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MEMORY, MYTH, AND MODERNISM IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *THE BURIED GIANT*

Abstract: Kazuo Ishiguro's affinities with modernism have been the subject of critical studies of his earlier works, which have been found to display such modernist features as the preoccupation with psychological and moral depth and the exploration of the inner life. Correspondences with modernism are also detectable in his most recent novel, *The Buried Giant* (2015). While the concern with feeling and consciousness is evident in this novel, in the following essay we argue that what inscribes *The Buried Giant* even more clearly within a new, reconfigured modernism is Ishiguro's treatment of memory, history, and myth. The conception of memory that emerges in the novel shows the imprint of modernist inspirations: memory as a construction involving forgetting and repression is reminiscent of both Maurice Halbwachs's ideas on collective memory and Sigmund Freud's theories concerning individual memory. Likewise, the inevitable and unwilling return of the lost past, featured in *The Buried Giant*, although not identical with Marcel Proust's conception of involuntary memory, shows affinities with his idea. The fact that this mode of memory is firmly anchored in the body additionally highlights the modernist-like valorization of the corporeal and the intuitive over the intellectual. Finally, in its vision of the cyclical character of human history, the novel embraces a mythical perspective on time, rather than the spatialized, scientific time of historiography, which constitutes yet another link with modernism, the "underlying metaphysic" of which is myth.

Key words: Kazuo Ishiguro, modernism, collective and individual memory, forgetting, involuntary memory, myth

Since our aim in this article is to discuss Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015) as a novel with strong affinities with modernism, we shall first consider the ways in which his earlier work has been classified. Neither of the labels often attached to Ishiguro – post-colonial or postmodernist – seems adequate as, in our view, his novels can be more fruitfully aligned with modernism. The category of a post-colonial novelist was applied to Ishiguro in the 1980s, when he published his first two novels, both set in Japan. This coincided with the appearance of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which received a Booker Prize in 1981 and effected a significant change in the cultural awareness of the English literary world by exploring Indian post-colonial experience. *Midnight's Children* successfully exploited "postmodern tropes of migrancy, nomadism and hybridity: the migrant and the nomad no longer tied to any one national tradition but rejoicing in the fluid, the disseminated and the rootless."¹ However, the Japanese

¹ Patricia Waugh, "Kazuo Ishiguro's not-too-late modernism," in *Kazuo Ishiguro. New Critical Visions of the Novel*, ed. Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (Palgrave Macmillan: Houndsmill, 2011), 14.

content of Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) was dictated by an entirely different purpose. If Rushdie's novel was a display of a revisionist "triumphant, post-imperial spirit,"² for Ishiguro, as the novelist himself explains, writing his two 'Japanese' novels, was "an act of preserving things that would have otherwise faded in [his] memory,"³ an attempt to reconstruct a place to which he "in some way belonged, and from which [he] drew a certain sense of [...] identity and [...] confidence."⁴ Ishiguro's classification as a post-colonial novelist was, then, a matter of his origin rather than his writing. As it soon became apparent, Japan was not to be his main theme – in 1989 he published *The Remains of the Day*, which, like his subsequent novels, was set in Europe. If it is not possible to pigeonhole Ishiguro as a post-colonial writer, it is not easy to classify him as a truly postmodernist author, either; even when, as Patricia Waugh observes, "iconic images from popular culture" appear in his work, it is not to create the effect of postmodern play, but to serve as "shortcuts, opening spaces for affective exploration."⁵ Neither does Ishiguro subscribe to relativity and pessimism – his novels constitute rather an attempt to offer meaning and consolation. Moreover, although Malcolm Bradbury calls Ishiguro 'an artist of the floating world', the name refers less to the fluidity of postmodernism than to his impressionistic, indirect narrative method which never reveals the plot fully.⁶

Ishiguro's literary inspirations and models as well as the critical evaluations of his work rather point to the writer's kinship with modernism. The novelist himself admits to the influence of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* on his writing method and style – Proust gave him freedom of composition, of handling time and space, which he likens to that of an abstract painter who can "place shapes and colours around canvas."⁷ One cannot avoid the association with Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* here – her handling of time, plot and memories, and Lily Briscoe's abstract painting. Ishiguro also expresses his admiration for Anton Chekhov and his "spare and precise, controlled tone,"⁸ and complex emotions hidden under apparently inconspicuous gestures and words. Unsurprisingly, literary critics have not failed to notice modernist traits in

2 Sebastian Groes, Barry Lewis, "Introduction: 'it's good manners, really' – Kazuo Ishiguro and the ethics of empathy," in *Kazuo Ishiguro. New Critical Visions of the Novel*, ed. Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (Palgrave Macmillan: Houndsmill, 2011), 6.

3 Kazuo Ishiguro, "Kazuo Ishiguro on song lyrics, scones, and the life he could have had," interview by John Freeman, *LitHub*, October 5, 2017, <https://lithub.com/kazuo-ishiguro-on-song-lyrics-scones-and-the-life-he-could-have-had/>.

4 Kazuo Ishiguro, "Nobel Lecture," *Facts. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB*, 2018. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2017/ishiguro/facts/>

5 Waugh, Kazuo Ishiguro's, 16-17.

6 Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (Penguin Books: London, 1994), 424.

7 Ishiguro, "Nobel lecture."

8 Kazuo Ishiguro, "Kazuo Ishiguro by Graham Swift," interview by Graham Swift, *BOMB* 29 Fall 1989, Oct.1, 1989, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/kazuo-ishiguro>.

Ishiguro's work. Bradbury places Ishiguro among those authors who managed to marry successfully "British with other forms of fiction to create an international, late-modern fictional voice that is, like Henry James, larger than any individual culture."⁹ Bradbury's association of Ishiguro with one of the first "international" writers is confirmed by Patricia Waugh, who links the writer with the first wave of the internationalization of the novel, rather than the second one, initiated by Rushdie.¹⁰ Additionally, Waugh underlines the presence of 'depth' in Ishiguro's work, which she understands as an exploration of "what it is to be human as well as what it is to be British, or Japanese or American": this "constant preoccupation with 'depth'" puts him "closer to modernism than postmodernism, a *late* international modernism."¹¹ Thus, Ishiguro's novels address the same question which modernists asked before – of whether the novel "can still provide a moral and political 'sentimental education.'"¹² Ishiguro's fiction, which explores the themes of identity and otherness, the characters' interactions with the world, human relationships and feelings, brings to mind Henry James's psychological analysis of his characters and his interest in otherness, Woolf's focus on "the dark places of psychology," Conrad's "preoccupation with the 'secret sharer,' the hidden double or secret agent," and Forster's "concern with the undeveloped heart."¹³

Likewise, the theme of memory that weaves through Ishiguro's work from his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), to his latest, *The Buried Giant* (2015), is strongly present in the literature of High Modernism – in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, or James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In his first two novels, the writer's aim was to preserve Japan as he remembered it and to explore the questions of how people remember, whether their memories are clear or "blurred at the edges," and what role memory plays in "constructing a sense of oneself."¹⁴ While his latest novel also explores the issues of personal memory and identity, collective past and memory play an increased role. The mythic setting of the novel emphasizes the universal and recurrent character of the questions Ishiguro poses in *The Buried Giant*, in that the dilemma whether to erase collective, traumatic memories or to confront them remains relevant in the aftermath of all wars and acts of genocide. In the remainder of this essay, we will demonstrate that Ishiguro's way of engaging with the issues of memory, collective and individual, in *The Buried Giant* makes apparent the continuity between current conceptions of memory and

9 Bradbury, *Modern British Novel*, 425.

10 Waugh, "Ishiguro's not-too-late-modernism," 15.

11 *Ibidem*, 20.

12 *Ibidem*.

13 *Ibidem*, 15-16.

14 Kazuo Ishiguro, "Kazuo Ishiguro Interview on *Charlie Rose*," YouTube, 24:52. February 21, 2017. Accessed 08.09.2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RohhPLfXWfE>.

the ideas that arose at the beginning of the twentieth century: memory as a construction involving forgetting and repression brings to mind Maurice Halbwachs's ideas on collective memory and Sigmund Freud's theories concerning individual memory. The unwilling return of the lost past, featured in *The Buried Giant*, also shows affinities with Proust's conception of involuntary memory. We will argue as well that Ishiguro's foregrounding of the cyclical nature of human history further links the novel with mythopoeia which is "the underlying metaphysic of much modernist literature."¹⁵

It is particularly *The Buried Giant's* concern with the dynamics of remembering and forgetting that establishes a link between the novel and the conceptualizations of memory in modernism. Although modernism is commonly associated with a radical break with the past and a distrust of conventional historiography, its explorations of history and memory, both literary and theoretical, offer a sustained reflection on the role of memory in individual and collective life; the philosophical discourses of Nietzsche, Bergson, Freud, Benjamin, and Halbwachs precede, run parallel to, and inform the works of modernist novelists and poets. As early as at the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche had elevated oblivion to a positive faculty on the grounds that it provides a remedy for the burden of excessive history and memory. Opposing the classical philosophical tradition and its valuation of memory, Nietzsche, in the second of his *Untimely Meditations*, claims that for individuals and nations alike, forgetting is essential to happiness and to action; its value lies in the erasure of the overwhelming past in order to escape its determinism and to reimagine a different future. Since "the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture," it is vital to be "as able to forget at the right time as to remember at the right time."¹⁶ The question of whether forgetting, or rather totally erasing a traumatic past, is indeed beneficial for individuals and communities runs through *The Buried Giant*. The novel is set in post-Roman Britain, a land enveloped in an oblivion-inducing mist. The erasure of people's memories makes possible peaceful coexistence of Britons and Saxons, who only a generation before were locked in a violent conflict. As it transpires, the mist – the effect of Merlin's magic – was a measure adopted by the victorious King Arthur to prevent future bloodshed. In this landscape, an elderly Briton couple, Axl and Beatrice, embark on a journey to reunite with their long-lost son and to restore the memories of their life together, which have been wiped out by the mist.

¹⁵ Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1997), 2.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874), *Untimely Meditations*, edited by Daniel Breazeale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 62-3.

Ishiguro's novel does not endorse historical amnesia: presented as a temporary measure, it deprives each tribe of its collective memory, which is necessary for maintaining a sense of community. Since collective identities are founded on rehearsed memories, neither Britons nor Saxons know who they are. Not being anchored by a shared past and identity, they feel insecure, fearful and suspicious of all otherness. The inhabitants of the Saxon village that Beatrice and Axl visit are prone to violence towards strangers, while the members of the Briton settlement where the couple lived before their journey treat both people from the outside and each other with hostility. Shared memories emerge as vital for the creation of a community, as suggested by the first theorizations of collective memory at the beginning of the twentieth century. The concept was defined by Maurice Halbwachs in 1925 as comprising a "body of shared concerns and ideas" of a particular group of society, "which its members have *constructed* over long periods of time" (emphasis added).¹⁷ For Halbwachs, collective memory does not resurrect the past, but reconstructs it, adjusting past events to the demands of the changing present. Each generation creates memories which, in turn, participate in the construction of a group identity. Further elaborated by Jan and Aleida Assman, Paul Connerton and Pierre Nora, collective memory thus emerges as a construct, not necessarily fully conscious and deliberate,¹⁸ aimed at meeting present needs, such as the development of a sense of identity and social cohesion, rather than at preserving the past. While shared memories are indispensable for the creation of a community committed to long-term continuity, it is also vital to forget those truths that do not promote the communal feeling.

Contemporary theories confirm that such selective forgetting is an inevitable component of all forms of memory, but analogous insights were already expressed in the first half of the twentieth century. Walter Benjamin's idea of remembering as a way of forgetting implies that by remembering the past in a certain way, we simultaneously forget that it could be remembered otherwise. According to Benjamin, the societal production of meaning involves this kind of forgetting, which is apparent in the widespread politicization of memory. It is therefore necessary to "brush history against the

17 Anne Whitehead, *Memory* (Routledge, 2009), 128-29.

18 Jeffrey K. Olick, drawing on the work of, among others, Jan Assman, theorizes an 'unconscious' "dimension of memory at the level that supersedes that of the individual." Inspired by Freud's work, Assman sought to show that there were unconscious elements not only in individual but also in collective memory. Those unconscious aspects, as Olick writes, "shape horizons of understanding whereby speakers might deploy the same tropes in defense not only of their solitary egos, but of cultural identities more generally [...] Cultural memory is born of collective identity, constitutes it in time, and in turn serves it, though usually not in straightforwardly instrumentalist ways" (4-5). See: "The Ciphered Transits of Collective Memory: Neo-Freudian Impressions," *Social Research* 75.1. *Collective Memory and Collective Identity* (Spring 2008): 1-22.

grain.”¹⁹ By referring to memory as a construction, John Frow’s recent narrative model provides a link between memory and forgetting, indicating a continuity of modernist insights: “rather than being a repetition of the physical traces of the past, [memory] is a construction of it under conditions and constraints determined by the present,” and, therefore, subject to distortion and selective forgetting.²⁰ If the past is open-ended, submitted to ongoing revision, “rather than having a meaning and a truth determined once and for all by its status as event, its meaning and its truth are constituted retroactively and repeatedly.”²¹ Aleida Assmann expresses a similar view, observing that all types of remembering involve various forms of inclusion, overlooking, ignoring – “those gaps created by forgetting form an integral part of remembering, enabling its focus and providing contours.”²² In collective life, the gaps are not accidental – the selection criteria of the economy of remembering are imposed on individuals by the groups to which they belong. Certain memories are excluded because they are considered irrelevant or unacceptable from the point of view of the group.²³ As a result, representations of collective memory vary not only historically, as each generation revises and rewrites the past. Even within the same generation, competing versions of the same events are created by different social groups with their particular agendas.

In *The Buried Giant*, in spite of the mist, diverse instances of collective memory are in evidence since people are not affected by oblivion in the same way. While the mist has effectively erased the memories of common, unreflective folk, Gawain and Wistan have evaded the impact of the fog as they have preserved the memory of their people, the Britons and the Saxons respectively. Consistent with Halbwachs’s ideas, each of them remembers only those facts and events which conform with their people’s collective memory, which has survived among those who are strongly motivated to remember – the monks who side with Gawain and the Saxon king who has entrusted Wistan with the mission to kill Querig. Sir Gawain only appears to be an errant knight; in fact, together with the monks he protects the collective memory of the Britons and their king. He remembers his sovereign as “a great king, like God himself, [who] must perform deeds mortals flinch from” (BG 314) and justifies Arthur’s decision to break the peace treaty between the two tribes in order to wage the final battle. By contrast, for Axl, Gawain’s contemporary and the knight who engineered the peace treaty, the

19 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, (Schocken Books, 2007), 257.

20 Quoted in Julie Hansen, “Theories of Memory and the Imaginative Force of Fiction,” In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies*, ed. Shiobhan Kattago (Routledge 2016), 203. In Frow’s conceptions of memory there is memory as archive and memory as construction.

21 *Ibidem*, 205.

22 Aleida Assmann, “Forms of Forgetting,” Frankfurt Humanities Research Centre, 29 April, 2015.

23 *Ibidem*.

memory of King Arthur is a painful memory as he was the man who broke the treaty, which was “an unholy thing” to do (BG 313). Sir Gawain’s vision of the past is also contrasted with that of Wistan, a young Saxon warrior that Axl and Beatrice meet during their quest. While Gawain’s story is told from the perspective of the victorious Britons, Wistan represents the Saxons, who were conquered and nearly wiped out, and therefore his memory emphasizes violence, trauma and the desire to settle old scores. However, what motivates the warrior is not just his personal memory of the Britons and the lost battle, but primarily a collective narrative of victimization, which has proved to be stronger than the mist. This narrative has obviously been sustained at the court of the Saxon king, who has sent him on a “mission to slay the dragon Querig” (BG 136). The elimination of the dragon and the death of Gawain in a duel allow Wistan to predict a new order in which the Saxon version of memory will prevail and all traces of the Britons will be eradicated: “And country by country, this will become a new land, a Saxon land, with no more trace of your people’s time here than a flock or two of sheep wandering the hills untended” (BG 340). In *The Buried Giant*, memory is thus a construction that depends on generation, ethnic group or individual attitude.

Regardless of the version of the past to which Ishiguro’s characters subscribe, their individual recollections, which appear spontaneously, often clash with the accepted vision of the past. The fact that the characters’ memories reappear unbidden makes it possible to regard the mist as a figure for the working of human memory – how it selectively forgets, repressing unwanted truths, events and experiences. Thus, the return of the suppressed memories in the novel is consistent with Freud’s conception of memory, according to which the burden of the past cannot be removed for it is permanently lodged in the unconscious. On this view, neither Nietzsche’s willed forgetting nor externally imposed amnesia can erase the past irrevocably. Disappointed in his king, Axl has relegated to his unconsciousness his life as Arthur’s knight while Gawain retains and cherishes that very life, for it is the foundation of his identity. What Gawain represses, however, is the final battle and the atrocities he committed. Wistan, on the other hand, despite the fog, consciously reconstructs a narrative of bloodshed, carnage, and injustice, which offers a sense of identity and gives purpose to his life; however, he has repressed the kindness of Britons he experienced in his childhood. Unexpectedly, involuntary recollections begin to subvert the official version of Saxon memory and the hatred of Britons he has embraced so far. On seeing Axl for the first time, though he cannot remember the man, Wistan’s “heart leapt for joy” as the old Briton’s features seem pleasantly familiar (BG 124). Later, when his memories slowly return, the warrior realizes that the very first encounter with Axl took place in the Saxon village in which Wistan was raised. The Briton knight used to visit the village as King Arthur’s emissary of peace. This recognition, although emotionally disturbing

to the warrior, does not change his attitude. Wistan ignores the voice of his suppressed memory and chooses to hate all Britons, compelling his young companion, Edwin, to do the same (BG 276-77). Similarly, the memories of the last battle that unexpectedly invade Gawain's consciousness reveal the burden of repressed guilt, which makes him refer to himself as a "slaughterer of babes" – this does not, however, alter Gawain's perception of himself or his late sovereign (BG 244).

Even if the sudden sensation Wistan feels at the sight of Axl's face does not fully conform with Proust's understanding of involuntary memory, the warrior's reaction shares a number of important features with the moments of remembrance in Proust's novel: both are non-intellectual, arise suddenly and by chance, and revive a memory image that is accompanied by sensations and emotions.²⁴ Moreover, in both cases, it takes a considerable effort to grasp the original event or experience – it is only after some time that Wistan can understand why Axl's face has evoked such a strong and pleasant emotion. The fact that the memory that is restored in Wistan's consciousness undermines the version of the Saxon past held by his king is in line with Proust's conception of involuntary memory. When he sees Axl, Wistan relives the feelings he experienced as a child, and the joyful character of the sensations associated with the elderly knight disrupts his consciously constructed narrative of the hateful Britons. This derives from the fact that involuntary memory is non-narrative, grounded in the body and the emotions. According to Proust's distinction between voluntary memory and its involuntary counterpart, arriving at true memories is not possible through a willed, intentional contemplation: "And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect."²⁵ Since voluntary memory remains at the service of the intellect, it retains no trace of the past. As Walter Benjamin observes in his 1939 essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Proust's distinction between voluntary and involuntary recollection was later confirmed by Theodor Reik, an Austrian psychoanalyst, whose conceptions of remembrance and memory

24 Although it is Marcel Proust who is usually associated with the concept of involuntary memory, it had been mentioned by Aristotle, Voltaire, Diderot and analysed in great detail for the first time by Paul Sollier, a doctor who treated Proust in 1905 for "neurasthenia." Sollier linked involuntary memory with affective factors – a violent emotion felt, for instance, during an accident which a person has witnessed, may trigger the revival of memories which are not related to the actual accident, but have evoked a similar emotion. Sollier claimed that the voluntary retrieval of life events is not efficient, and our will plays a trivial role in the evocation of memories. Proust elaborated on Sollier's ideas: he emphasized the "shock" caused by the surge of a previously forgotten memory, which may lead to an intense feeling of happiness due to the affective overlap between the past and the present. See: J. Bogousslavsky and O. Walusinski, "Marcel Proust and Paul Sollier: the involuntary memory connection," *Schweizer Archiv für Neurologie und Psychiatrie* (4/2009): 130-6.

25 Marcel Proust, *Swan's Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House, 1956), 61.

correspond to Proust's voluntary and involuntary modes of memory: the function of intentional, intellectual remembrance [Gedächtnis] is the "protection of impressions; memory [Erinnerung] aims at their disintegration. Remembrance is essentially conservative, memory is destructive."²⁶ In *The Buried Giant*, Wistan's and Gawain's involuntary memory offers a corrective to the voluntary mode, its intuitive truth opposes the inevitably constructed character of voluntary memory. This destructive and subversive nature of involuntary memory is consistent with the modernist deemphasizing of the conscious and the intellectual and the valorization of the unconscious and the corporeal.

In the case of Axl, whose memory has repressed his military past, involuntary recollections bring back the very experience from which he detached himself by leaving King Arthur. Axl registers a sudden sensation when he witnesses Wistan's movements as the warrior prepares to confront Lord Brennus's soldier. To his own surprise, the elderly Briton recognizes and correctly interprets both warriors' gestures and strategies as if they were part of his own intimate experience. As it later turns out, before the fog descended, Axl was a warrior himself, which explains his ability to evaluate the skills of Wistan and his opponent. Axl's vague and involuntary sensation is thus anchored in his Briton past, which resonates with Halbwachs's theorization of the link between individual and collective memory: "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories."²⁷ In his early work *Social Frameworks of Memory* (1925) and in his later studies, such as *The Collective Memory* (1940), Halbwachs argues that while the collective memory "endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember."²⁸ The collective and the individual intersect in the sense that collective memory constitutes a 'framework' into which individual remembrances are incorporated.²⁹ Ishiguro shows how individual memory hinges on collective memory – it is a fusion of Proust's and Halbwachs's ideas that illuminate Axl's, Wistan's and Gawain's crucial acts of remembrance. An important aspect of this fusion is the bodily character of Proust's involuntary memory, which revives a certain image of individual past together with related sensations and emotions; throughout *In Search of Lost Time*, a physical sensation "acts as a catalyst for involuntary memory," demonstrating that the "richest route into recollection is through body memory."³⁰

Ishiguro's treatment of history as cyclical constitutes another link between his novel and modernist myth-inspired conceptions of temporality present, among others, in

26 Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, 160.

27 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter, intro. Mary Douglas (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 38.

28 *Ibidem*, 48.

29 Whitehead, *Memory*, 126.

30 *Ibidem*, 104-105.

the work of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot or W.B. Yeats. The novel continues the legacy of the mythopoeic strand in British modernist literature, which employed myth to find “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.”³¹ In his essay “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” T.S. Eliot identifies this method in the novel of James Joyce and the work of W.B. Yeats. Eliot resorts to myth himself in *The Waste Land* in order to overcome the fragmentation and chaos of the modern world. Ishiguro’s employment of elements of myth serves the double purpose of structuring his novel and giving meaning to the world it presents. The quest-like journey of the main characters, the recurring Charon-like figure of the ferryman, the upward movement towards light/knowledge provide structure, but the fact that knowledge is at all achievable suggests that Ishiguro’s is a (quasi-modernist) novel of epistemological questions and not a postmodernist text of ontological doubt. Ishiguro’s focus on myth as generating meaning becomes inscribed in the recent “engagement with history and a revival of mythic meaning-making that the arch-postmodernists would have abhorred.”³²

The perception of history as cyclical requires the adoption of a dispassionate, detached vantage point, which is advocated by Nietzsche. Through the character of Axl, Ishiguro alludes to Nietzsche’s “superhistorical spirit,” which arises when “a great range of historical knowledge spanning different cultures and times has been assimilated,” revealing “the partiality and limitation of all those issues which seem supremely important to one’s contemporaries. The superhistorical spirit transcends historical time.”³³ This transcendence, as Bell argues, is not necessarily a negative “withdrawal into some realm of the timeless,” but may be “a condition of properly living within history.”³⁴ Such ‘living within history’ involves a perception of history not as a chain of events arranged chronologically in time, but as cyclical and “understood under the sign of myth.”³⁵ Such a recognition of the repetitive nature of violence informs Axl’s final reflections on the Briton and Saxon future. After Wistan’s slaying of the she-dragon, Axl realizes that the cycle of violence, stopped for a short time by the mist, will be unleashed again, inscribed in a never-ending pattern of vengeance: “Who knows what will come when quick-tongued men make ancient grievances rhyme with fresh desire for land and conquest?” (BG 340). This is immediately confirmed by Wistan’s predic-

31 T.S. Eliot, “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” *The Dial*, Nov. 1923, 483. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/review-of-ulysses-by-t-s-eliot-from-the-dial>.

32 Alison Gibbons, “Postmodernism is dead. What comes next?,” *Times Literary Supplement*, June 12, 2017. <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/postmodernism-dead-comes-next/>

33 Michael Bell, “The metaphysics of Modernism.” *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15.

34 *Ibidem*.

35 *Ibidem*, 14.

tion that Britons will soon become erased from both the land and memory. Ishiguro's recognition of the cyclical nature of human history resonates with similar insights of modernist writers: Yeats's conception of its spiral character, expressed for instance in "The Second Coming," or in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, where the idea of cyclical return resembles a vicious circle.

The myth-like structures underlying history do not apply just to collective life, but also to individual existence. Axl and Beatrice's journey to reunite with their son turns out to be a quest for memories which, as they hope, will strengthen their love and allow them to travel to the otherworld together. In the course of the journey they move upwards, first to reach the monastery, where they gain insight into the nature of the mist, and then up the cairn, towards the she-dragon's lair, where they confront dark aspects of their common past. Both the significance of the motif of ascent to a higher vantage point, which functions as the figure for gaining higher understanding, and the presence of the motif of quest in *The Buried Giant* point to its affinity with the modernist myth-inspired novel with its development of spatialized rather than chronological structures. The fact that the novel represents both historical and legendary past deemphasizes the role of time and chronology and underlines the mythic and universal aspects of human experience. This universality marks both collective and individual experience: the repetitive pattern of violence illustrated by the unresolved conflict between the Saxons and the Britons and human life as a journey towards death, enacted by Axl and Beatrice's quest that culminates in the final meeting with the ferryman. The ferryman, who takes people to the mythic island *qua* otherworld, is a recurrent figure in the novel, a constant reminder of death as the ultimate horizon of human life. While the repeated encounters with the ferryman prompt a reconciliation between Axl and Beatrice, his presence in the novel does not perform the same function at the collective level – the longer lifespan of nations makes them less receptive to the recognition of finality and the need to end the cycle of violence.

The vision of human history in *The Buried Giant* as cyclical and myth-like reflects the modernist tendency towards detecting meaningful patterns as opposed to the post-modern break with the idea of deeper significance underlying history. When Ishiguro draws on myth, then, it is not only to add to his mixture of various genres in the novel: fairy tale, medieval romance, fantasy, contemporary adventure story. While this playful measure situates the novel formally within the postmodern convention, the deployment of myth adds depth and universality to his work, which is in fact consistent with Ishiguro's intentions. In an interview he explains the rationale behind the novel: "I wanted to write a universal novel about memory and forgetting, and the function of these two antagonistic forces in the life of a nation and in a relationship, regardless

of whether it is a relation between husband and wife or between friends.”³⁶ This very intention to find universal meanings and patterns in the existence of individuals and of communities together with the manner in which Ishiguro shows memory – as both voluntary and involuntary, as shaped by the conscious and unconscious processes of forgetting – suggest the continuation of a modernist literary legacy, which is resurfacing nowadays in the new literature that breaks away from postmodernist “playfulness and affectation.”³⁷

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