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Memory and Understanding in Ishiguro

Addressing what he saw as his next challenge in his considerations of memory soon after the publication of *Never Let Me Go* in 2005, Ishiguro commented that he was still ‘fascinated by memory’: ‘What I would like to tackle next’, he remarks, ‘is how a whole society or nation remembers or forgets. When is it healthy to remember, and when is it healthy to forget?’¹ To date, a majority of Ishiguro’s novels are narrated in the first person by someone remembering the past. And in each of these cases, the individual is afflicted by crucial lapses in memory or by a failure to understand the things remembered. The fundamental condition of narrating – that the narrator knows something that the reader or interlocutor does not – is therefore compromised by narrators who do not fully know or understand their own stories. A key exception is Ishiguro’s 2015 novel *The Buried Giant* – a predominantly third-person narrative about a community afflicted by a supernatural mist of memory loss. Ishiguro’s work is profoundly concerned with the fact that we account for ourselves in ways that are compromised by the fallibility of memory and understanding, and it is focused on the fact that individuals and communities sometimes need to forget. With a focus on *The Buried Giant*, this chapter explores the implications and ramifications of this critical question in Ishiguro’s work.

Memory Work

Ishiguro’s writing has been concerned with the complexities of memory and the failure of the individual to understand both past and present circumstances. All of the novels in his first trilogy, *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World*, and *The Remains of the Day*, are based on similar themes and feature older first-person narrators as protagonists reflecting on their lives, achievements and choices. These characters seek out meaning and ‘wholeness’ by trying to

understand their life-stories and the circumstances that surrounded their past decisions.² The theme of neglect pervades *A Pale View of Hills* as Etsuko revisits both her past in Nagasaki and her estranged relationship with her late daughter Keiko. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Noriko's *miai* and her marriage prospects account for some of the triggers of Masuji Ono's return to his life as a painter, and to the way he conducted his relationships with his former teacher and his students in Imperial Japan. Stevens's impending reunion with Miss Kenton (Mrs Benn) provides the impetus for him to take stock of his time at Darlington Hall, whilst being confronted with the missed opportunities of engaging with his father and Miss Kenton in *The Remains of the Day*. In what has been described as his 'Bewilderment Trilogy', Ishiguro's next three novels experiment with narrative structure, form and genre, finding innovative ways of meditating on issues of identity and memory.³ Instead of a retrospective point of view, *The Unconsoled* experiments with a protagonist narrating in the present, conveying a sense of being in the midst of the narrative's events, as Ryder struggles to remember and understand his relationship with the city's past. The unusual narrative form of *When We Were Orphans* offers a predominantly retrospective account of Christopher Banks's life in the first half of the novel, followed by a more immediate sense of being grounded in present events for most of the second half. This change in narrative perspective marks a heightened sense of unreliability with regard to Banks's claims about his intentions, and is indicative of his growing self-delusion and failure to reconcile with his past. The act of retrospection and testimony that governs the novel is given a science-fiction twist in 2005's *Never Let Me Go*, where the narrator and protagonist Kathy is revealed to be a clone, created for the purpose of organ harvesting. The foreshortened lifespan of clones in the novel alters the perception of what a typical lifespan for a human is, and enables Ishiguro to crystallise lived experience and to bring an intensified focus on the human condition.

The publication of *The Buried Giant* in 2015 constituted the fulfilment a decade later of Ishiguro's declaration (quoted at the beginning of this chapter) of his interest in exploring more explicitly the relationship between memory at the communal as well as at the individual level.

Ishiguro's earlier meditations on testimony, understanding, and the complexities of memory are expanded beyond the individual realm, and this is facilitated by the use of a third-person narrator for the majority of the novel. This particular orientation of the narrative voice generates a greater sense of distance between the reader and the key characters, whilst simultaneously conveying the impression of a world in which the secrets of its past remain hidden just below the level of consciousness.

Giving an Account of Ourselves

Set in a post-Arthurian Britain, *The Buried Giant* depicts the journey of an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice, as they leave their community in search of their estranged son. The land is surrounded by a mist of forgetting that is powered by the dragon Querig's breath and Merlin's spell, and instigated by Arthur in order to enforce a state of collective amnesia that covers up his war crimes.

Ishiguro's turn to communal experiences allows for an orientation in the novel towards individuals who are caught up in key events and transitional periods within a nation's tumultuous history. He has previously engaged with this theme from a first-person narrative position with protagonists such as Ono, Stevens, and Banks in *An Artist of the Floating World*, *The Remains of the Day*, and *When We Were Orphans*. These character-narrators provided subjective experiences of self-deception and hindsight when it comes to evaluating the past against the backdrop of the Second World War. *The Buried Giant* takes a significantly different perspective, utilising the third-person narrative voice to explore experiences from a distance and from multiple viewpoints. Axl and Beatrice make for a good initial focal point in this area of enquiry. Their quest to reunite with their son at his village is a courageous, affecting, and deeply personal endeavour as they brave the unknown beyond their community's 'sprawling' hillside warren (BG 4). As the journey sees the Briton pair joined on their travels by the warrior Wistan and the boy Edwin, both Saxons, and the old knight Gawain, their end-goal begins to change to encompass a more politically charged objective, which is to see the end of Querig and the mist of forgetting. As their journey progresses, they

become more aware of how much they have forgotten as fragments return to them, strengthening their urge to remember what happened to their son and how things were before the mist descended. They are unable to perceive the larger consequences of the mission that they are eventually involved in – awakening the memories of genocide for the Saxons, and the widespread release of the anguish of loss and injustice. Axl and Beatrice initially hoped that the strength of their relationship would allow them to overcome whatever the past would reveal once the mist had gone. After Wistan slays Querig, Axl begins to realise the magnitude of the consequences of their actions in the removal of the mist by comparison with the relative insignificance of their own personal interests. Following Wistan's comment about the coming 'justice and vengeance' from the Saxons, Axl says to Beatrice 'You and I longed for Querig's end, thinking only of our own dear memories. Yet who knows what old hatreds will loosen across the land now?' (BG 323). Axl and Beatrice's focus on removing the mist denies them the wider perspective on what might lie beneath.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode describes, in the context of fictional narrative, the human predicament of being 'stranded in the middle' between beginnings and ends, and the desire for meaning between those two points.⁴ Being stranded in the middle means that it is often difficult to gain any kind of wider perspective or understanding on where one is during a period of change. As they get caught up in the search for their son while under the long-term influence of Merlin's spell, Axl and Beatrice are unable to sense the wider implications of their actions. According to Kermode, we are unable to observe the structure of our life-stories from 'our spot of time in the middle', and instead find meaning from 'fictive concords' with our origins and ends.⁵ Axl and Beatrice set out initially to find their son, but this intention gets muddled with other objectives that are uncovered along the way. In a ruined villa not long after they begin their journey, their encounter with an old woman and a boatman reveals Beatrice's personal interest in the story of an island to which people go to live out the rest of their lives, with the condition that they are unlikely to be with their partners. Beatrice's earlier encounter with a woman by the old hawthorn tree tells a similar story about this island of forgetting and of the sorrow of those left behind unable to be with

their partners. Beatrice's curiosity, as well as her fear, about this island attracts her to its mythology and magical qualities, and just as Querig's voice calls to Edwin later in the novel, the island seems to call to Beatrice. Despite Axl's assurances that they have 'no plans to go to any such island' at the very end of the novel, when Beatrice is keen on letting the boatman ferry her to that location, she seems to have forgotten her earlier fear of being separated from Axl (BG 48). When Axl reminds her of the 'sly tricks' to which these boatmen have been known to resort, she insists on placing her trust in the boatman's promise of their 'time together on the island' (344). The couple, situated as they are in their spot of time between the end of Arthur's reign and the ascendancy of the Saxons, are unable to gain a wider perspective on their lives, and this is further complicated by the mist of forgetting that prevents them from accessing their memories. Both Axl and Beatrice try to look towards the future and find meaningful ends to their lives. As the mist begins to dissipate following the death of Querig, we find that the two characters have quite different thoughts about their future together. It turns out that Axl and Beatrice's relationship has actually been strengthened during the time of memory-loss generated by the mist. Axl realises that, with the imminent return of their memories, old hatreds might tear them apart again.

In *The Course of Recognition*, Paul Ricoeur theorises the figure of what he terms the 'capable human being', comprising the ability to speak, to act, to narrate, and to give an account of one's own actions.⁶ This represents the phenomenology of an individual subject who is 'capable' of these different accomplishments. However, this act of self-recognition also requires 'the help of others' at each step.⁷ The enforced amnesia achieved by Arthur and Merlin's mist of forgetting questions and problematises the ability of individuals to narrate and understand how their stories relate to those of others within their social environment. Following on from the community dispute about the use of a candle, as Axl comforts Beatrice she brings up the idea of going to the village of their estranged son and asks if this time Axl would permit them to travel to see him. Shocked by this question and the suggestion that he might have forbidden them to see their son in the past, Axl struggles to remember: 'many fragments of memories tugged at [his] mind', to the extent that he feels 'almost

faint' and tries to recover his balance (BG 25). As characters no longer remember even the most significant and personal events, their ability to narrate their lives or orient themselves within their own life-stories is rendered ineffectual. Ishiguro's interest in examining the dependency of couples on shared memories is demonstrated in the form of Beatrice, who fears that the love that she and Axl have for each other will disappear if they cannot remember their shared past. She likens their present feelings for each other to the raindrops still falling from the leaves of the tree they are sheltering under despite the rain having stopped, believing that their love will eventually 'fade and die' when there are no more shared memories (48-9). A person's ability to narrate their life-story sometimes requires the help of others as, Ricoeur suggests, and this is achieved through shared memories that attest and affirm a relationship. Ishiguro utilises the fantasy genre to create the murky backdrop of a mist that negatively affects people's ability to remember (although the mist seems to affect people to different degrees, and in the case of the warriors Gawain and Wistan, there seems to be hardly any effect at all). Edwin's memory of his mother, who was taken by Britons when his village was invaded when he was four, seems to persist, and it fuels his determination to 'one day bring her back' from captivity (262). Despite being able to remember his mother's kidnapping, Edwin's memory of her is clouded by another act of magic; in this instance it is a dragon's bite on his body creating a line of communication between him and Querig that manifests itself as his mother's voice. Edwin's role as a witness to the kidnapping, and his ability to narrate the crime, are negatively affected by the bite, as we see when he confuses Querig's voice with that of his mother.

The Buried Giant challenges the work of memory, exemplified in Ishiguro's earlier novels, and its function to 'overcome obstacles of forgetting'.⁸ Ishiguro's previous novels acknowledge how dependent we are on others to remember our life-stories, and how in being witnesses we 'affirm the memories of people, places and events that are important to us'.⁹ Ishiguro's post-Arthurian tale, however, makes the case that it is not always possible to remember and bear witness. The complexities of individual and collective memory have previously been acknowledged in novels such

as *An Artist of the Floating World* and *Never Let Me Go*, for example when Ono expressed regret for his past involvement in Japan's war effort as a way of dealing with his guilt, and to secure his daughter Noriko's future through marriage, and in the shared memories of the former Hailsham students as they encounter one another as carers and donors towards the end of their foreshortened lives. In contrast to this, the people in *The Buried Giant* suffer from a number of years of enforced amnesia, and the process of remembering and cathartic release associated with the work of memory cannot take place for many individuals and communities. The human capacity to narrate and give an account of one's actions are heavily impeded by a lack of memory, at least for the Saxons and the Britons who live side-by-side. Ricoeur uses the term 'imputability' when discussing a person's ability to give an account of themselves, and how individuals can 'impute' (or ascribe) their own acts to themselves.¹⁰ With the agency of imputability withheld from remembering subjects, the cathartic work of memory evident in earlier Ishiguro narratives is rendered ineffectual in *The Buried Giant*.

These considerations point to the inherent difficulty in understanding one's memories, and to the fact that even with the revelation of returned memories it is a challenge to understand the past and work out a suitable path for the future. As memories of his painful past with Beatrice return, Axl seems to bid a sad farewell to Beatrice, asking to 'hold [her] once more' as she prepares to be rowed first by the boatman to the island of forgetting (BG 345). The revelation of unresolved guilt, hurt, and anger over the death of their son might have affected the boatman's decision to ferry the couple across separately, indicating the possibility that they will be apart indefinitely. While Ishiguro leaves the ending ambiguous, there is a palpable sense of conflict in Axl: would he be willing to live on the island with Beatrice whilst having no memory of her and no awareness of her presence, or would it be better to say goodbye to Beatrice and still have his memories of her? Even if they were allowed to retain their full memories whilst living on the island, the pain from the past might be too difficult for Axl to bear. It was not too long before they first set out on their epic journey that Axl woke up one early spring morning to discover that 'the last of the darkness' of their

feud had left him (341). Their old wounds had 'healed slowly', but this has only been rendered possible because of the mist (341). Wounds that might otherwise have healed over a longer passage of time have been superficially patched up through magic and an enforced amnesia. Now, with the weight of their memories returning to them, the spectre of unforgiveness and guilt hover close by.

There are wider implications involved in the sense of failure to understand memories and life-stories. I discussed earlier the experience of subjects caught up in the middle of historical events being unable at the time to perceive the significance of things happening around them, an experience that applies both to individuals and to groups. In his consideration of microhistory, Ricoeur describes how historians are able to observe the unperceived connections within 'a village, a group of families, an individual caught up in the social fabric'.¹¹ Finding themselves 'stranded in the middle' of time, as Kermode has it, individuals and communities attempt to 'make sense' of their worlds and lives, and locate themselves within significant events.¹² This therefore necessitates the consideration of multiple mnemonic viewpoints. Michael Rothberg describes the ethical dimension of multidirectional memory as constituting acts that uncover existing and unresolved 'hidden histories, traumas, and social divisions'.¹³ Ishiguro's innovative novel and his predominant use of the third-person narrative voice allows for a range of memory perspectives, comprising intergenerational and multi-ethnic groups. This creates in the narrative a sense of unease and instability concerning the past, whether it is Wistan informing Axl of the suffering endured by the Saxons at the hands of the Britons, the similarity of Edwin's and Wistan's traumatic childhoods, or the gradual revelation of Axl's historical role in the conflict between the Saxons and Britons. Axl, as a chief negotiator for Arthur, is gradually understood to have been instrumental in brokering a landmark peace-treaty with the Saxons. Gawain defends his uncle Arthur's subsequent decision to breach the treaty and kill the Saxons in the villages as a just cause to end the 'circle of slaughter' and deliver a longer-lasting peace (*BG* 232). Gawain (and Arthur's) politically motivated and rationalised view of the killings is very different to that of Axl, who has built a strong relationship with the Saxon communities as their 'Knight of Peace', and for him the betrayal and genocide concretises a 'circle of

hate' that will bear consequences, as it does towards the end of the novel (*BG* 232-3). The different perspectives on war and war crimes is just one of the ways in which Ishiguro considers the complexities of narratives of conflict. Ishiguro's depiction of the acts of Arthur as King presents a revision of the popular notions of this quasi-historical and mythological figure from British history. *The Buried Giant* presents the heroic and legendary figure as a calculating and murderous autocrat, whose instigation of genocide goes against the grain of a popular national narrative. This portrayal of Arthur, with its allusions to the famed 'Battle of Mount Badon' where Arthur was victorious against the Saxons, represents Ishiguro's meditation and critique on the accuracy of the historical record.¹⁴ Utilising the fantasy genre to experiment with 'notions of reality and history' and subvert the Arthurian myth, Ishiguro's text questions the formation of national myths and traditional depictions of Arthur as the heroic leader against Saxon invaders.¹⁵

The Buried Giant represents Ishiguro's assessment on war and its relationship to nationhood. The novel bears witness to Ricoeur's argument that 'there exists no historical community that has not been born out of a relation that can, without hesitation, best be likened to war'.¹⁶ In the novel, Arthur's solution for peace is a brutal eradication of several generations of witnesses, followed by the instigation of an enforced forgetting. If each civilisation's peace has its origins in war and is sustained by collective forgetting, this would suggest that peace and forgetting are inseparable at both individual and collective levels. The constant threat of memory returning, of a reigniting of painful memories, means that peace is often tenuous and fragile. Both Gawain and Axl seem to recognise the cyclical nature of repressed hatred and the 'lust for vengeance' (*BG* 232). They both find themselves stranded in the middle of key events and both are manipulated by a highly influential leader, in a similar vein to Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, all the while lacking perspective and understanding as they try their best to 'perform [their] duty to the end' (234).

Ishiguro's meditations on national memory and enforced amnesia constitute an enquiry into the complexities of communal and intergenerational memory, areas that have been highlighted by the work of theorists such as Marianne Hirsch. In her account of 'postmemory', Hirsch considers the intergenerational nature of traumatic memories, in which the legacy of trauma can be keenly felt by the next generation even if they have had no direct experience of the original events. The 'stories, images, and behaviors' conveyed to the next generation in their growing up years can be so deeply transmitted as to '*seem* to constitute memories in their own right'.¹⁷ Hirsch suggests that postmemory is less about recall than it is about 'imaginative investment, projection and creation' in its connection to the past.¹⁸ Wistan, who as a child directly experienced the trauma of his mother's abduction by Britons during a time of war, expects the lifting of the mist following Querig's death to unleash 'anger and thirst for vengeance' amongst the 'strong men and growing boys' within Saxon communities across the land (263-4; 323-24). As the memory of the genocide by the Britons returns, 'overwhelming inherited memories' of trauma will begin to shape the lives of the next generation of Saxons.¹⁹

The landscape covered by the mist includes sites of memory such as ancient burial grounds, hostile Saxon villages, and forgotten battlegrounds. These sites constitute traces of distant traumatic events. With recall just out of reach of one's consciousness due to the effects of the mist, the ability to narrate the past and impute major crimes to specific groups is undermined. Rothberg's work on multidirectional memory highlights the multifaceted and interrelated nature of collective memory, and points to the necessity for multiple viewpoints of remembering in order to overcome historical inaccuracies. More recently, he has built on this analysis of the connections between history and memory to investigate 'the implication of those proximate to power' and the importance of collective responsibility for crimes committed in the distant past.²⁰ Ishiguro's earlier novels depict narratives that initially conceal the protagonists' culpability and guilt in relation to war and collective trauma. Ono's role as a propaganda artist in Japan's imperialist war effort, as well as his actions in undermining his former student Kuroda's career and livelihood are in stark contrast to the more

benign portrait of a retired artist and grandfather in the first part of the novel. The first-person narration depicting Stevens's unflinching loyalty to Lord Darlington, and his misplaced trust in Darlington's judgement, is thrown into sharp relief by Mr Cardinal's explanation to Stevens of how Darlington is being manipulated by the Nazis. The first-person point-of-view of Ishiguro's earlier novels focuses the narrative onto the protagonists and their culpability concerning events that take place in the past. In the case of Stevens, while he might not be directly involved in Darlington's political plans, his work has enabled those plans to proceed, and as his moment of being erroneously recognised as a gentleman will attest, he has, in Rothberg's words, 'benefited from privileged positions'.²¹

In *The Unconsoled*, Ishiguro expands his enquiry beyond Ryder, the protagonist, to incorporate the unnamed city's inhabitants. He makes an implicit comment on the beneficiaries and implicated subjects of war in *When We Were Orphans*, when Christopher Banks expresses his disdain for the opulent social event he attends in Shanghai, commenting on the 'denial of responsibility' and 'pompous defensiveness' amongst society's elite (*WWWO* 162). Ishiguro continues developing this theme of implication and responsibility in *The Buried Giant*, where it seems no one is innocent of the wars and atrocities that ravaged the landscape. I will focus below on both Axl (an individual) and the monastery (a collective). Axl, we learn, is renowned among the Saxon community for his role as the broker of the peace-treaty named 'The Law of the Innocents', which is described as 'bring[ing] men closer to God' (*BG* 233). The treaty was intended to protect women, children, and the elderly living in the Saxon villages. Wistan remembers Axl from that time as the 'gentle Briton' whom he 'adored from afar' as a young boy, and who moved through his Saxon village 'like a wise prince' inspiring the villagers to 'dream' of the possibility of protecting the innocent from war (319-20). Arthur's eventual betrayal of Axl and the peace treaty, by slaughtering the innocents while they were unprotected in their villages made Axl out to be 'a liar and a butcher' and placed him at odds with Arthur and Gawain.

The event of the mass slaughter of the innocents represents one of the novel's titular buried giants, involving the concept of multidirectional memory whereby the reader experiences events recounted from the viewpoints of both the Britons and Saxons. Axl recognises that he is implicated in the genocide, even though he did not participate directly in the atrocity. With the memory loss caused by the mist, Axl, formerly known as 'Axelum or Axelus' amongst Arthur's inner circle, cannot remember the betrayal and the slaughter (*BG* 233). Instead, we have Wistan and Gawain functioning as alternative witnesses to these horrific events.²² Wistan's childhood memory of Axl is revealed through his observations of and questions to Axl over the course of the novel, whilst Gawain's memory of Axl is conveyed through the first-person narrative voice in his Reveries, which punctuate the text. Both of these voices demonstrate Ricoeur's concept of the human ability to narrate as well as to be accountable for one's actions. By allowing key characters to bear witness to Axl's past, Ishiguro's writing suggests that it is possible to find 'a different way of narrating' loss when the pain of loss can be a hindrance to remembering.²³ The complex nature of his past relationship with the Britons and Saxons taints Axl's legacy as a broker of peace. Having been betrayed by Arthur during his time as the Saxons' Knight of Peace, Axl will experience another betrayal, this time by Beatrice, leading to his fateful decision not to allow Beatrice the chance to visit their son's grave soon after his death, further complicating the way readers judge his past actions.

In Chapter Six of *The Buried Giant*, it quickly becomes evident that the monastery and its community harbour many secrets that are tied to a conspiracy of silence concerning past atrocities. Despite being able to seek temporary refuge and rest in the monastery, the motley crew of Axl, Beatrice, Wistan, and Edwin are not safe within its walls. It soon becomes noticeable that there is activity taking place to which the group are not privy. Axl recalls Wistan's keen observations of the monastery's architectural history, noting features that betray its origins as a Saxon hillfort, and one that likely saw the mass slaughter of Saxons by an invading army. In addition to the grounds bearing witness of mass bloodshed, Edwin also reports his discovery of a large iron cage and mask that Wistan surmises has been used by the monks as an instrument of penance through the mutilation of

their bodies by wild birds – a self-inflicted penalty to atone for ‘crimes once committed in this country and long unpunished’, and a further indication of hidden atrocities (*BG* 165). Father Jonus, a senior monk who is sought by Beatrice, bears traces of such mutilations on his face when the group are taken to see him in his living quarters. The group are subsequently hunted down by soldiers called in by the abbot, with orders to kill both Wistan and Edwin. While soldiers pursue Wistan up the tower, Axl, Beatrice, and Edwin are tricked into going down an underground passageway that leads to a confrontation with ‘the beast’, a creature used by the monks to dispose of ‘those they wish dead’ (179). Religious establishments are not safe havens in *The Buried Giant*. The initial sense of refuge for the travellers quickly gives way to betrayal and mortal danger; the narrative even reveals the grounds of a religious establishment to be a site of war atrocities and unpunished crimes. The actions of the monks, both in their pursuit of atonement through the self-imposed mutilation of their bodies by wild birds, and in the practice of the brutal erasure of lives they wish to forget, are indicative of the complexities of national memory in relation to war crimes. The attempts at making reparations for past crimes acknowledge the sense of collective responsibility shared by those who, in Rothberg’s terms, are implicated by their proximity to the event. But such attempts also evidence the levels of guilt experienced by those who seek atonement. As demonstrated by the monks’ controversial (and criminal) actions, the collective pursuit of expiation frequently obscures the line between justice and forgetting.

Forgetting

The Buried Giant marks a tonal shift in how the theme of forgetting is approached and contrasts sharply with how it is handled in Ishiguro’s earlier novels. The novels prior to *The Buried Giant* demonstrate some evidence of a profound forgetting leading, in many cases, to a sense of possible catharsis for the characters. Here, forgetting is used as a form of weaponry to incapacitate the Saxons and to enforce an artificial peace between old enemies. There is, however, another dimension to forgetting to which the novel draws attention, and that is its complex relationship with

memory. As we have seen, Ricoeur argues that being able to remember means that a person is empowered to narrate and give an account of or impute their own actions. Equally, forgetting allows for old feuds to be put aside to allow for a period of healing, as exemplified in the case of Axl and Beatrice. On a national level, it allows for a break in a cycle of violence and retribution between warring factions. As we have seen, such a peace is often tenuous and fragile and can be broken by the return of an unresolved past.

In his book *In Praise of Forgetting*, David Rieff argues that on occasions when collective memory causes all communities to feel ‘the pain of their historical wounds’, ‘it is not the duty to remember but a duty to forget’ that should be the focus.²⁴ Rieff discusses the cycle of oppression, citing the Rwandan genocide as an example of how quickly the role of oppressor ‘can flip and how easily yesterday’s victimizers become today’s victims’.²⁵ Rieff, in a similar vein to Ishiguro, suggests that it might not be good to keep holding on to painful memories if doing so holds the subject captive to the past. Elsewhere, I have suggested that the concept of forgetting is utilised in *The Buried Giant* as ‘a challenge to the sacralisation of memory’, representing Ishiguro’s critique of established pathways of amnesty and remembrance.²⁶ The novel engages directly with the question of forgetting (or erasure) as a fundamental element of peace. When Axl relates to the boatman that early spring morning and how ‘the last of the darkness’ had left him and the old wounds from his past with Beatrice had healed, we are aware that this is only possible because of the enforced forgetting provided by the mist (BG 341). What is also being addressed here is the nature of repressed memories and old resentments, and the idea that in this case some measure of forgetting is needed in order for peace to return.

The mysterious island, with the boatman as the gatekeeper, is a place of solitude as well as a place of forgetting. Alluded to from Chapter Two onwards, the boatman and the island appear to be some kind of final destination, a euphemism for death via an undisguised allusion to the Greek mythological figure of Charon, who ferries the dead over the Styx and Acheron rivers. The island is said to be ‘full of gentle woods and streams’, yet retains some ‘strange qualities’ where, for those

who dwell there, it is as if they walk the island 'alone' with their neighbours being 'unseen and unheard' (BG 334). In order to be on the island, one must accept being alone indefinitely. Like Kathy and Tommy in *Never Let Me Go*, Beatrice and Axl seek a rumoured exception, whereby, if they were able to prove their genuine and deep love for one another, they would be permitted to live on the island as a couple and not be forever separated. In his First Reverie, Gawain claims to look forward to 'greet[ing] the boatman' when his time comes and entering his boat to be taken to the island (BG 233). The island represents the only place, once the mist is fully lifted, to which one could travel in order to forget. The symbols of the boatman and the island represent some of the dilemmas concerning memory and forgetting: if Beatrice and Axl wish for the mist to be lifted and for memories to return, they must be prepared for the return of painful memories. If they choose not to have their memories return, they will not be able to answer the boatman's questions in their attempt to remain unseparated. In the moment of his final farewell to Beatrice, the reader is left to wonder if Axl has in fact chosen to hold on to the happier memories of their relationship – a distortion of memory facilitated by the mist – rather than to live on the island either separated from Beatrice or having to face the complete return of painful memories. There are suggestions that Beatrice has also begun to remember some of the most painful moments of their marriage, but she seems to be more at peace with the past and ready to move on to the island than Axl is. Perhaps the guilt of denying Beatrice's wish to see their son's grave continues to weigh heavily on him, even after all this time, as does the realisation that his real motives for doing so continue to perpetuate cycles of 'vengeance' (BG 340). Beatrice and Axl seem to be going their separate ways in terms of how they choose to deal with their returning memories and their immediate futures.

The question of the importance of forgetting in how we deal with painful or traumatic memories is examined at both individual and collective levels in *The Buried Giant*. At an individual level, forgetting represents a paradox, according to Ricoeur. Citing Augustine's *Confessions*, Ricoeur describes forgetting's ability to destroy memory, whilst also providing moments of recognition when the forgotten object is 'rediscovered' later on.²⁷ When Axl and Beatrice visit the Saxon village in the

neighbouring country in Chapter Three, Axl experiences a ‘startle[d]’ moment of recognition in identifying Wistan’s bearing as suited to combat, suggesting some prior knowledge that he has forgotten (BG 57). This indicates that perhaps that item of knowledge was never truly forgotten in the first place, but rather ‘misaid somewhere’, especially if the remembering subject is able to recognise it (49). On the night of their visit to the Saxon village, the Britons Ivor and Axl discuss the ‘strange forgetfulness’ that pervades the village, soon after the couple were accosted by a hostile group of villagers and had to be rescued by Ivor (64). The mist of forgetfulness appears not only to have robbed the villagers of their memories, but also of some element of their true selves as well. The village, according to Beatrice who has visited before, is ‘eerily still’ (54). The strange atmosphere acts as a metaphor for the costs of an enforced forgetting on a collective or national scale, namely the threat to selfhood and identity, creating an atmosphere of fear and suspicion and resulting in the loss of humanity. The suggestion here is that whilst forgetting is a key component of peace, enforcing it at a collective level is too dangerous and destructive. Forgetting needs to occur in ways that are not regulated by the state or by an autocrat, but in ways that are mediated by the passage of time and a keen awareness of the full implications and responsibilities that are entailed among the groups that are both directly and indirectly linked to traumatic memories. Through a critical enquiry into the ways in which we account for our decisions, our failures in understanding, and the complexities of forgetting, *The Buried Giant* represents Ishiguro’s most direct and sustained engagement thus far with the theme of collective and national memory.

¹ Michael Scott Moore and Michael Sontheimer “‘I Remain Fascinated by Memory’”: Spiegel Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro’, *Spiegel Online International*, 5 October 2005: www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel-interview-with-kazuo-ishiguro-i-remain-fascinated-by-memory-a-378173.html.

² Yugin Teo, *Kazuo Ishiguro and Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.112.

³ Peter Kemp, ‘Enigma Variation’ (review of *Never Let Me Go*), *Sunday Times*, 20 February 2005.

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- ⁴ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.190.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.7-8.
- ⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p.252.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.69.
- ⁸ Teo, *Kazuo Ishiguro and Memory*, p.151.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.156.
- ¹⁰ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, p.105.
- ¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.210.
- ¹² Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p.190.
- ¹³ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p.272.
- ¹⁴ Alan Lupack, review of *The Buried Giant*, *Arthuriana* 25:3 (2015): 118-20.
- ¹⁵ Deimantas Valančiūnas, 'Forgetting or Making to Forget: Memory, Trauma and Identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*', in Regina Rudaitytė, ed., *History, Memory and Nostalgia in Literature and Culture* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2018), p.222.
- ¹⁶ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p.79.
- ¹⁷ Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, 29:1 (2008): 103-28 (106-7).
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), p.212, n.48.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p.21.
- ²² See Yugin Teo, 'Monuments, Unreal Spaces and National Forgetting: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* and the Abyss of Memory', *Textual Practice* (published online 18 May 2022).
- ²³ Teo, *Kazuo Ishiguro and Memory*, p.95.
- ²⁴ David Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p.121.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Teo, 'Monuments, Unreal Spaces and National Forgetting'.
- ²⁷ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, p.119.