

No Homelike Place: The Lesson of History in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*

T i m o t h y W r i g h t

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Early in Kazuo Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), the narrator Etsuko makes a grim admission. Her eldest daughter, brought to England as a child when Etsuko left Japan after the war, is several years dead. Never able to adjust to her new country, without friends, she has taken her own life, her body hanging undiscovered in her Manchester bedsit for several days. "The horror of that image has never diminished," says Etsuko, "but it has long ceased to be a morbid matter; as with a wound on one's own body, it is possible to develop an intimacy with the most disturbing of things" (54). Intimacy with the disturbing turns out to be the leitmotif of Etsuko's story, and indeed of Ishiguro's oeuvre as a whole. We discover that the daughter's sui-cide is merely one manifestation of an ongoing historical trauma from which, despite time and distance, she cannot fully emerge. The emotional devastation, the sense of terrible historical guilt, the unlocalizable shame that continues to accompany Etsuko even after she marries a British citizen and moves to the English countryside—all this is bound up with the bombing of her home city, Nagasaki, whose hills, which escaped nuclear devastation, symbolize an unrealizable yearning for a refuge from history.

As a statement of the essential theme that would come to dominate much of Ishiguro's work—how one survives after historical

catastrophe—Etsuko’s confession is implicitly a rejoinder to Theodor Adorno’s famous proclamation, made from the ruins of postwar Europe, that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (“Cultural Criticism” 34). This claim Adorno was later to qualify in his philosophical summa, *Negative Dialectics*. Conceding that “[p]erennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream,” Adorno goes on to raise the “less cultural” question of “whether after Auschwitz you can go on living,” especially when “mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz” (362–63). The horror for Adorno was not just Auschwitz but our ability to disregard that horror, to put it to one side as we go about the process of living. Adorno perceived that the status of human existence in the wake of these catastrophes had been decisively altered. “After Auschwitz,” he wrote, “our feelings resist any claim for the positivity of existence as sanctimonious prating” (361). Hence Adorno’s famous proscription on poetry: if poetry is a creative act, it is an affirmation—of the human spirit, of culture, of language. But can one affirm the human spirit if this same human spirit is also responsible for Auschwitz? Should not one just abandon the entire human project as such?

Adorno’s position remains controversial, more so because of the blanket moral complicity it attributes to Enlightenment modernity as a whole. It is not only that one must live every aspect of one’s life with the knowledge of Auschwitz—that is, that one can never forget it, brush it to one side, go on as if it didn’t concern one. It is also an acknowledgment of the radically compromised nature of human life itself, which must now internalize the intolerable fact of its existence within a system that is fundamentally and inescapably inhuman. In response to his sense of modernity’s structural entanglement with catastrophe and violence, Adorno developed the notion of negative dialectics, a restless, unhappy, and relentlessly critical mode of thinking that refused the syntheses and sublations of Hegelian “positive” dialectics. Due to its ability to continually elude conceptualization, aesthetics occupied a privileged position within this antisystem. The very aesthetic practices Adorno denounced as barbaric still harbored the potential to be salvaged and recuperated as possible spaces of resistance. Art existed both

inside and outside the social world it represented, not so much a representation of it as its negative reflection, “the negative knowledge of the actual world” (“Reconciliation” 160). In particular, Adorno found a measure of legitimacy in the autonomous art of the modernists. Autonomous art was not wholly bound to the logic of its social context but was able, through negation, to hold itself at a degree of separation. The writings of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett did not affirm anything; rather, they refused meaning, and in this way resisted the neutralization of suffering as it was subsumed into an ideal realm.¹ For “only what does not fit into this world,” claimed Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*, “is true” (59).

Adorno’s aesthetics emerged from the acknowledgment that history had failed to instruct us—or, to be more precise, that we had failed to learn from it, that in the face of the horrific revelations of the concentration camps, Europe was unable to do anything more than avert its gaze and go about business as usual. The same sense of a latent and unacknowledged historical catastrophe lurking behind the quotidian aspects of postwar existence also constitutes the buried horror of Ishiguro’s novels, which, like those of Adorno’s heroes Kafka and Beckett, mount a full-scale resistance to being read as affirmations of the “human spirit” or of historical progress. While with their clear and limpid surfaces and their benign narrators they seem to lack the rebarbative spirit of these two modernist predecessors, Ishiguro’s novels nevertheless go one step further than them and turn their gaze onto history itself, viewed not as a succession of triumphs and progressions but as an unfolding trauma. In this way Ishiguro’s novels assume the historical task enunciated by Adorno’s sometime Frankfurt school interlocutor Walter Benjamin, who in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” exhorted historiographers to “brush history against the grain” (257), to “blast open the continuum of history,” and thereby to break apart the age-old complicity between history and power (262).

¹ The most extensive elaboration of Adorno’s notion of enlightened modernity appears in Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which argues that enlightenment has not liberated humans from myth but instead replaced myth with its own master myth centered on instrumental rationality. Adorno’s argument for autonomous art is made in several places, most forcefully in the essays “Commitment” and “Trying to Understand *Endgame*.”

Benjamin's "Theses" are home to his image of the "angel of history," who eternally gazes backwards upon the wreckage left behind by historical progress (257). This essay attempts to understand that reverse gaze as it operates in an early Ishiguro novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986). The novel, I will argue, formulates an aesthetic in which history's failure to instruct becomes a form of instruction in its own right. Although set in postwar Japan, it concerns historical consciousness in general, examining the ways in which history has been repressed, hidden, manipulated, normalized, or distorted in order that the present may flourish. A reading of this novel illuminates a broader concern with the "use and abuse" of history as it appears in all of Ishiguro's writing. Despite their diverse thematic foci, Ishiguro's novels are undergirded by a common concern with individual and collective forms of a kind of knowing not-knowing: of willed ignorance, self-delusion, and misapprehension with regard to larger social and historical forces. History is the absent presence of all these narratives, which are not "about" historical catastrophe so much as structured *by* historical catastrophe. While ostensibly concerned with humanistic themes such as the well-being of society, the dignity of the individual, and the difficulty of family relations, they hint at a nightmare world through which human subjects grope in blind desperation. One senses that beneath the placid and banal surface of the everyday lies a horror too powerful to be viewed directly, a horror whose disclosure must proceed not by the presentation of events but by indirection, dissemblance, projection, concealment, silence, and anamorphosis, that trick of perspective in which an object appears at first obscure and distorted, like the elongated smudge in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* that reveals itself, at the correct angle, to be a human skull.

The Blindness of History

An Artist of the Floating World is narrated by disgraced war painter Masuji Ono. An unwanted relic of imperial Japan, he is trying to marry off his younger daughter, a process which requires him to symbolically "kill" his old self. Ono spends much of his narrative ruminating over the past, in particular his involvement with the

anti-Western imperialist movement, a project whose catastrophic failure can be measured in its historical results: the atomic bombing and military occupation of Japan, the loss of Japanese sovereignty, and the demotion of its traditional symbol, the emperor, into a puppet figure. Ono, it emerges, has also lost his son to the very militarism he championed. His reputation in tatters, he has been forced to retire from painting. None of these events is mentioned directly, and Ishiguro's text thus avoids the potential danger of slipping into the gothic, of placing deeply shocking events in the realm of the supernatural and caricatural. Rather, the horrors of the novel are buried in the silences of Ono's day-to-day ruminations and emerge only through the excavations of the reader. It therefore grapples with that peculiar Cold War sensibility that Susan Sontag has described as the "continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror" (42).

The temptation is to read Ono's narrative as a form of bad faith, in which he continually finds ways to evade the truth or protect himself from it and thus refuses to take full responsibility for his morally and politically reprehensible support of the imperial cause. The reader can thus distance him or herself from Ono's self-delusions and participate in the judging of Ono. It is Rebecca L. Walkowitz's insight that the novel relies on historical distance in order to dramatize a cautionary moral lesson: "Ishiguro would have his readers see, as Ono begins to see, that what is 'correct' has changed: Ono needs to betray his past—to display it, to question it, and to turn away from absolutism—in order to live responsibly in the present" (128). Similarly, Cynthia F. Wong comments that "Ono . . . gains a reader's sympathy: how could any one of us have performed or behaved differently from him? At the very end, however, a reader's better sensibility takes hold, and Ono's false sense of himself in the context of world history resonates too much with a sense of self-inflicted wounding; his warped views of the past ultimately cannot offer redemption when his life is woven from such a dense fabric of lies" (51). Walkowitz and Wong are undeniably correct in their judgment of Ono's character and the reliability of his narrative, which clearly cannot be taken at face value. Having embraced these observations, however, one must wonder whether the true subject

of the novel is really not Ono at all, but rather the workings of history itself.

In examining Ono's guilt, one should not forget that guilt, like shame, is a social emotion, and that its presence can often tell us more about the society producing it than about the individual experiencing it. The critical tendency to find Ono guilty, while not misplaced, has the unintentional effect of recapitulating in a different form the very act of judgment by which the new order of postwar Japan finds Ono guilty (and itself, by implication, innocent). Rather than refute previous critical readings of the novel, then, I wish to extend them, showing how Ono's personal self-deceptions and concealments point to much larger forms of self-deception and concealment at the level of the nation. The guilt, in other words, is not purely Ono's. Instead, Ishiguro uses Ono as a figure to examine what Milan Kundera has called the *tribunal of history*—the subtly coercive means by which the present condemns the past in order to surreptitiously validate itself.² In this reading, the focus of the novel is not the guilt of Ono—the mistakes he made, his evasiveness in owning up to them—but the historical construction of moral right.

What Ono experiences is not guilt but shame. Guilt is distinguished from shame in being an individual and private emotion—the sense of deviation from an internal compass—whose effects are often felt irrespective of the fashions of society. Shame, on the other hand, is far more rooted in the values of the group, and it is experienced on departure from a socially accepted norm.³ In emphasizing shame over guilt, I am trying to wrest the novel away from a historical perspective that accepts the premise of a new Japan superior to the old and moralizes from this point of view. I am certainly not, on the other hand, attempting to invert this judgment and defend the old Japan as superior to the new. The position that I think is implicit in the novel is closer to a Foucauldian one—that what we think of as historical progress is really just the reconfiguration

² For a full exposition of Kundera's idea in the context of European history, see *Testaments Betrayed* 198–238.

³ This distinction is drawn from David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd*. Riesman's thesis is that shame, guilt, and anxiety are forms of socially produced affect that are mobilized to create conformity. Also related is the late Freud's notion of guilt as a civilizing mechanism for defusing instinctual desires (see *Civilization and Its Discontents*).

of a set of power relations into forms that are less visible or less obvious. This sense of history means that Ishiguro cannot be read as working straightforwardly within the paradigms of either liberalism or the Hegelian/Marxist tradition of Universal History: his view of progress is too ambivalent for the former, and his sense of the inherent meaning of history too pessimistic for the latter.

The situation in the novel is one of regime change. Discussing revolutionary France, Paul Connerton writes:

Those who adhere most resolutely to the principles of the new regime and those who suffered most severely at the hand of the old regime want not only revenge for particular wrongs and a rectification of particular inequalities. The settlement they seek is one in which the continuing struggle between the new order and the old will be definitively terminated, because the legitimacy of the victors will be validated once and for all. . . . To pass judgment on the practices of the old regime is the constitutive act of the new order.

(7)

Of course, a distinction needs to be made between revolution (in France) and defeat and occupation (in Japan). One might begin by noting that the new Japanese regime is motivated by shame rather than fear, but the essential dynamic remains similar: a new dispensation must solidify its hold on its members through the implantation of new forms of disciplinary behavior, in particular through a kind of psychological monopoly over the act of judgment. (If one needs any proof of this, one need look no further than the strange presence of detectives who roam through the novel policing the moral credentials of prospective marriage partners, like grotesque emanations of Kafka into the world of Jane Austen.) Ono's prior life is now viewed as monstrous otherness, a sin for which he must atone in order that society may be healthy again. In one of the subtle continuities from prewar Japan, taking one's own life is considered a satisfactory form of atonement, as is attested to by the approbation with which honor suicides are discussed by Ono's acquaintances. To Ono's shame over his past life is added the shame of his continued existence.

Part of Ono's narrative strategy is to denaturalize and even invert that moral condemnation, so that he appears not as a monstrosity but instead as an idealist who happens to have fallen on the wrong

side of history. Thus in the portrait of himself that he sketches, Ono is driven by the noblest of impulses—the desire to participate in a larger form of community and to live a more historically meaningful life. Rebelling against his authoritarian father’s desire that he follow his footsteps into a career as a bureaucrat, he becomes an artist. He works at first for a commercial firm, churning out ostentatiously Japanese prints for foreign collectors. In frustration at the banality of this career, he makes his way into the studio of Sensei Seiji Moriyama (Mori-san), where he apprentices with a dedicated group of young artists. Mori-san works within the tradition of *ukiyo-e*, or art of the “floating world,” whose subject matter is the ephemeral beauty of Tokyo nightlife. (The “floating world” refers to the pleasure district of old Tokyo, destroyed during the war and finally outlawed under the new regime.) Mori-san is engaged in merging traditional *ukiyo-e* with some of the features of European art: subdued colors, night scenes, a mood that aims to capture the melancholia of city life as seen in the lives of the women who work in the pleasure district (141). After an encounter with a local political firebrand, a radically conservative Restorationist—although Ono at first takes him for a Marxist revolutionary, which tells us something about his level of political awareness—Ono begins to realize that his art has sealed him off from the real social problems of modern Japan: the vast slums, the political corruption, the overwhelming sense that the nation has decayed. In what he casts as a courageous break from his Sensei, Ono begins to create political art that reverts to the traditional Japanese style of hard lines and bright colors: “Sensei, it is my belief that in such troubled times as these, artists must learn to value something more tangible. . . . My conscience, Sensei, tells me I cannot remain forever an artist of the floating world” (180). The floating world, blind to the larger structural realities of Japan, becomes for Ono paradigmatic of a form of private, self-interested consciousness that must be transcended.

At least, this is the story as he presents it: his participation in progressively greater social spheres—familial, commercial, artistic, and finally political—forms a classical, Aristotelian path of advancement, in which the individual realizes his *telos* in the political sphere. Yet it is Ono’s realization of his *telos* that has led, perversely, to his current dishonor. There is thus something classically tragic

about the story Ono tells, similar to the Oedipus story in that the hero's best intentions lead to catastrophe. The novel by no means endorses Ono's version of events, leaving the reader to choose among the several competing narratives that it plays with: is Ono's story really one of classical tragedy, or is tragedy merely the form he has retrospectively imposed on an ordinary life in order to endow it with historical meaning? Should we feel sympathy for Ono, or is his story merely an attempt to absolve his guilt by claiming himself to be a victim?

"I cannot recall any colleague who could paint a self-portrait with absolute honesty," says Ono at one point (67), coming as close as he can to admitting that his story might be distorted, although, characteristically, displacing this admission onto other people. Nonetheless, there are strong hints that Ono's story might be more banal than he is willing to admit. Occasional comments and references hint that, far from being the hero of a historical tragedy, Ono is merely a bit-player in a somewhat conventional marriage novel. The actual plot of the novel, insofar as it is visible through Ono's preoccupations, involves his finding a suitable marriage partner for his younger daughter, Noriko. The elder daughter, Setsuko, has suggested that the recent failure of her sister's marriage arrangements can be attributed to Ono's failure to adequately satisfy the prospective family's investigators. Ono in this sense becomes merely the obstacle that disrupts the traditional novel of marriage, and indeed, much of the plot of the novel, such as it is, involves him marching around the city trying to defuse aspects of his past before they are discovered by the family of Noriko's latest suitor, who have deployed detectives to this end. Therefore, one could quite reasonably read the novel as working not within the genre of historical tragedy, but within the genre of the marriage novel, with all its attendant anxieties concerning the fate and stability of the culture as a whole. (It must be noted that Noriko's marriage is finally secured on the second try, after Ono has satisfactorily repented, and the threat, at least to this particular family, is successfully averted.)

This generic instability can be read as the expression of a period of historical uncertainty, in which various forces are struggling to lay claim to a history whose meaning is still disputed: Ono's tragic drama (as representative of the old regime) and his daughters' mar-

riage novel (representing the new regime) do not cancel one another out but engage in a battle for primacy in the mind of the reader. Indeed, the historical window Ishiguro chooses—the narrative runs from October 1948 to June 1950—marks a deeply ambiguous moment in the history of modern Japan. At the beginning of this window, the demoralized country is under the military rule of General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, who, while envisaging himself as the creator of a new, democratic Japan, ran the country more like a shogun.⁴ Furthermore, the economy had fallen into a catastrophic slump, with even food supplies running scarce (Goto-Jones 89–97). Ishiguro chooses this period for very specific reasons: at this moment it is not yet clear what the nature of the new Japan will be. In the section of his narrative marked April 1949, Ono looks out over the city and sees part of MacArthur’s rebuilding scheme, the new apartment blocks under construction for future employees, commenting that “one might even mistake them for the bombed ruins still to be found in certain parts of the city” (99). Ono is still able to equate the emergent new Japan with American destruction and the disappearing old world in which he had flourished. In its reconstruction of these ruins, which “become more and more scarce each week,” the new Japan is able to definitively stamp its claim on the present (99). The narrative window ends abruptly with the beginning of the economic revival in the 1950s, when Japan first began to emerge as the economic powerhouse of Asia that it would become during the Cold War.

The novel is thus situated at the cusp of a historical inversion. In an interview, Ishiguro identifies this as a major concern of his fiction:

How people justify to themselves the kind of life they’ve led . . . how they try to do something that will give their lives some kind of dignity, to do something and then have to come to terms with their ordinariness. Therefore I’m interested in historical periods that are topsy-turvy, where people who’ve spent their whole lives doing something are suddenly told it’s

⁴ MacArthur’s rule commenced with the wholesale democratic restructuring of Japanese society but soon, by late 1947, began to enforce military and police repression of the nascent left emerging as a result of this very democratization. For more detail, see Goto-Jones 89–100.

wrong. The things they could be proud of are suddenly something to be ashamed of.

(“Kazuo Ishiguro”)

History appears here as an unaccountable and inexorable force that with an arbitrary shrug alternately incorporates and rejects its protagonists. It is seen not from the perspective of Hegel’s Absolute, as the progressive unfolding of Reason, but from the more Adornian perspective of the empirical ego, as “the slaughter bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized” (Hegel 21). Hegel explained this historical suffering as part of the “Cunning of Reason” (*List der Vernunft*): Reason uses the passions and actions of men in order to realize its own ends; once these ends are attained, the individual actors are no longer necessary, and “they fall off like empty hulls from the kernel” (31). The great world-historical figures think that they are creating history, when the truth is that history is piggy-backing on their passions, which it will eventually turn against them. Hegel does not concern himself with the fate of these human remainders: their perspective needs to be transcended to reveal the greater order of history, and thus human failures are really the successes of the Absolute. “History,” acknowledged Hegel, “is not the theatre of happiness” (26).

It is a fidelity to the perspective of these unhappy subjects of history that Adorno stresses in his critique of Hegelian dialectics, which he argues has the effect of rationalizing away immense human suffering in the name of a putative World Spirit, an abstraction whose validity, in the wake of World War II, seemed ever less evident.⁵ Ishiguro, like Adorno, refuses the synthesis of historical

5. See Kojève for a Hegelian reading of world history that accounts for World War II: “From the authentically historical point of view,” he argues, “the two world wars with their retinue of large and small revolutions had only the effect of bringing the backward civilizations of the peripheral provinces into line with the most advanced (real or virtual) European historical positions” (160, footnote). Adorno adopts an almost antithetical viewpoint to Kojève, remaining skeptical of the tendency of Hegel’s concept of World Spirit to abstract itself from the lived experience through which it is supposed to reveal and fulfill itself: “It is over men’s heads and through their heads, and thus antagonistic from the outset. The reflexive concept ‘world spirit’ is disinterested in the living” (*Negative Dialectics* 304).

suffering into a larger project of Reason. Ono is no world-historical figure, but in his attempt to transcend his private desires and enter into a larger collective project, he is still one of the unhappy actors who have been ejected from history's stage. Nevertheless, Ono valorizes his great failure at the grand Hegelian level, where his actions stand in contrast to the plodding mediocrity of those, like his colleague the Tortoise, in whom "one despises their unwillingness to take chances in the name of ambition or for the sake of a principle they claim to believe in" (159). These types of people are constitutively unable to participate in history, for "notwithstanding the small sorts of respectability they may sometimes achieve as school-teachers or whatever, they will never accomplish anything above the mediocre" (159). The individual who is willing to embrace a position, to take a stand on the public stage, and is finally crushed by history is worthy of a certain tragic grandeur. These views echo Friedrich Nietzsche's arguments against the "last man," who seeks nothing beyond his own comfort, who sees no point in the pursuit of grand projects, and with the arrival of whom the wheels of history grind to a halt.

It is unsurprising, then, that one also sees creeping into Ono's descriptions of the new Japan echoes of what Francis Fukuyama would argue, three years after Ishiguro's novel was published, was the "end of history"—the notion that American-style capitalist liberal-democracy was the final stage of history and would not be rolled back or superseded. Indeed, Ono experiences a growing sense that a new and definitively final regime of this type is emerging in Japan. While acknowledging its arrival, however, Ono would no doubt dispute Fukuyama's claim that this end of history is the fullest expression of human freedom. Not only is it pushing out Ono's old world, but it has in the process sealed off the very forms of heroic action and tragic failure through which he understands and evaluates his life.⁶ The concluding pages of his narrative, which

⁶ For arguments on the relationship between the end of history and the end of tragedy, see Fukuyama. For its implications for literature, see Moses. Alexandre Kojève, in a 1959 footnote to his lectures on Hegel, wrote that Japan "has for almost three centuries experienced life at the 'end of History'—that is, in the absence of all civil or external war" (161, footnote). It is perhaps a sign of both the startling degree to which postwar Japan had recovered and reconsolidated itself, and the Olympian perspective afforded by

seem to aim at unburdening the brave new nation from its past sins, appear to constitute a vision of this Fukuyaman end of history:

It must have been approaching the lunch hour by then, for across the road I could see groups of employees in their bright white shirtsleeves emerging from the glass-fronted building where Mrs Kawakami's used to be. And as I watched, I was struck by how full of optimism and enthusiasm these young people were. At one point, two young men leaving the building stopped to talk with a third who was on his way in. They stood on the doorsteps of that glass-fronted building, laughing together in the sunshine. One young man, whose face I could see most clearly, was laughing in a particularly cheerful manner, with something of the open innocence of a child. Then with a quick gesture, the three colleagues parted and went their ways.

I smiled to myself as I watched these young office workers from my bench. Of course, at times, when I remember those brightly-lit bars and all those people gathered beneath the lamps, laughing a little more boisterously perhaps than those young men yesterday, but with much the same good-heartedness, I feel a certain nostalgia for the past and the district as it used to be. But to see how our city has been rebuilt, how things have recovered so rapidly over these years, fills me with genuine gladness. Our nation, it seems, whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things. One can only wish these young people well.

(205-6)

At first glance, Ono's acceptance of the passing of his world and its values to make way for the new regime seems a painful but necessary and honest one. However, this closing passage is in fact far more sinister than an initial reading suggests. It is necessary to reintroduce the historical context deliberately excluded from the narrative in order to reveal the full extent of the novel's subversion of this new Japan.

The final section of Ono's narrative is dated "June 1950"—a crucial date in the history of the Far East and the turning point of the economic depression into which Japan had sunk after the war. On June 25, 1950, under mysterious conditions whose nature historians still debate, North Korean soldiers crossed the border into South

Hegel's philosophy of history that, a mere fourteen years after World War II, this shock wave through Japanese history seems not to have warranted mention.

Korea, and the Korean War was underway.⁷ In Japan the ramifications were momentous: a surge of orders from the U.S. for military equipment, and an influx of UN troops into the country, providing an instant market for consumer goods. It was immediately apparent to the Japanese that this was the end of their economic woes: Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida called it a “gift from the gods”; businessmen spoke of “blessed rain from heaven.” From an economic standpoint, they were correct: from 1949 to 1951, exports nearly tripled, and production rose nearly 70 percent. By the mid-1950s, Japan’s GNP had grown by 250%, due almost entirely to massive American military spending in Japan, totaling nearly three billion dollars between 1950 and 1954 (Gordon 239; Goto-Jones 98).

The Korean War also “saved” the United States, to use the word employed by U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson (Cumings 210). For the war was, crucially, the stimulus for President Truman’s approval of NSC-68 (National Security Council Report 68), one of the most significant and far-reaching resolutions of American Cold War policy. This proposal “gave credence to a ‘Kremlin design’ for world domination” (Hixson 508) and recast containment as an open-ended military project with limitless global reach. To this end, it allowed for unlimited military spending during peacetime—leading directly to the passage through Congress of a quadrupling of American defense spending (Cumings 210)—and precipitated the escalation of the arms race over the subsequent decades. For proponents of NSC-68, the ultimate endpoint envisioned was “the collapse of Soviet power and the emergence of a ‘new world order’ centered on American liberal-capitalist values” (Hixson 508).⁸

7. Initial intelligence reports point to the possibility that the South Korean 17th regiment may have made a skirmish over the border to provoke North Korean retaliation. Responsibility for the war has been debated, inconclusively, by decades of Korean War historians. Bruce Cumings’s 2011 history of the war finds this question ultimately opaque, noting of the weekend that saw the war’s commencement that “much remains to be learned” (9).

8. For more on the historical background of the Korean War, see Cumings and Catchpole. Walter L. Hixson outlines two schools of American thought on understanding Cold War policy: orthodox or conservative historians, who “view the collapse of the Soviet Empire as vindication of nearly half a century of American . . . containment,” and critics who argue that the collapse “resulted from internal causes and that American diplomacy needlessly prolonged the East-West conflict” (507).

Behind the laughs in the sunshine and the glass-fronted offices, then, lies not just the seemingly benign, American-inflected modernity that Ono has grudgingly come to accept, but something far darker: Japan's assumption of a crucial role within the new, violent battle for a total global *imperium* that we call the Cold War. The U.S. funding of Japanese economic expansion was a crucial strategic move in the Cold War: as Brian Catchpole notes, the U.S. decision to authorize military purchasing in Japan was made with the idea that Japan would "become capitalism's eastern bulwark against Russian and Chinese communism" (334). One should recall that part of the ideological platform of the imperial Japanese politics in which Ono was caught up was the liberation of other Asian nations from the perceived scourge of Western modernity (the "co-prosperity sphere" was Japan's euphemistic name for its empire): the Japanese empire in Asia would supposedly "overcome" Western modernity and replace it with its own, ideal modernity.⁹ Korea, long a pawn in conflicts between China, Japan, and Russia in the late nineteenth century, was once again at the center of a different geopolitical struggle, the Cold War. The new, postwar Japan was still effectively "in" Korea—not in the form of Japanese troops marching under imperial banners, but rather as a critical component of the Cold War Western Alliance spearheaded by the United States. Postwar Japan may no longer have been an empire in name, but as the key Western ally in the East, it had entered into an imperial project of far greater magnitude, reach, and power.

The historical window of the novel is once more important here: in the 1950s, there was no assurance that the atom bomb would not be used again, and the future of Korea could not have seemed anything but dire. In April of that year, the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the U.S. forces had issued an order for retaliatory atomic bombing if North Korean forces attacked (apparently only Truman's reluctance to give the final authorization prevented this outcome, although Truman admitted to actively considering it throughout

⁹ Imperialism was only one of the responses to Western modernity. For a succinct overview of the variety of these responses, as well as the ideology of Japanese "anti-imperialist imperialism," see Goto-Jones 62–88.

the war).¹⁰ One might ask why none of the Japanese in the novel seem concerned with the use of nuclear weapons in Korea.

No doubt Ishiguro leaves out this historical context due partly to his minimalist aesthetic and partly to a novelistic intention to explore Ono's psychological situation without the screen of moral judgment. Yet there is also a more profound reason for the historical elision that the lives, values, and beliefs of individuals and entire societies are determined by historical processes of which they are barely aware, or whose true nature is too sinister to be acknowledged. The dated entries of Ono's narrative should be read not as guiding us through Ono's progressive reconciliation with his past, but as yielding a record of the changing historical situation of the nation. With this elided historical background in place, Ono's final acceptance of his new position seems less the result of grace or repentance than a convenient complicity, secretly informed by the sense that, with the economic upturn triggered by the Korean War, the new regime is cemented in place, and the possibility of an alternate history, of which he had still been able to entertain fantasies prior to the Korean War, is finally banished. The novel, unlike Ono, gives no quarter to Fukuyama's panacean end of history: it is a politically useful illusion that has gained hegemony, nothing more.

The key word in all of this is "innocence." Secure in their historical framework, the young Japanese businessmen have no reason to be suspicious of their world. Lacking this same grounding, Ono is unable to convincingly evaluate this new Japan as superior to the world it has replaced. His ignorance grants him greater perceptiveness about the unacknowledged parallels between the two regimes: "all those people gathered beneath the lamps," he thinks, "laughing a little more boisterously perhaps than those men yesterday" (206). Walkowitz has commented on the use of echoes and repetition to "make allies of American democracy and Japanese militarism, both certain of progress and continuity" (130). This observation is dead-

¹⁰ Nuclear weaponry—in particular nuclear weapons testing—played a key role in what Bruce Cumings calls "atomic blackmail," yet there was more at stake than pure military posturing: Eisenhower had suggested that using nuclear weaponry in Korea would be cheaper than conventional arms, and the Joint Chiefs at one point recommended launching nuclear attacks against China. See Cumings 34.

on: it would perhaps be overstating the case to say that the “superiority” of the new Japan is based purely on its existence in and hold over the present, but Ishiguro sets up enough structural parallels between the new and the old Japan that one is led to question whether this new and improved “final” stage of history is at bottom any different from its predecessor. Certain elements within the country have clearly progressed—notably, the position of women (as seen in Ono’s limited sway over his daughters). Yet Ono’s confidence that the new Japan has the weight of history behind it, that it has entered into a period of historical clarity, is belied by our knowledge of the occluded Korean War. The entry of Japan into the “end of history” is contingent on the plunging of Korea into the destructive inferno of history at its most malignant. Ono’s narrative thus reveals, through its silences, a structural blindness within the triumphal discourse on the end of history, in particular that discourse’s silences regarding the material grounds by means of which its posthistorical utopia props itself up. The novel in this way hints at an underlying historical circularity, metaphorized in its narrator’s palindromic name—Ono—in which each successive historical regime finds and masks its own particular monstrosity.

The Workings of Silence

Ishiguro offers a parable about the role that silence plays in the maintenance of social norms in a scene at Mori-san’s villa, as Mori-san invites his acolytes into his studio to observe his new works. “The convention of these occasions,” says Ono, was that “we behave as though our teacher were not present” (138), and indeed, expressions of admiration give way to impassioned debate as to the Sensei’s intentions in his new work, while the Sensei stands to one side, apparently oblivious and slightly bemused. The idea behind this convention is that an expression of admiration directed explicitly to the Sensei would be taken as insincere; the fiction must be that all these utterances are natural, that is, completely outside the convention of polite appreciation and deference to the master (hence the debates over the master’s true intentions). For the Sensei to speak would be to break this illusion; therefore, his silent presence in effect authorizes the fiction and is essential to its maintenance. It cannot

be explicitly acknowledged, yet without it, the entire charade would be pointless. Silence is built into the ritual and allows otherwise shameful or dishonest actions to take place.

This silent presence (or present silence) manifests itself in the strange sense of incompleteness in Ono's narrative: the reader is never given enough information, the words themselves never say everything, the real meaning of events is always shrouded. Characters, events, and chronology seem to float nebulously through Ono's narrative. An exemplary passage is Ono's recollection of an episode at Mori-san's villa, recounting the expulsion of the "traitor" Sasaki, a gifted student whose work has diverged from the teachings of the Sensei:

Most of us had already turned in. I was myself lying awake in the darkness in one of those dilapidated rooms, when I heard Sasaki's voice calling to someone a little way down the veranda. He seemed to receive no answer from whoever it was he was addressing, and eventually there came the sounds of a screen sliding shut and Sasaki's footsteps coming nearer. I heard him stop at another room and say something, but again he seemed to be met only with silence. His footsteps came still closer, then I heard him slide open the screen of the room next to mine.

"You and I have been good friends for many years," I heard him say. "Won't you at least speak to me?"

There was no response from the person he had addressed. Then Sasaki said:

"Won't you just tell me where the paintings are?"

There was still no response. But as I lay there in the darkness, I could hear the sound of rats scuttling under the floorboards of that neighbouring room, and it seemed to me this noise was some sort of reply.

"If you find them so offensive," Sasaki's voice continued, "there's no sense in your keeping them. But they happen to mean a great deal to me at this moment. I wish to take them with me, wherever it is I'm going. I've nothing else to take with me."

Again, there came the scuttling sound of rats in reply, then a long silence. Indeed, the silence went on for so long, I thought perhaps Sasaki had walked off into the darkness and I had failed to hear him. But then I heard him say again:

"These past few days, the others have done some terrible things to me. But what has hurt me the most has been your refusal to give me even one word of comfort."

There was another silence. Then Sasaki said: "Won't you even look at me now and wish me well?"

Eventually, I heard the screen slide shut, and the sounds of Sasaki stepping down from the veranda, and walking away across the yard.

(142–43)

This passage is remarkable for the way in which time, place, and character become unmoored through Ono's strategic use of silence and suggestion. Fact imperceptibly dissolves into metaphor—note the liberal use of the word "seems"—and events are subtly dissociated from individual human agency: at crucial points, it is not Sasaki who is speaking, but merely his voice. The anecdote ostensibly tells of a conversation between the traitor Sasaki and Ono's neighbor, with Ono, lying next door, an objective witness. But the lack of a respondent to Sasaki's questions leaves their addressee ambiguous: is "the room next to mine" really Ono's own room? Is the neighbor's silence Ono's own silence? Is Ono projecting his own anxieties onto an external screen where they can be managed? Is the entire story, in fact, fabricated by Ono for this very purpose? Indeed, we learn of Ono's expulsion from the villa shortly after this scene, and later, of Ono's expulsion of his own students. Not only this, but the anecdote also echoes an earlier trauma in Ono's life, his father's burning of his youthful paintings. Every event in Ono's account seems to resonate with other events, which are not only doubled but often tripled or quadrupled. At various times, Ono occupies the position of both the silent rejecter and the plaintive rejected. Reading Ono's narrative, one has the sense of losing one's bearings, of struggling to find the "real" story, the center from which all these decoys are dispatched.

Walkowitz locates the "primal scene" of the novel in the arrest of Ono's student Kuroda, whom Ono has reported for questionable artistic practices (128). At this point in his narrative, shortly before the outbreak of war, Ono has become official advisor to the Committee for Unpatriotic Activities (182), and the brief scene merely narrates Ono's arrival at Kuroda's house, to find Kuroda gone, his house ransacked, and his paintings in flames. The conflagration and arrest Ono finds excessive: "I had no idea . . . something like this would happen. I merely suggested to the committee someone come round and give Mr Kuroda a talking-to for his own good," he says

plaintively to the policeman at the scene; “[t]hings have gone much too far” (183). But Ono does not mention why he is at Kuroda’s house in the first place. Presumably his intention was to somehow allay the severity of the police crackdown on Kuroda, in which case he must, at some level, have anticipated its possibility, have “known” it.

Ishiguro has described the novel as being about “the need to follow leaders and the need to exercise power over subordinates, as a sort of motor by which society operates” (qtd. in Wong 50). Ono’s evasive protestations of innocence regarding Kuroda’s arrest illustrate a key consequence of this dynamic: by not considering the larger social context within which his actions take place, Ono is able to displace or outright evade responsibility for their ramifications. While these features can be read as constituting a sociology of Japanese culture, with its hierarchies and rituals, its indirection and silences, it is also clear that the larger structure they describe applies to historical consciousness far more broadly.¹¹ By abandoning the reader within the morass of Ono’s evasions, compromises, and disavowals, the novel depicts the mechanisms of historical consciousness “from below.” The world that emerges through Ono’s narrative, in which the boundaries between individual and collective, between past and present, are smudged and indistinct, counteracts attempts to apply to it a linear historical narrative: one sees instead an unbroken continuum between the present and the past (an anti-Hegelian position) in which the legitimacy of the regime is seen to be granted not by a transcendental appeal to Reason or Spirit, but instead by its own immanent force. Of course, the new (liberal) regime does not enforce its values by persecutions, burnings, arrests, and the like. It enforces them psychologically and culturally, through the use of social norms. Witness the dinner conversation at Noriko’s *miai* (or courtship), in which Ono’s confession of guilt—a ritual of self-shaming that he must perform before his daughter may be accepted by her new family—is met with puzzled bemusement,

¹¹ If it is a sociology of Japan, I suspect, as Barry Lewis has suggested, that it is in the manner of Roland Barthes’s *Empire of Signs*, a partly invented fantasy based on the idea of Japan. Lewis puts it elegantly: “Ishiguro’s Japan is not a country but a system, a system which he calls: Japan” (26).

as if he had nothing to confess. The social enforcement is surreptitious and not publicly admitted, but nevertheless active.

It is easy to criticize the early Ono, who fervently entered into the spirit of Imperial Japan, for failing to understand the historical context of his actions. Yet the harder and more painful observation to make is that the new Ono equally fails to recognize how embedded he is in a historical context, the extent to which his actions, and the actions of all those around him, are still complicit in structures of power.¹² One must therefore avoid placing Ono's story in the too-easy mold of liberal progressivism—a reading which would align itself with the new Japan and speak with the weight of historical distance. This “liberal” reading would assert that, while Ono could not have foreseen everything that would befall Japan, he was nevertheless naive and misguided, that part of his blindness was a product of his own hubris, part of the outmoded traditional structures of Japanese society. In this reading, furthermore, the new Japan would be qualitatively superior to the old Japan, in that it no longer sanctions the social forms that gave rise to catastrophe (the emperor), and the new Ono superior to the old Ono, in that he now has the wisdom to step back and reflect on his life, rather than merely acting (he is now a “backwarder” rather than an “engineer,” in the slang used to divide the two classes of painter in Mori-san's workshop [160]). A reading such as this, while reassuring, is thrown into disarray once we stand back and try to account for the larger historical narrative (Korea, the Cold War, the American occupation of Japan) elided both by Ono's private narrative of heroic tragedy

12. For examples of the strong pull of this kind of liberal (mis)reading, see the fascinating chapter “Strange Reads: Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* in Japan” by Motoyuki Shibata and Motoko Sugano, on the way in which Japanese translations of Ishiguro's early novels have attempted to heighten the disjuncture between the young and the old Ono, and the old and the new Japan. The authors write: “Rather than translating . . . militarist slogans and songs by using the same writing system as the contemporary narrative, [the translator] reverts to an archaic form that creates a jar in the translation, reinforcing the discontinuity between Ono's own language and consciousness of the past and present. The effect gives emphasis to the fact that he *used* to utilize the language of the imperial government but that he now no longer uses that discourse. The distinction also makes it *seem* as if the politically sensitive problems of the past are resolved” (31).

and by the dominant narrative of liberal progressivism held by his countrymen.

Yet we also need to avoid a third historical trap in Ishiguro's novel—the temptation to take the ethos of the floating world, with its seductive privileging of the ephemeral, as the moral center of the novel. The “floating world” of the title refers not only to the historical floating world, destroyed during the war, but also to the shifting and deceptive nature of historical consciousness itself. In an interview, Ishiguro has noted of the irony in the novel's title that, “in the end, [Ono] too is left celebrating those pleasures that evaporated when the morning light dawned.” The floating world, he continues, refers “to the fact that the values of society are always in flux” (“Conversations” 12). We need to draw out the implications of Ishiguro's characteristically understated reading of his own novel: the shifting and transient values of these “floating worlds” mask concrete historical realities.¹³ If the floating world occluded the social injustice of the Japanese nation, it mirrors the structure of Japanese imperial nationalism, which occluded the violence of its “utopian” colonization of mainland Asia, and mirrors, finally, the triumphant democratic order of the new Japan, which occludes the Cold War imperial project on which its new economy is built.

I would suggest that the novel instead articulates a far more Adornian notion of history: the insistence that the bright “post-historical” world of democratic Japan is unknowingly enveloped in the tangled mess of history. This is allegorized in the Godzilla motif running through the novel. Ishiro Honda's 1954 film *Godzilla* (Ishiguro has moved it to 1948) is well known as one of the first popular expressions of anxiety about the dawning nuclear age.¹⁴ Yet despite

¹³ Scholars of Japanese history have suggested that the floating world effectively functioned as a “safety valve” to release class resentment against the ruling shogunate (Kita 35). The shogunate issued legislation against the underclasses, but at the same time gave its victims a place—the Floating World—to vent their anger against these laws. Thus the shogunate had preemptively disarmed anti-shogunal expressions by making it clear that they occurred in a realm that stood outside reality. Kita is arguing against this position, but I have drawn my description from her lucid summation of it.

¹⁴ An Adornian logic is also embedded in the original film: the premise is that nuclear experimentation has awakened a prehistoric saurian monster from the depths of the ocean surrounding Japan. The monster wades inland destroying villages, and in a final

its cultural ubiquity in the novel, Godzilla is never referred to by name. Ono merely calls it the “monster,” advertising the film to his grandson Ichiro, part of a younger, semi-Americanized generation, by stressing its horror. When Ono has him sketch one of the posters for the film, Ichiro’s crayon rendering makes the monster seem almost a part of the city itself rather than an alien force attacking it (Ichiro draws both monster and city in the same brown crayon). Ichiro also adds bursts of red flame to the scene—a detail, as Ono notices, conspicuously absent from the movie posters (33, 82). (In an echo of the other historical repressions of the novel, the child’s drawing reveals in a displaced form the historical violence that has been erased from public discourse.) The prospect of the horrific beast clearly appeals to Ichiro’s masculinity: he boasts of the monster’s artificiality, and after the screening proudly relates the story to his mother, warning her that it might be too frightening for her to handle. The screening itself is a different story: during the entire film Ichiro covers his face with a raincoat expressly brought with him for that purpose. To what does the metaphor of self-blinding refer? Is Ono himself the child, who cannot look directly at the hor-

rampage decimates the capital itself, impervious to the attacks of the Japanese military. A striking dramatic feature of the film is the suicidal destruction of the monster by the hero, a Japanese scientist who invents the terrible weapon that will destroy Godzilla. Horrified by the potential for destruction that he has unlocked, he decides he must destroy himself at the same time as Godzilla (he dives down to the ocean bed carrying his deadly bomb and ignites it). This self-immolation seems intended to be as much a moral parable justifying the defeat of Japan as a warning against nuclear weaponry. It is as if the war guilt of Japan has rendered it morally unacceptable for the nation to look elsewhere for the causes of its misfortune, and thus responsibility for the nuclear bombing is displaced in the film from America onto Japan. (One of the most horrific images conjured up by the film’s lizard monster is that of the famous “lizard men” seen after the bombing of Nagasaki—that is, Japanese whose skin had been entirely burnt off.) The response to Godzilla’s monstrosity (Japan’s monstrosity?) is to destroy Godzilla and at the same time to destroy the destroying self. The film thus serves to narratively rationalize the bombing and the defeat of Japan as a form of just retribution visited upon a people who have foregone their right to appeal to justice. (In this sense it is reminiscent of what W. G. Sebald has described in his discussion of the German response to the bombing of Dresden: “those affected by the air raids, despite the grim but impotent fury in the face of such obvious madness, regarded the great firestorms as a just punishment, even an act of retribution on the part of a higher power with which there could be no dispute” [13–14].) Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World* translates the film’s allegory of Japanese self-immolation into Ono’s narrative: Ono is now both the monster to be destroyed and the one who must destroy himself so that Japan may remain innocent.

ror of his own past—his enthusiastic embrace of militaristic expansionism, the death of his son in the war, the destruction and humiliation of Japan that resulted? Is it rather the new generation of Japanese, sanguine about the Americanized future and unreasonably confident that they have mastered the traumas of their past? Or is it the readers of Ishiguro's work, who do not see the half-known, shadow side of their (our) world of comfortable literary consumption?

The Abuse of History

At this point we can return to the historical narratives of the novel with an understanding of the mechanics behind its deeply embedded historical pessimism. The novel pits two radically opposed conceptions of history against one another. On the one hand, as I've discussed, the closing of Ono's narrative seems to want to situate itself at the far end of Hegel's dialectic of historical progress, in which the turmoil of historical upheaval has subsided and one can clearly survey and evaluate actions and events. On the other hand, the text also hints at a far more Nietzschean view of history: that the flourishing of this new modernity is made possible by willed blindness. For Nietzsche, excessive historical knowledge "slackens the rein of activity" (11) and prevents the coming to fruition of "everything that is truly great and human" (16):

This is a universal law: a living thing can only be healthy, strong and productive within a certain horizon: if it be incapable of drawing one round itself, or too selfish to lose its own view in another's, it will come to an untimely end. Cheerfulness, a good conscience, belief in the future, the joyful deed, all depend, in the individual as well as the nation, on there being a line that divides the visible and clear from the vague and shadowy: we must know the right time to forget as well as the right time to remember; and instinctively see when it is necessary to feel historically, and when unhistorically.

Active and strategic forgetfulness is, for Nietzsche, as central to the flourishing of human activity as are knowledge or remembrance, which can paralyze the spirit of action. Nietzsche, rebuking Otto von Bismarck's Germany for its complacency after the defeat of France in the bloody Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, repeatedly

insists that history always serves life, that “it is not justice that sits in judgment” over the past, but “only life, the dim, driving force that insatiably desires—itsself” (28). Yet if Ono is a standard-bearer for a kind of Nietzschean historical action enabled by the circumscription of knowledge, he is an ambiguous one. Ono’s life path—which begins with rebellion against a stern bureaucratic father, a move into a career as an artist, and finally a shift from art into nationalistic politics and militarism as affording a greater scope for action—I suspect Ishiguro has borrowed from the career of a far more infamous actor on the historical stage of World War II.¹⁵ The echo of Hitler is a jolting one, for now the story cannot be read as an apologia for those on the wrong side of history. Rather, it suggests a dark linkage between historical action and the almost inconceivable bloodiness that has marked the history of the twentieth century, a century whose grandest political experiments have ended largely in catastrophe.

Ernest Renan argued, in a Nietzschean spirit, that the nation survives not only by remembering but by forgetting—that is, by actively using its monopoly over history to nourish its growth: “Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation . . . the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (11). Ono’s narrative, with its multiple layers of concealment, both personal and collective, bears witness to this logic. The novel thus leaves us at an impasse in which, on the one hand, the new Japan flourishes by repressing the knowledge of the Korean War and, on the other, any form of concerted resistance to this new regime is rendered taboo by the catastrophic specter of the Japanese empire. Action in the service of the “wrong” narrative is catastrophic, yet characters are denied a transcendental perspective from which the “true” narrative might reveal itself. Indeed, Ishiguro’s novels deny that we can ever attain a position of full historical clarity and imply, instead, that even our most noble intentions are prone to catastrophic error. Ono’s perspective, like

¹⁵ Hitler was twice rejected from the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna. His overbearing father, flight from a banal petty-bourgeois existence, and final transition to politics all echo aspects of Ono’s life.

the reader's, is personal, delimited, and contingent, made from within another milieu that is as opaque as the one he is recollecting. In this way the novel opens up a Chinese box of historical levels, since the moment that one perceives this embedding of one level of historical misapprehension (Ono's memories) within another level (the narrative present of the novel), one is compelled to reflect back on oneself as a reader and see in one's own historical context the backdrop for a hitherto unsuspected blindness.

By refusing a triumphal historical perspective, the novel counteracts the desire to definitively impose a singular narrative upon events and thus attempts to grasp and represent the intangible movements of historical consciousness as it consolidates itself within a culture. On the historical currents leading up to Ono's fateful decision to embrace the imperialist movement, on the ramifications of that decision, and on the virtues and merits of the new democratic Japan as opposed to the old imperial one, the novel remains silent. In sum, it offers none of the putatively transcendental justifications for human action that it is traditionally the role of history to provide, no standpoint from which all can be understood as a logical unfolding and working out of social forces (the Hegelian dialectic). Instead, it registers history as felt in the subtle and unacknowledged pressures it applies on the individual consciousness. It therefore does not offer a philosophy of history so much as an estranged perspective on history.

The Politics of Disconsolation

I should emphasize again that the historical situation I've discussed is by no means confined to a peculiarity of Japanese history. *Remains of the Day* (1989), often described as the consummate portrait of the English psyche, is in many ways the story of Ono retold. Although not personally responsible for any of the political dealings at Darlington Manor, Stevens's sense of loyalty to the principles of a moribund class structure result in his disgrace within the context of postwar Britain, which, like Japan, had entered into an unequal and compromised relationship with the U.S. in order to preserve its standing on the global stage. (Britain was, incidentally, the largest contributor of armed forces to the Korean War after the U.S. and

South Korea.) Similarly, Britain's disastrous imperial maneuverings during the Suez crisis form the hidden backdrop of this novel, its "Korean War." Moreover, both Japan and the U.K. (under Margaret Thatcher) were in periods of economic ascendancy in the late 1980s when the novels were written. Ishiguro's excavation, in these respective national histories, of moments of uncertainty and shame pointedly destabilizes the grounds for national self-confidence. For both Japan and Britain were, in effect, losers of World War II: the former lost militarily, the latter economically. These two small island nations, former empires possessed of strong, even overweening senses of national pride, found themselves forced into positions of compromise in order to remain world powers. They thus appear to constitute for Ishiguro privileged sites for the exploration of the contours and fault lines of a posthistorical, post-Auschwitz modernity. The attention to Japan can be taken as related to the particularly stark fashion in which it emerged into this late modernity, and to its particular national *misère* as a nation that tried to stop history, sealing its borders to the world for two centuries, and ended up catastrophically overwhelmed by it.

I speak of *misère* here to suggest the way in which Ishiguro's writing operates at the level of a particular form of discomfiting and uneasy affect. This affective dimension of the writing should alert us to the dangers of characterizing Ishiguro as an international novelist or cosmopolitan writer—labels which not only resolve the deep uneasiness of his writing but also deflect attention from its fundamental political attunement. Ishiguro's most perceptive critics have characterized him as working in the tradition of modernism, citing his ambivalence toward the "globalized, diasporic forces of postmodernism," as Patricia Waugh phrases it (13). Indeed, his works exhibit none of the playful historical relativism of postmodernism proper; they are concerned instead with carefully chosen moments of historical trauma that effectively form a set of vignettes of a singular late modern condition. Rather than a postmodern being-at-home everywhere, they embody a more modernist sense of being-at-home nowhere. Cynthia Wong and Barry Lewis have both emphasized Ishiguro's homelessness. But this homelessness is not purely geographical; it is a homelessness in history.

Let me attempt to specify the nature of Ishiguro's modernism by borrowing from the critic Neil Lazarus. Lazarus writes of a vital modernist literary practice that lives on after the death of modernism, "a writing . . . that resists the accommodation of what has been canonized as modernism and does what at least some modernist work has done from the outset: namely, says 'no'; refuses integration, resolution, consolation, comfort; protests and criticizes" (431). This is a writing whose project, he suggests, playing on the title of Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*, is "disconsolation" (431-32). By disconsolation Lazarus does not mean mere unhappiness, a withdrawal into the disaffected world of Hegel's Beautiful Soul. Rather, disconsolation distills into one word both an affect and political logic: rather than consoling readers for the state of a fallen world, disconsolation confronts readers with that world and refuses to allow them to make any peace with it, either through withdrawal from or embrace of it.

Ishiguro's modernism is thus best understood as the persistence of a particular kind of *late* modernism. While Ishiguro shares the spirit of radical critique that we associate with the high modernists, he is separated from them by the historical burden of the twentieth century, a century whose idealistic political experiments ended almost uniformly in catastrophe. Like the other late modernists (among whom I would group Samuel Beckett and certain contemporary novelists, such as J. M. Coetzee), his writing is imbued with the sense that attempts to either resist or refine modernity have been exhausted. These writers do not attempt to affirm a different or better reality; rather, they work within the present one, undermining it, rendering it unhomey.

Ishiguro's aesthetics channel Adorno's idea of an art that could "resist by its form alone the course of the world" ("Commitment" 180), but Ishiguro brings this sensibility to bear on that most humanist and comfortable of literary forms, the novel. If Ishiguro's writing seems to lack the rebarbative and conflictual elements of the modernists championed by Adorno, it is not because it lacks conflict, but rather because this conflict is buried beneath its surfaces. In what I find to be the most distinctive characteristic of Ishiguro's work, this conflict must be *excavated* by the reader (as, for example,

I have excavated the Korean War from the silences of Ono's narrative above). Malcolm Bradbury's observation that *Artist of the Floating World* "hides behind itself, forcing the reader patiently to unlock it" (365; qtd. in Lewis 137) gets to the essence of Ishiguro's aesthetics. Ishiguro makes his readers work to unlock the painful silences in the texts: the reader must fill in these silences, both in the text and, ultimately, in him- or herself. Behind these silences lurk barbs that aim to jolt readers out of their sense of worldly or even merely literary comfort, to awaken within them a suspicion regarding the stories they tell themselves.

Adorno begins his essay "Commitment" with the paradox that the embrace of a political bloc is itself a form of consolation, since it is an affirmation of and acquiescence to the essential structures of the world. Works of art that are "committed" to the struggle between political blocs "merely assimilate themselves to the brute reality against which they protest" (177). In contrast, Ishiguro's works consistently resist providing readers with any kind of solution, any political program or utopian vision to which they might cleave. This suggests some reasons why Ishiguro—in all of his novels—chooses as narrators those marginalized from historical processes, those without agency, or without agency any longer. These characters' marginal relationship to history allows them to see history from a perspective not available to those in its main current—not necessarily from a clearer vantage point, but from a less familiar one, a position reminiscent of Benjamin's Angel of History, blown from Paradise by the storm of progress, unable to reassemble the shattered fragments accumulating in his wake. "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe," writes Benjamin (257). The Angel of History might be the purest figure of the disconsolations wrought by history, and the clearest exemplar of how this figure is compelled to turn its disconsoling gaze back onto history, to excavate that which history (triumphal history) has suppressed. Ishiguro's decision to narrate from the perspective of a "bad" character—a right-wing Japanese nationalist—refocuses our attention onto the ruins upon which "post-historical" society is erected. By deflecting our sympathy from Ono while at the same time estranging the new Japan that stands against him, the narrative suggests the possibility of a third, as yet unarticulated element in

this historical schema. Although I may seem to have sketched Ishiguro's art as working in purely negative terms, it is far from defeatist in spirit. By refusing to endorse a historical solution—in fact, by actively representing their idealistic protagonists as blindly entering into catastrophe—Ishiguro's novels become a kind of waiting room for the political, a space in which the desire for a better world is held in stasis rather than foreclosed outright. That is to say that disconsolation—unlike the more familiar view of art as purely consolatory—makes sense only if there is some residuum of hope.

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