohen, Not Working, p. xxvii.
99 See note 57.
100 Ibid, pp. xxvii-xxix.
102 In the UK, such tests include the narratives that asylum seekers are required to present, and the demand for spousal visa applicants to demonstrate that the relationship is genuine.