THE USES OF OBLIVION BETWEEN TRAUMA AND BALM IN KAZUO ISHIGURO’S THE BURIED GIANT

Irina Toma
Assoc. Prof., PhD, Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești

Abstract: Each of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels hides a “buried giant” within its substance, a monstrous secret that is gradually exhumed with unsettling consequences. The present paper focuses on Ishiguro’s latest novel, whose action plunges the reader in the England of Geoffrey of Mannouth and the other mythologizers who gave the world King Arthur, Sir Gawain and Merlin, the wizard. In a village whose amnesia and smothering forgetfulness is addictive, an elderly couple starts a quest in which personal and collective memory mingle with a view to disclosing crucial information that has been withheld. This process of exhumation functions as the distinguishing mark of Ishiguro’s style, which applies the techniques of detective fiction to the mysteries of the heart.

Keywords: amnesia, memory, giant, quest, forgetfulness

Each of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels hides a “buried giant” within its substance, a monstrous secret that is gradually exhumed with unsettling consequences. The unfolding of the novels always turns out to be a movement of remembered forgetfulness, in which memory imbues everything with a sense of loss that we can only recuperate through forging, nursing and celebrating brittle human relationships. As stated by Sean Matthews in a recent collection of essays dedicated to Ishiguro: “At the heart of Ishiguro’s work is a series of grand, dialectical oppositions: between History and the Present; Objectivity and Subjectivity; Reality and Imagination; Individual and Collective; Contingency and Universality; Realism and Surrealism.”

Kazuo Ishiguro’s work can be considered illustrative of what was called, in the related area of postcolonial writing, “the literature of fictional returns”. The exilic dimension underwrites a narrative sensibility where spatial dislocation is transposed to the temporal realm, so that all his protagonists are situationally exiled or out of sync with the worlds they find themselves in. This overwhelming sensation of “being out of place” justifies the protagonists’ concern with events from the past, the abundance of flash-back sequences in Ishiguro’s work, the recurrent pronouncements in the novels about the uncertainty and malleability of memory, and also the melancholy tone suffusing them.

His novels use memory as a mediator between the psychological and the political, to express the defamiliarising experience undertaken by their heroes. If in his other novels individual displacement can be associated with a type of obsession with themes of individual memory and loss, The Buried Giant approaches the concept of collective memory loss, of the mysterious amnesia of a whole community meant to stifle a traumatic event set after the end of a war between Saxons and Britons. Suggesting that the desire to forget lurks under the form of the amnesic breath of a giant dragon which overwhelms the whole community, Ishiguro questions the reliability of collective memory seen as a reluctance to exhum e buried memories. Haunting the novel there lurks the possibility that

---

1 Sean Matthews (ed.), Kazuo Ishiguro. Contemporary Critical Perspectives, p.7

Section: Literature
the memories themselves may be false and the memory loss that may serve a troubled people as a blessing cannot help but threaten the individual with the dissolution of his or her self.

Written not as a novel about historical amnesia but as an allegory of historical amnesia, set in the 7th century Britain, teeming with ogres, dragons and Arthurian knights, *The Buried Giant* may be read as a story about the condition of forgetting imposed on the population by an external source. Consequently, the present paper aims at demonstrating that such a story may function as a theology of suffering about historical victims, no matter the age or space.

As Kazuo Ishiguro himself once jokingly suggested (“I write the same novel over and over again”), each of his previous novels hides a “buried giant, a secret that is gradually exhumed with unsettling consequences.”² Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* haltingly reveals that his revered employer used to be a Nazi sympathizer, likewise the master painter in *An Artist of the Floating World* turns out to have collaborated with the imperialist regime in the 30s. In *Never Let Me Go* the secret consists in the revelation that the narrator and her fellow-boarding school students are genetic clones being harvested for their internal organs. The overall image in these novels is that of characters trying to bury their secrets beneath heavily reinforced strata of denial, self-delusion and cognitive dissonance. The revelations always lead to reflection and a profound, deforming sense of regret. This process of exhumation is the distinguishing mark of Ishiguro’s style, which applies the technique of detective fiction to the mysteries of the heart. In all these novels the fictional spaces created out of the landscapes of the past and of memory and its deficiencies map out the creative forces of nostalgic desire as well as a preoccupation with the homesickness of metaphorical and personal orphanhood that transforms the investigation into an exploration of personal identity and sense of displacement. Ishiguro himself offers the clue to this permanent quest for identity in his novel *Never Let Me Go*: “Then there were those questions about why we wanted to track down our models at all. One big idea behind finding your model was that, when you did, you’d glimpse your future……Nevertheless, we all of us, to varying degrees, believed that when you saw the person you were copied from, you’d get some insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you’d see something of what life held in store.”³

The major shift performed by the author in *The Buried Giant* consists in the subtle interlocking of personal memory of trauma and loss with that of a whole community, with a collective memory, a kind of pact that holds the personal and historical present together at the cost of a sinful amnesia. *The Buried Giant* is set after the end of the war between Saxons and Britons, in the year 450 A. D. (approximately), who now live alongside each other, in the grips of a widespread historical amnesia, erasing both distant and recent memory. The novel begins in Ishiguro’s wellknown apparently flat style, where nothing announces the intensity of the hidden, long-forgotten trauma: You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding land or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated.” The reader’s guides through the craggy hills and bleak moors of the medieval countryside are an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice, living in poverty, ostracized by the rest of the village, unable to remember basic facts about their past: Have they always lived in this village? Did they have children? We soon find out that the whole village is amnesic:

---

3 Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, p.127
“In this community the past was rarely discussed. I do not mean that it was taboo. I mean that it somehow faded into a mist as dense as that which hung over the marshes. It simply did not occur to these villagers to think about the past— even the recent one.”

In an interesting attempt at self-defense, characters also encounter moments of self-awareness which trigger off their quest a rebours: “But she went on speaking about how this land had become cursed with a mist of forgetfulness, a thing we’ve remarked often ourselves. Then she asked me: How will you and your husband prove your love for each other when you can’t remember the past you’ve shared?....We don’t remember our fierce quarrels or the small moments we enjoyed and treasured. We don’t remember our son or why he’s away from us. I wonder if what we feel in our hearts today isn’t like these raindrops still falling on us from the soaked leaves above, even though the sky itself long stopped raining. I’m wondering if without our memories, there’s nothing for it but for our love to fade and die. Our memories aren’t gone for ever, just mislaid somewhere on account of this wretched mist.”

The two characters embark upon a quest which involves finding their lost son, and discover that the mist obscuring memories is the breath of a she-dragon named Querig (her breath, thanks to a spell cast by Merlin causes amnesia) and that the only way to restore the country’s stolen memory is to kill Querig. In the course of their journey they encounter two knights, Wistan, a young Saxon warrior, and Sir Gawain, an elderly and slightly buffoonish nephew of King Arthur, whose reputations precedes him. There are also adventures and battles with ogres, dragons, menacing soldiers and sinister monks. Along the way, the buried giant is gradually disinterred. We learn that during the war between the Britons and the Saxons, Axl had served King Arthur, his greatest achievement being a treaty that ordered the Britons to spare Saxon women and children. As the war intensified, the Britons violated the treaty, massacring entire villages. To avoid reprisals, Merlin cast his spell on the she-dragon, causing all the war’s survivors, Saxon and Briton alike, to forget that the genocide had ever occurred. Wistan is the only one to have been spared by the mist, and, consequently, sets out to kill the dragon and afterwards lead the Saxons to avenge their defeat.

The novel ends with the vanquishing of Querig and the inauguration of a new historical dispensation, in which people will have to reckon with what they have forgotten. This restoration of memory proves bitter, hardly a balm for the people. Beatrice and Axl recover their intimate past, but historically the mist has enabled a period of peace, during which Saxons and Britons had productively forgotten their former enmities and grievances.

“Who knows what old hatreds will loosen across the land now?” Axl asks, fearfully. Wistan agrees:” The giant, once well buried, now stirs.” He predicts savage warfare, which Beatrice and Axl will likely not live to see.

The ultimate message of the book lurks menacing over the readers. For a time, Britons and Saxons live in peace, forgetful of the terrible acts of slaughter that had enabled Arthur to establish his realm and keep the invaders at bay. What, though, is it were possible to exhume buried memories? “How, demands a Saxon indignant over the slaughter of his people at the hands of Arthur’s knights can old wounds heal while maggots linger so richly?” The reader knows what is destined to happen: that the Saxons will recover the memory of the wrongs done to them and that the Britons will be swept

---

4 Kazuo Ishiguro, The Buried Giant, p.48
5 Kazuo Ishiguro, The Buried Giant, p.49
6 Kazuo Ishiguro, The Buried Giant, p.344
7 Kazuo Ishiguro, The Buried Giant, p.344

Section: Literature
from the future England. The warning implied in Ishiguro’s novel is that a grievance forgotten is an atrocity forestalled. It is needless to say that the relevance of this goes far beyond dark-ages Britain.

The memory loss that may serve a troubled people as a blessing cannot help threatening the individual with the dissolution of his or her self. During their journey, Axl and Beatrice meet a boatman whose duty is to ferry people to an island of the dead. Only if a couple can convince him of their devotion will he allow them to travel together. The question still remains: In both public and private life, might forgetting past horrors be a balm? Why awaken the giant from its slumber? The last dialogue between Axl and Beatrice seems to epitomize Ishiguro’s message to his readers: “Tell me, princess” I hear him say. Are you glad of the mist’s fading? It may bring horrors to this land. Yet for us it fades just in time. I was wondering, princess. Could it be our love would never have grown so strong down the years had the mist not robbed us the way it did? Perhaps it allowed old wounds to heal.”(Ishiguro, 2015:344)

Above all, The Buried Giant is a fascinating reflection on war and the traumas it involves and on how both, which rage across and destroy external landscapes, rely so heavily on memory and the internal landscape. We can consider the novel a modern-day myth of personal and collective memory and of the way they intertwine, oscillating between trauma and balm. This quiet novel creeps along like the old couple trudging across rainy hills, inducing the heart-breaking conclusion that the giant is not dead, only buried. Ishiguro forces his readers in the contemporary world to ask their own hard questions: Would we be better off in a forgetful peace or in a world of remembered wounds and quests for revenge?

The reader, just like Ishiguro’s characters, will remain poised between two extremes, between the bliss and the agony of forgetfulness and remembrance: Forget everything and you lose your soul, remember everything and you lose the ability to forgive. It takes courage to let sleeping dragons lie, but in Ishiguro’s opinion the latter is not a valid attitude, if one (be it a person or a people) is to find and preserve his/her identity. To be deprived of one’s past can be considered tantamount to being deprived of one’s future. On the one hand, the novel suggests that humans may have caused the arrival of the mist (presumably as a result of warfare so terrible that it encouraged and enforced amnesia), on the other hand the existence of Ouergig, the she-dragon, suggests forces beyond human control and complicity. One can only hope that Ishiguro’s dream of prolonged peace is not as quixotic as the old warriors in his novel. It is up to the reader to pick up the task of breaking the violence and not yield in the face of letting go.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ishiguro, Kazuo. Never Let Me Go, Faber and Faber, London, 2005
Ishiguro, Kazuo. The Buried Giant, Faber and Faber, London, 2015
Vorda, Allan. An Interview with Kazuто Ishiguro, Mississippi Review, No2/1991