Research Article

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National Identities, Personal Crises: Amnesia in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*

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Abstract: This article considers how Ishiguro's 2015 novel about mass forgetting in post-Arthurian Britain adds to debates about what it means to be a human living within a society. There are four areas of enquiry linked by their emphasis on the interdependence of remembering and forgetting: ideas of memory in nationhood; the depiction of the British landscape; the cognitive process of recognition; and the emotional aspects of remembering. Interdisciplinary in scope, this article uses evidence from psychological studies of memory alongside detailed close readings of the text, allowing a more precise analysis of the role of the narrator and the effect of Ishiguro's text on the reader. By keeping his previous corpus in view throughout, it evaluates Ishiguro's continued use of memory and nationality as themes, while demonstrating the new departures offered by the conjunction of an ancient setting and a contemporary reading audience. One of the first sustained critical efforts on *The Buried Giant*, this article puts the novel firmly on the agenda of literary, cultural and memory studies respectively.

Keywords: memory studies, narrative, Kazuo Ishiguro

Memory is one of Japanese-born British novelist, Kazuo Ishiguro's great themes. Indeed, Yugin Teo claims that "The work of memory is an aspect of his writing that makes him unique among his contemporaries" (151). In 2015, Ishiguro released his long-awaited seventh novel—his first in a decade. Through the depiction of a nationwide condition of forgetting, *The Buried Giant* engages ideas of nationhood, individual and collective identity, and the problem(s) of memory.[1] In a 2005 interview with *Spiegel*, after the publication of *Never Let Me Go*, a dystopian novel about clones reared to donate their organs to ailing humans, Ishiguro admitted that:

> I remain fascinated by memory. What I would like to tackle next is how a whole society or nation remembers or forgets. When is it healthy to remember, and when is it healthy to forget? ... it's such a big subject. I think my books have concentrated on countries going through big social changes on the one hand, or individual memories on the other hand, but I've never been able to put these two things together. It is quite a challenge. (Moore)

TBG is the result of "put[ting] these two things together," Ishiguro's first work which tackles the conjunction of society and the individual and considers them as equally important. The genesis of the novel is further seen in an interview from 2009, where Ishiguro states he "wanted to write a novel about how people—not just individuals—but communities and countries remember and forget their own history. There are perhaps times when a nation *should* forget and when you *can* cover things up and leave things unresolved because it would stir things up" (Matthews 118, original emphasis). Certainly, this rings true of *TBG* where the (figurative) exhumation of the once-buried giant of memory is set to leave Britain a war-torn country

1 *The Buried Giant* is hereafter referred to as *TBG* for ease.

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in the "coming conquest," and render communities destroyed, as people "turn on neighbours loved since childhood" (323). Ishiguro gave these questions greater resonance in his 2017 Nobel acceptance speech: reflecting on a 1999 visit to the weathered remains of Auschwitz-Birkenau, he again asks "What should we choose to remember? When is it better to forget and move on?" (Ishiguro, "Twentieth Century" 10). While *TBG* may be set in the alternative world of ancient Britain, its central problems probe the political realities of the present and the recent past.

In skeletal outline, *TBG* sees an elderly couple of Britons, Axl and Beatrice, set out across the post-Roman post-Arthurian landscape to find their son who, for reasons unknown, no longer lives with them. No-one can fully remember either their individual past or their collective past. As they journey, Axl and Beatrice meet Edwin, a young Saxon boy of unusual experience and abilities, a Saxon warrior called Wistan and a significantly aged version of Sir Gawain. The reader pieces the past together as the novel progresses, coming to understand that—following years of intense war and bloodshed between Britons and Saxons—negotiating a truce failed, and the way in which peace was actually brought about was through Merlin's magic: the breath of a she-dragon, Querig, causes forgetting across the land. The novel hinges on whether or not memory will be restored to the nation, as doing so will have overwhelmingly negative consequences, as well as positive ones.

While critics may not necessarily have appreciated Ishiguro's novel, they have been keen to assert how "the book can be applied to our own times" (Lezard), in particular, the poignancy of "reconciliation" for which "the anguish of remembering is vital" (Akbar). Indeed, Akbar claims "this is as applicable to Ishiguro's Old England as it is to postwar Europe, or today's war-ravaged regions." For all its remove from the present, readers see parallels in national behaviour. Ishiguro's interview responses demonstrate that he anticipated difficulty in marrying individual and national memories, but what are the "challenges" involved in depicting mass amnesia and how does his novel acknowledge them?

Firstly, for a society or nation to understand itself as such requires a knowledge of a shared past—nations need memories in order to maintain their identities as much as individuals do. To consider how Ishiguro exploits "such a big subject" (Moore), I split the discussion into four sections. The first considers the nature of remembering and forgetting alongside theories of nationhood. Secondly, I consider the specific import of the British setting and compare *TBG* with Ishiguro's 1987 novel, *The Remains of the Day*.[2] Following the discussion of how Ishiguro recruits the reader with his remembered Britain, I turn to the cognitive process of recognition in the novel, both as encouraged within the reader and depicted of the characters.[3] Ishiguro's use of recognition to have the reader remember something historically removed and mythological is of particular concern. Finally, I detail the role of emotion and empathy, particularly as they affect the new dawn of remembering with which the novel ends. These sections allow me then to question whether such amnesia as *TBG* presents is ethical.

Fragmented Memories and Nationhood

As Teo writes, "Ishiguro prefers to work with the disjointed elements of memory, allowing for a more fragmented view of past events" which is more "realistic from the point of view of … human perception and experience" (34). The incompleteness of memory is a human trait: Ishiguro noticeably has Stevens recall as distasteful a moment when a butler had been "displayed as a kind of performing monkey … it had become an established sport … [to] put to him random questions … rather as one might to a Memory Man at the music hall" (*RotD* 35). Remembering as "sport" or performance, in the manner of the professional mnemonist, interests neither Stevens nor Ishiguro, as it reveals nothing more than a string of factual answers. The fluidity of memory in *TBG* is more representative of human memory and raises interesting questions around identity.

Memories rarely come back wholesale: they can be prompted by reminders, sneak into view unbidden,

2 This is hereafter referred to in the text as *RotD*.

3 In my use of psychology to criticise Ishiguro's writing, I follow the work of Wojciech Drąg, whose *Revisiting Loss: Memory, Trauma and Nostalgia in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro* makes extensive use of psychological categories.

and are always a shadow of the former experience. Ishiguro's characters often experience being reminded of the past by current events: "As Parkhurst had been talking, a fragment of memory had come back to me from my student days," Ryder notes in *The Unconsoled* (305). Similarly, for Axl, "as he listened to Wistan and the old knight talk, a fragment of memory came back to him" (120). For other Ishiguro characters, though, this is involuntary memory, whereas both Axl and Beatrice display a sincere determination to recover their respective pasts. Indeed, Axl knows it is "not much, but it nevertheless brought him relief to have something to hold and examine" (120): remembering is a process of decoding the past, particularly if you have forgotten it. This moment is one more step along Axl's journey to remembering that he himself was one of Arthur's knights. While "fragment" is often used to talk about memory, it artificially suggests that a memory is a solid object. In this instance, Axl treasures this recollection for its thing-ness, being "something to hold and examine," when memory is otherwise fleeting and intangible in the novel, figured as a "mist."

It is also true that forgetting is rarely wholesale, and the forgetting depicted in *TBG* is not total; the characters are not in a fugue state where they have no concept of their own identity.[4] Critics have taken Ishiguro to task over this, with James Wood claiming that "Ishiguro is always breaking his own rules, and fudging limited but conveniently lucid recollections … which is it, a mist [of forgetfulness] or an intermittent rain?" This, though, misses the point of the novel: to demonstrate that remembering and forgetting are two halves of the same coin (even dementia sufferers can have moments of clarity). It is also worth emphasising that the novel's two main rememberers are elderly, and perhaps more susceptible to forgetting; they are certainly in a position to have lived through more of the past and now have the time to dwell on it.[5] Given the spare quality of the dialogue, a reader could reasonably take Beatrice's assertion that "Some days I remember [my son] clear enough … Then the next day it's as if a veil's fallen over his memory" (26), as rational and reasonable in an elderly woman with memory problems in our own society.[6]

The reader is introduced early to the population's condition of amnesia:

> You may wonder why Axl did not turn to his fellow villagers for assistance in recalling the past, but this was not as easy as you might suppose. For in this community the past was rarely discussed. I do not mean that it was taboo. I mean that it had somehow faded into a mist so 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. (7)

This passage talks about "this community," meaning Axl's own village, but as the novel makes clear, this amnesia is nationwide. While the novel focuses mainly on a condition of retrograde amnesia (the forgetting of past events), there is also evidence of anterograde amnesia (the inability to form new memories). Importantly, the past is not "taboo," which is perhaps a more usual state of affairs when national identity and memory come under scrutiny. As explained, though, the purpose of this amnesia is to quell civic unrest and cease awkward questioning, much as modern controls on national memory operate.

In his 1989 *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton outlined the importance of memory control to any incoming government, as well as the role of forgetting in this process. The current power may seek to "break definitively with an older social order" and "The more total the aspirations of the new regime, the more imperiously will it seek to introduce an era of forced forgetting" (12). "Forced forgetting" here, though, is to enable the takeover of new dictatorship: what is interesting about *TBG*'s era of forced forgetting is

4 This rare psychiatric disorder is now known as dissociative fugue, a particular form of dissociative amnesia. "Fugue" is taken from the Latin for "to flee," since people with dissociative fugue tend to leave their current lives for something and somewhere completely different, with no awareness of a change (until they come out of the fugue state).

5 Tammy Ho Lai-Ming also makes the point that "Perhaps, to younger people, memories are less precious because they have time to create more. For Axl and Beatrice, however, they need to remember, for there is not so much time left for them given their advanced age" and thus explains Axl and Beatrice's "urgency to locate their lost son and their memories."

6 Ishiguro's dialogue in *TBG* has come under critical fire as "uniformly archaic, leaden almost" (Lezard); "dialogue … more like Monty Python than William Golding" (Wood). While Axl's endless answer of "Princess" to Beatrice may become wearing, this too is a product of the pared-down vocabulary of the amnesiac. The narrative voice does not suffer from specific criticism, perhaps because readers are used to Ishiguro's narrators, "whose deadpan minimalism is closer to silence than speech" (Nunokawa 303; here Nunokawa refers to Kathy H, narrator of *Never Let Me Go*).

that because the reader's focus is kept on a benign, elderly couple (and there is no outright or obvious oppression), this amnesia can seem somewhat detached from political power, not least because it is set so far in the past. This Britain does not appear to have a distinct ruler: Arthur is dead, and while Wistan speaks of "my King" from his own Saxon country, he refers to Britain as "lands ruled by Britons, and in these parts by Lord Brennus" (119). The "organised oblivion" seen in *TBG* is not to unite the people under one leader, but to unite people with each other, Saxons and Britons in one society.[7]

Since *TBG* is a novel, it is worth pointing out that one of the most prominent theories of nationhood sees nations themselves as creative outputs:

> I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community … It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. … Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (Anderson 5-6)

Though nations may pride themselves on having definite qualities, Anderson characterises them as more akin to artworks, or memories. Since nations are consciously produced, there must be a certain social agreement for their formation to be secured. Nations are works of the imagination. Importantly, Anderson highlights the fact that this creation of community is not of interest for its "falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which [it is] imagined": what is telling in nation-creation, as in memory-creation, is the how and the why behind these cognitive efforts and their socio-cultural effects.

While the next section looks at how Ishiguro imagines Britain, and figures the reader's image of Britain, here I am interested in Anderson's claim that "in the minds of each [citizen] lives the image of their communion." Apply this template to Ishiguro's pre-Norman Britain, and all *TBG*'s characters do have is a vague "image" of "communion" with no real understanding. The nation in *TBG* is an imaginary construct precisely because it has been falsely united through amnesia.

National culture is a memory system in itself, and nationalism, with its historical basis constantly being reaffirmed, has a clear investment in long-term memory. Ernest Renan makes the link between nationhood and memory explicit—"forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation" (11). Nation creation relies upon the convenient dropping of those truths which do not aid (or actively hinder) the consolidation of national feeling, or the nation itself. This is precisely what the dragon Querig is designed to do: provide a tabula rasa through amnesia so that the past cannot ruin the present and future.

Renan insists a nation is a "soul or spiritual principle" based on two things: "One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of heritage that one has received in an undivided form" (19). Renan gives two time frames for nationhood to work: the past and the present. It is only in their combination that a successful nation continues. Halbwachs's conclusion in *On Collective Memory* similarly details social beliefs as "collective traditions or recollections, but they are also ideas or conventions that result from a knowledge of the present" (188). Key to all of this is "a rich legacy of memories"—a shared cache on which to draw. Since a nation is a lived reality rather than a discrete historical event, though, it requires a stronghold in the present. The amnesiac isle of *TBG*'s Britain, by contrast, leaves its citizens unmoored in a perpetual present with little sense of their individual or shared identity.

Rather than being anachronistic by using theories forged on the modern nation-state, I think that Ishiguro's novel invites debates on nationhood. Is it possible to have a viable nation without a memory? Halbawchs stresses the social dimensions of memory, that "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (38). While the latter will be seen in the recognition section, this quotation makes clear the importance of memory to a functioning society. The mass amnesia in *TBG* is intended to unite society but fails in this precisely because it lacks memory. Without the ability to form new memories properly, people are overly suspicious

7 "Organised oblivion" is Connerton's phrase (14) but again he is thinking in terms of "the mental enslavement of the subjects of a totalitarian regime [which] begins when their memories are taken away" (14).

of newcomers (64). Even the Briton/Saxon divide still exists to a degree since (after Edwin is shunned by the villagers) Wistan notes "When the elders asked me to take the boy to a distant village, they meant no doubt a *Saxon* village" (89, original emphasis).

Moreover, citizens feel no particular links to each other to the point that Axl claims he is from "the neighbouring country" rather than neighbouring village, or simply "a day's walk away" (78). Earlier, Axl is sympathetic to a village elder because "it's the same in our own country" where they've "witnessed many incidents of such forgetfulness among our own neighbours" (64). Axl can align his experiences with those of others, but not see their identities within a shared framework; he cannot imagine a community beyond the local because he cannot remember what they have in common. While remembering a brutal past did not endear people to one another, neither—Ishiguro shows—does forgetting it.

Britain Remembered

Above, I described Axl and Beatrice as "a pair of Britons" rather than "a British pair," to mark the distance between modern concepts of Britain (and particularly the cultural freighting of "Great" Britain) and the historical period in which Ishiguro sets his novel. *TBG* sees Ishiguro again engaging with notions of British identity and particularly the ways in which national pride is tied to the landscape. Other Ishiguro novels deal with Englishmen in terms of the country house (*RotD*) or the boarding school system (*The Unconsoled*, *When We Were Orphans*) but here the land itself takes precedence.

Much has been made of Ishiguro as a writer of world literature, and he himself has struggled with the fact of having to "set a novel somewhere" (Matthews 118), but unlike *The Unconsoled*, with its pan-European, resolutely unspecified location, *TBG* is definitively set in Britain, albeit one so ancient as to be amorphous to the modern reader. By setting his novel just after King Arthur's reign (the time perhaps richest in British mythology and folklore), Ishiguro literalises his famous statement from an interview, that England "is like a mythical place" (Adams). With Sir Gawain as one of *TBG*'s central characters, and Axl later revealed as a former Arthurian knight, Ishiguro aligns his text with both a rich literary tradition and a cultural imaginary that has been continually rehearsed in books, films and television series. In another interview from the same year (2005), Ishiguro admitted "I never wanted to write books that are actually about England … I call it 'England,' but it's just an imaginary setting" (Moore). Given the date of the interview, one assumes he's talking about *Never Let Me Go*, set in "England, late 1990s." However, Ishiguro goes on to say, about *RotD*, his most England-centric of novels, that "that England too was a very made-up England. … Even English people have that myth of what England is like" (Moore). In *TBG*, then, Ishiguro tackles mythical notions of England head-on by setting it in a mythological version of Britain.

Ishiguro has always been more interested in perceptions of England than its actuality. Remembering writing *RotD*, Ishiguro recalls his decision that:

> My version of England would be a kind of mythical one, whose outlines, I believed, were already present in the imaginations of many people around the world, including those who had never visited the country. ("Twentieth Century" 8)

It is these same pre-conceived notions of England on which Ishiguro plays in *TBG*. He engages with what is "already present" in the imaginations of readers when "England" (or in this case, "Britain") is the setting. As the recognition section makes clear, Ishiguro enjoys recruiting the "outlines … already present" in order to highlight how the geographical and cultural templates imagined by readers sit at odds with Ishiguro's imaginary.

It is worth comparing *TBG* with *RoTD* since both involve a journey across the English landscape and through one's memories. While Axl, in the novel's marketing tag-line, says "There's a journey we must go on, and no more delay" (19), Stevens opens with "It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days" (3). Stevens, though, travels through the English countryside in 1956 and sees in Salisbury "delightful rows of old timber-fronted houses … some little stone footbridge" (28)—a familiar postcard vision of England. In this same passage, Stevens claims the "greatness" of the landscape:

> the English landscape at its finest … possesses a quality that the landscapes of other nations, however more superficially dramatic, inevitably fail to possess … the feeling that one is in the presence of greatness. We call this land of ours *Great* Britain … I would venture that the landscape of our country alone would justify the use of this lofty adjective. (28-29, original emphasis)

Stevens is overwhelmed by the vision of the landscape, but even his praise is in terms of propriety: Britain here is seen as dignified, not "superficially dramatic" and traversable through its "footbridge[s]." A butler who has witnessed the legacy of two world wars has a vested interest in preserving a positive sense of Britain, but this is a landscape made manageable, in possession of a "greatness" whose definition the reader may wish to challenge.[8]

For all the possible problems of Stevens's Salisbury, though, it is a recognisable vision of Britain, one not only seen live but also reproduced in books, films and adverts.[9] With a reading audience bred on such constructions of the British landscape, Ishiguro noticeably has his narrator in *TBG* assert "that navigation in open country was something much more difficult in those days, and not just because of the lack of reliable compasses and maps. We did not yet have the hedgerows that so pleasantly divide the countryside today into field, lane and meadow" (30). The narrator has to put this ancient version of the British landscape into context via the hedgerow-ridden one which can be imagined, forcing the construction of a kind of memory. The reader may wonder whether "so pleasantly" is sarcastic, since hedgerows evidence enclosure, and exactly the kind of land disputes *TBG* is concerned with avoiding.

The novel opens with a consideration of the landscape that sounds almost apologetic for the state of Britain:

> You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated. There were instead miles of desolate, uncultivated land; here and there rough-hewn paths over craggy hills or bleak moorland (3)

This is the opposite of Stevens's vista over Salisbury: it is England without the "celebration," the reputation for a having beauteous landscape. Ishiguro begins with a conditional perfect, "you would have," as if it is hypothetically possible to go back and physically "search" the landscape, a level of linguistic remove to match the historical one. Part of the reason that *TBG*'s Britain is difficult to comprehend is that the terrain is so indistinguishable and has few-to-none of the features modern readers would connect with an image of Britain. With its productive, ordered and fertile landscape stripped away, how is the reader to respond to this Britain? As if fearful of recrimination, the narrator assures "I have no wish to give the impression that this was all there was to the Britain of those days; that at a time when magnificent civilisations flourished elsewhere in the world, we were here not much beyond the Iron Age" (4). The problem, then, is not the state of Britain herself, but as compared with her competitors. The narrator begins as apologetic historian, admitting "there is no getting around" the paucity of ancient Britain's beauty and industry: this is not the countryside as you like it, but as it was. It is as if *TBG*'s narrator is aware of later cultural representations of Britain and fears offending current national pride.

The vision of England the narrator appears to anticipate in the reader is the "green and pleasant land" of Blake's "Jerusalem" (212). Much as this is a cultural veneer, it is also revealed as a literal covering, since—discussing the day that Arthur and Merlin created collective forgetfulness—Gawain notes that "it's long past and the bones lie sheltered beneath a pleasant green carpet. The young know nothing of them" (311). The use of Blake's adjectives cannot be accidental in Ishiguro's attempt to rewrite or overwrite Britain 's landscape. Beautiful a covering as may be seen above, it does not erase the composition of the soil which includes human remains from countless conflicts. As Wistan avers, those same forgotten horrors "await in the soil as white bones for men to uncover" (312).

This moment echoes an earlier episode when, escaping from a besieged monastery, Axl, Beatrice and

8 Stevens takes this to the point of claiming that his brother died in "a most un-British attack on civilian Boer settlements" (41), the negation protecting the nation's reputation.

9 As Teo points out, prior to this trip, Stevens has relied on Jane Symons's guidebooks *The Wonder of England* and thus has fed his imagination with the myth of England (28).

Edwin find themselves alongside Sir Gawain in an underground burial chamber. Surrounded by bones, Gawain remarks:

> I dare say, sir, our whole country is this way. A fine green valley. A pleasant copse in the springtime. Dig its soil, and not far beneath the daisies and buttercups come the dead. And I don't talk, sir, only of those who received Christian burial. Beneath our soil lie the remains of old slaughter. (186)

Once again, the illusion of the beautiful landscape is undone by the reality of what lies beneath. While the people may have forgotten their past, the land keeps memories in the form of physical remains.

The soil is pertinent to questions of nationhood, even for an island nation, since a nation is in part defined by its geographical boundaries. Returning briefly to *RotD*, it is telling that young Mr Cardinal dwells on this in the midst of the build-up to the Second World War:

> Treaties and boundaries and reparations and occupations. But Mother Nature just carries on in her own sweet way. … I wonder if it wouldn't have been better if the Almighty had created us all as—well—as sort of plants. You know, firmly embedded in the soil. Then none of this rot about wars and boundaries would have come up in the first place. (112)

It is the movement across land(s) that young Mr Cardinal sees as responsible for the competitive impulse humanity demonstrates. Mother Nature may carry on, but she is not "sweet" in *TBG*, not least because she still bears the marks of memory which indicate former clashes. Using the gardening idiom "come up" (which usually refers to flowers), Ishiguro ironises civilisation's progress since, horticulturally speaking, it has reared "wars and boundaries" rather than life.

Noticeably, a landmark traditionally held to denote calm and contemplation—a monastery—is seen in *TBG* for what it was previously by Wistan: a fiercely defended fortress. Only Wistan can "read" the landscape, as it was once a Saxon fort, designed to their tactics. For Wistan, "'these walls whisper to me of days gone by'" (153) and, rather than a monastery, he sees the possibility of a second hidden "watergate" allowing the orderly slaughter of the enemy, and Axl must concede that "'This is today a place of peace and prayer, yet you needn't gaze so deep to find blood and terror'" (154).[10] The monastery is a physical manifestation of the larger condition afflicting Britain and its people in *TBG*: the landscape only attests to the current condition of peace superficially, and its own memories of the bloody past are not buried "so deep."

Recognising Your Past

Wistan recognises in the monastery the features of a Saxon fort, just as *TBG*'s narrator plays on what the reader would recognise as being Britain (even if it is in order to supplant this with an alternative). While Teo has written at length on the philosophical notion of recognition (particularly that proposed by Ricoeur) in Ishiguro's writing, here I am interested in more cognitive understandings of recognition. Defined as a separate type of remembering within psychology, recognition requires a subject to remember that they have previously encountered this target. It is supposedly easier than recall (in which a subject must spontaneously remember something) since the target item (be it a person, an action or a thing) is present. George Mandler defines it as "the act of perceiving something as previously known … to know again" ("Recognising" 252).

Ishiguro's narrator uses the faculty of recognition in order to involve the reader in this long-ago Britain and to require the reader to amalgamate memory and imagination in order to visualise the scene. In describing Axl and Beatrice's abode—in a village dug into a hillside—the narrator references the known and familiar:

10 Wistan repeats this process of reading fatal designs when he shows Edwin the tower which operates as a "chimney" into which marauding Britons would be lured and then burned (209-13). The monastery offers a learning opportunity for the young Saxon warrior lapping up Wistan's vengeful teachings.

> Many of the 'doorways' within the warren were simple archways to mark the threshold to a chamber. … Axl and Beatrice's room, however, … had something we might recognise as an actual door; a large wooden frame criss-crossed with small branches, vines and thistles which someone going in and out would each time have to lift to one side (6)

What was previously typographically separate becomes incorporated into the narrative once the reader has applied her/his own memory: the description befits the object the reader would term a door. Ishiguro asks the reader to rediscover the door through this process of recognition-modulation and uses this faculty to suggest the "actual" amid the imagined.

Like the opening sentence, the narrator remains oddly positioned between the ancient past and an understanding of how modern readers would receive such an archaic landscape and society. The narrator opens by speaking to "you," an entity separate from her/himself, but on the second page notes that "I would say this couple lived an isolated life, but in those days few were 'isolated' in any sense we would understand" (4). Here, reader(s) and narrator join together as "we," assumed to share an "understanding" which not only depends upon a certain synchrony of existence but which is also subjective in nature: namely, what constitutes isolation. As Bain observes, "Ishiguro's novels always establish a peculiar mixture of intimacy and detachment between reader and narrator" (242), while Groes and Lewis foreground "the curious 'you' to whom [Ishiguro's] narrators refer" and how readers "extend the tragically limited consciousness of the narrators until we carry the burden of their trauma and the guilt these characters feel at their complicity in sustaining undesirable social systems" (4). Ishiguro's pronouns connect the reader to *TBG*'s narrator, even as what is said might more rationally herald dissociation.[11]

Psychologists note that as children gain language and experience, they develop schemata and scripts to help remember information. Indeed, that humans often rely on generic outlines of a thing (such as "shop") or an activity (such as "eating out") as a shorthand for perceiving and remembering experiences. Chapter 3 reuses the same recognition technique for "door," by opening "The Saxon village, viewed from a distance and a certain height, would have been something more familiar to you as a 'village' than Axl and Beatrice's warren" (51). Once again, the narrator encourages the reader to access her/his schematic understanding—necessarily influenced by their particular socio-cultural disposition—for "village." The narrator seeks to align the reader with the familiar, even within this long-gone version of Britain, but these are cultural recognitions, involving things or concepts, rather than personal ones. Even this simulated remembering, though, is tinged with forgetting: developing scripts "has the effect of deleting memories … [as] separate experiences are sucked up into a schematic image, becoming increasingly hard to recall as independent experiences" (Draaisma 26). By appealing to the reader's memories of concepts rather than specific experiences, Ishiguro keeps the reader's own remembering vague: s/he, too, is held in the contradiction of a shared memory which could equally be figured as cultural forgetting.

The temporal distance intended between narrator and reader is hard to define since half a paragraph later the narrator asserts that "you would have made out the thatched roofs and the fact that many were 'roundhouses' not so far removed from the kind in which some of you, or perhaps your parents, were brought up" (51). Even with the caveat of "some of you … perhaps," still the narrator anticipates shared experience of a kind unlikely to a 2015 reader. Is the reader supposed to receive this text as a historical document? With the focus on the British landscape, the narrator can only be talking to an alternative time, not a different population. The narrator appears to be outside of time, due to her/his understanding of several competing chronological versions of Britain.

A kind of recognition is encouraged when the narrator wants the reader to connect visually with the ancient landscape offered. Indeed, the recognition of the village is followed by "That would have been the picture Axl and Beatrice saw below them" (51): the reader is led to see through the character's eyes. This technique also tempts her/him to recognise, or at least simulate the cognitive process of recognition, the fantastical or impossible. When the dragon Querig is finally—and bathetically—seen, the reader visualises:

11 See Teo p. 67-68 for a discussion of how in having readers recognise autobiographical narratives produces empathy for the characters. For Teo, Ishiguro "takes the reader well beyond the usual processes of recognition and identification with a character" (67).

> Her skin, which should have appeared oiled and of a colour not unlike bronze, was instead a yellowing white, reminiscent of the underside of certain fish (310)

A complex phrase, Ishiguro here dances with the properties of simile, but at arm's length and complicated—even compromised—by drawing on the reader's memory. What is impressive is the amount of information the reader is given, yet without the specifications which would form a strong visual understanding of Querig. While oiled skin is not so unusual, "a colour not unlike bronze" distances itself from understanding through the indirect article and a double negative. "Not unlike bronze" is not the same as "like bronze": the reader is asked to approximate a colour only to eschew it for an alternative. Reusing his technique from the novel's first sentence, Ishiguro gives what "should have" been and is not. One mental image is constructed merely to be contradicted by an alternative memory, which itself only works through experience: the use of "reminiscent" assumes that the reader will have knowledge of the "underside of certain fish," an experience more likely for those living in primitive, hunter-gatherer Britain than today's manifestation.

In the first village visited, the narrator claims "you would have not have thought this longhouse so different from the sort of rustic canteen many of you will have experienced in one institution or another" (80). The first pronoun sounds singular, addressed to the individual reader, but this later transforms into "many of you" and demonstrably plural: this recognition is cultural and collective. The time frame of this proposed recognition is further confusing. "You would not have," the conditional perfect, makes this hypothetical and it sounds possible that the reader could wander into such a longhouse. Yet two sentences later, the narrator explains that "Its main difference from a modern facility would have been the dominating presence of hay" (80). The illusion of synchronicity is suddenly ruptured by the significant division between this reality and that of a "modern facility," which is compounded by difficulty when one remembers that the narrator has addressed this same reader as someone who "perhaps" grew up in a roundhouse.

The recognitions I have discussed so far involve the reader recognising ways of life which are (chronologically) foreign to her/him, but in terms of recognition as experienced by *TBG*'s characters, the most important transition takes place is in Axl, who goes from benign elderly husband to being recognised—and recognising himself—as a former knight of King Arthur. In Gawain's first reverie, he remembers a man appearing from the crowded battlefield, "I mean Master Axl, as I now know him" (230), the first confirmation of what the reader has suspected for some time. Axl himself, though, is still confused in Gawain's second reverie, where Gawain's narrative question "Does he guess why I look back so often?" is followed by Axl's question "'Sir Gawain, were we not comrades once?'" (286): Axl takes longer to guess than everyone else, indicative perhaps of his unwillingness to accept the darker aspects of his past.

It is Wistan who begins the process of Axl's recognition by encouraging Gawain to look at Axl and "say if you've ever seen him in days past." Responding to Beatrice's confusion, Wistan admits "Your husband's face has all day promised me an important remembrance" (117). Axl's face is "promising" in terms of recognition: Wistan knows he somehow knows this man, that he is familiar. Familiarity, the unspecifiable sensing of something known, defines the initial stage of recognition.[12] Mandler's famous example is of seeing your butcher on the bus—a man "you are sure that you have seen before," but cannot place because the context is so different (252). This "initial sense of knowing the man" might not provide all of the relevant information, but is still a type of recognition (Mandler 253). Given that Gawain's personal memories of Axl mainly take place on the battlefield, it is unsurprising that Wistan is somewhat insecure in his recognition of a warrior when he encounters a kindly old man, firmly defined by his status as Beatrice's husband rather than any professional category.

The battlefield is a locus of recognition for Axl since his personal recognitions are often linked to this.[13] Indeed, when he first sees Wistan, Axl finds himself making unexpected assumptions:

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12 Later, Mandler admits that "Familiarity is not a well-grounded theoretical concept—it is the best available common-language label for describing a psychological phenomenon" ("Familiarity" 391).

13 The "fragment of memory" I discussed above takes Axl "inside a tent, a large one of the sort an army will erect near a battlefield" (120), another phrase which seems to assume a cultural recognition from the reader, yet which is unlikely to be recognisable from experience for many of Ishiguro's readers. For a reader such as myself, an army tent by a battlefield is only recognisable by drawing either on books I have read or historical dramas I have watched.

> the actual thought that crossed Axl's mind was that this man had tied his hair to stop it falling across his vision *during combat*. This thought had come to Axl quite naturally, and only on reflection did it startle him, for it had carried with it an element of recognition. Moreover, when the stranger … allowed his hand to fall and rest on the sword handle, Axl had felt, almost tangibly, the peculiar mix of comfort, excitement and fear such a movement could bring. (57, original emphasis)

The novelty of Axl's understanding is conveyed to the reader in the italics. With "combat" a scenario which, until now, the reader has had no reason to connect with Axl, s/he shares his surprise at this "recognition." That the thought comes "quite naturally" suggests that while this is a non-conscious form of understanding, Axl feels immediate affinity with this man's actions, and codes them in terms of battle. It is important also that Axl chooses the present over the past, since instead of examining these thoughts he "shut them out of his mind and concentrated on the scene unfolding before him" (57). He cannot ignore these reactions, though, since his instinctive understanding repeats when, watching a group of soldiers, "Axl suddenly had the feeling that he understood, even recognised, what the grey-haired soldier had just gone through" and believes "he had once had an almost identical experience himself" (106). By adding "even recognised," Ishiguro elevates understanding to the distinct cognitive process of corroborating through memory. Once again, Axl "forced away the thought." At moments in the novel, Axl chooses the present over the past, usually when the past is uncomfortable.

When Edwin's singing "gained a dogged quality that reminded Axl of the way exhausted soldiers sing to keep marching" (302), it proves that Axl organises information according to like military experiences (and, awkwardly, that Edwin already reminds Axl of a soldier). As if searching for a simile, Axl reaches naturally for the corresponding experience: his memory is partly organised around his soldiering past. This is confirmed when, sentences later, "it struck Axl [Gawain] might be memorising details concerning the warrior's person" for the coming battle (302): Axl even recognises how a soldier's memory works to his strategic advantage, yet he does not make the leap to remembering his own Arthurian past. Axl's half-recognitions show that his soldiering past is still there in his implicit memory (which is unconscious), but he appears unable, or unwilling, to transfer it into his explicit memory.[14]

Axl's character, in particular, shows the interdependence between individual past and national memory, as they prove inextricably tied together. Walkowitz writes of *RotD* that "the novel takes seriously the idea that national, collective events can be transformed by local, individual actions" (218), but *TBG* shows that the opposite is true, too. Focusing on Stevens's polishing of the silver and his ideas of the "unimaginable largeness" (80) of his actions, Walkowitz claims the novel "invokes the principle of enlarged thinking" (230). Stevens, though, owns to his actions and even takes pride in the efficiency with which he carried them out, while Axl (conveniently?) forgets his own role in his nation's larger history.[15]

When Gawain tries to insist upon shared war stories, Axl asks "Remind me no more … Let me see instead the life I led with my dear wife" (298). "Instead" betrays Axl's understanding of these familial memories as an alternative to his military past: he can be either a soldier or a husband, and he chooses the latter. Axl's angst comes from his seeing personal memory and public memory as mutually exclusive, rather than mutually constitutive of his identity. *TBG* demonstrates greater reflexivity between the national and the individual than Ishiguro's previous novels, as the national impinges on Axl, paradoxically, through both his inability to remember and his unwillingness to remember.

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14 Implicit memory is unconscious, meaning it is able to show up in thoughts or behaviours but is unable to be declared. A common type is procedural memory or habit memory: one can perform a task without remembering learning how to do it. Implicit memory is often preserved even in amnesia, i.e. amnesiac patients can be taught skills without their remembering it (but showing improvement and skill in consequent tests).

15 Ryder, the protagonist of *The Unconsoled*, is another character caught in the interplay between individual and collective action. He too displays an "inability to 'remember' [which] is partly a difficulty in connecting the past to the present in terms of its significance, relevance and authority, yet it is also an active forgetting of those 'deeply embedded' terms that have culminated in the present tendency toward crisis" (Reitano 371).

Emotion and Empathy

When Gawain confronts Axl with the memory of his "cursing Arthur to his face," Axl claims "I recall nothing of it" (297); however, a page later Axl tries to silence the knight with "I don't care for any of these memories, Sir Gawain" (298). While "care for" here is synonymous with "like," it also has semantic overtones of "nurture": only those memories which are emotionally wanted are allowed into remembrance. Above, Axl privileges memories involving his "dear wife" and only wants that which he likes confirmed. This illustrates an important dynamic: emotion can modulate memories, and even promote certain ones above others.

Emotion may also remain where amnesia has erased much else. In a poignant moment, Beatrice says "'He's our son … So I can feel things about him even if I don't remember clearly'" (27). While the details of a memory can fade, the affective quality remains. This is in part due to the proximity of the amygdala (responsible for emotions and fear) to the hippocampus (crucial for the sedimenting of long-term memories). People might not be able to explain rationally why they instinctively feel afraid, angry or tender towards a particular situation or person but register that feeling nevertheless. Given that the central couple of Ishiguro's text are elderly, he could intend a parallel with real-life human ageing.

The affective residue around memories, though, can have a positive or negative valence. As memories return, Axl is perturbed by their attendant qualities, since when Beatrice moved "The emotion it provoked, even before he could hold it down, surprised and shocked him, for mingled with the overwhelming desire to go to her now and shelter her, were distinct shadows of anger and bitterness" (294). As seen above, it is Beatrice's body posture which reminds Axl of this particular "fragment," one which confuses him all the more for its double-edged quality. The oxymoron "distinct shadows" points to Axl's confusion, which continues since "as Beatrice stopped before the cairn and bowed her head to the stones as if in apology, he felt both memory and anger growing firmer, and a fear made him turn away from her" (294). Remembering has consequences, and while here they are personal, Axl's "anger and bitterness" is an index of what will likely happen on a national scale as the population grapple with how they feel about what they remember.

Ishiguro foregrounds the emotional effect(s) of memory in *TBG* as the motivation for future action. Axl and Beatrice each worry about remembering the negative aspects of their shared life, for fear it might change the way they feel about each other. Indeed, Axl extracts a "promise" from Beatrice "to keep what you feel for me this moment" even if former "dark deeds" are revealed (280). As they journey towards memory, the couple are warned by Father Jonas, who questions "Is it not better some things remain hidden from our minds?" (171). This is perhaps the central question of the novel, one which it leaves the reader to answer since while such hidings may enable a contented present, there remain "old wounds" (311) which though forgotten still exert emotional pressure.

While Axl may wish to shun his Arthurian past, both he and Beatrice seek memories of their life together. Without their memories, they have no real individuated identities: as James Wood writes, "To be deprived of our past is to be deprived of our future; without memory, we are automatons, not fully human. This may be Ishiguro's greatest theme." There are further narrative reasons for Axl and Beatrice to seek their memories, too: boatmen will only ferry a couple together if they have "an unusually strong bond of love" (43). While Ishiguro casually refers to "boatmen" in *TBG*, the literary legacy of this figure has pervasive overtones. In Greek mythology, Charon ferries the newly deceased across the rivers of Styx and Acheron, and thus into Hades (the Underworld). Another of Hades' rivers is Lethe, the drinking of whose waters causes the dead to forget their memories: by bringing boatmen into the narrative, Ishiguro leans heavily on literary traditions which tie forgetting and death together. Crucially, the boatman tests the "bond of love" by "ask[ing] them to put their most cherished memories before me" (47): memories are the evidence of love in this society. Apart from their having remained together, Axl and Beatrice have little to show for their love.

Forgetting is often figured as a form of repression, and Axl and Beatrice's forgetting of their son's fate until the very end of the novel aligns with this idea. Only when they are ready to accept the news does the reader discover the son was "taken by the plague swept the country" (339) and that the expedition on which they have set out was always, in fact, to the son's grave. Ishiguro previously used this technique of delayed remembering of death, and the consequential grief, at the end of *The Unconsoled*: Ryder—having spent the novel concerned over plans for his parents' arrival in the city, their safety and their comfort—finally learns

from Miss Stratmann that his parents had previously visited it and "were looked after very well indeed" (513). That this revelation causes Ryder to "weep" (516) indicates that his parents are dead, though this is never made explicit, and thus that the memories of their visit are all he has. This type of remembering is what Jan Assman terms communicative memory, which "includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications" (126) and thus oral cultures of memory. While Miss Stratmann does not "personally have many memories of their visit … I can remember people talking about it" (513). When Ryder doubts the truth of her testimony, Miss Stratman asserts "What I'm reporting is how everyone here remembers it."[16] This, though, requires a community which circulates and perpetuates memories, precisely what *TBG*'s Britain lacks. Amnesia leaves the characters of *TBG* not just without knowledge of their own identity, but without the ability to connect with others.

Edwin, *TBG*'s youngest character, has "a fierce future" (325) ahead of him, having been trained by vengeful Saxon Wistan, but having grown up in the condition of forgetfulness, Edwin struggles to reconcile with this new reality. The last mention of Edwin is as he leaves to join Wistan and, all too aware of the future, Beatrice and Axl "'both beg this of you. In the days to come, remember us. Remember us and this friendship when you were still a boy'" (328). This injunction to remember is an attempt to channel Edwin towards personal remembering borne of direct experience: the hinge on which fates may turn. Indeed, at this, "something else came back to Edwin: a promise made to the warrior; a duty to hate all Britons. But surely Wistan had not meant to include this gentle couple?" (328). Differing memories are already in conflict for Edwin, as he attempts to rationalise Wistan's teachings and render them compatible with his own experience. Currently, Edwin still has empathy—he refers to Axl and Beatrice as "the old couple" and "noticed how frail they seemed" (327); he asks himself "Did they have strength left to descend the mountainside?" (328)—but under Master Wistan's warrior thrall, and a keen learner, the reader is left to suspect that these impulses are the next thing to be forgotten.

Conclusion: Ethical Amnesia?

Yugin Teo notes that "Forgetting can be described as both a failure to remember and as a form of neglect. Both descriptions highlight a fault in memory, a fault that is a part of the vulnerable nature of humanity" (15). However, in *TBG*, forgetting is not a failure, but a condition sought precisely to conceal humanity's fallibility in terms of understanding, forgiveness and peacekeeping. Indeed, forgetfulness has proven to be the only way to avoid the failure of the (currently largely harmonious) nation. While it may have robbed people of the more meaningful aspects of their identities, "Saxons and Britons had productively forgotten their former enmities and grievances" (Wood). Returning to Ishiguro's question "when is it healthy to remember, and when is it healthy to forget?" from his interview with Spiegel, *TBG* tests the possibility of if not healthy forgetting then helpful forgetting: it is only through forgetting that peace has reigned.

The reader likely empathises with Axl and Beatrice who want the return of their personal memories and thus a fuller concept of their identity, but the consequences of the restoration of remembering will devastate both collective life and individual lives as war(s) once again break out:

> 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? We must hope God yet finds a way to preserve the bonds between our peoples, yet custom and suspicion have always divided us. Who knows what will come when quick-tongued men make ancient grievances rhyme with fresh desire for land and conquest? (323)

In the end, Axl comes to realise the larger effects and responsibilities of killing Querig. Collective memory here is not binding: the memories of shared experience that Axl and Beatrice long for on a personal level are figured as only damaging at the level of society.

If the ethical choice at first appears to be the amnesia which prevents bloodshed, this is frustrated by

16 Inevitably, not everyone's memories concur, and Ryder gets very distressed when an electrician remembers Ryder's mother but "'I can't personally remember your father"' (530).

the knowledge that this amnesia "also retards any healing process" (Akbar). The opposing positions on the nation's situation are represented by the novel's eventual combatants: vengeful Saxon, Wistan, and warrior-turned-peacemaker Briton, Sir Gawain. While Gawain fears "what might be awoken across this land," Wistan asks "How can old wounds heal while maggots linger so richly? Or peace hold for ever build on slaughter and a magician's trickery?" (311-12). The exchange is all the more fraught because the reader knows how readily Wistan welcomes the forthcoming war(s). Ishiguro's text resists closure because there is no good answer: "it is clearly right, if not desirable, that historical memory should be restored" (Wood). Such answers are rarely so clear-cut: recalling his early questioning, Ishiguro, in his Nobel speech, asks both "Are there times when forgetting is the only way to stop cycles of violence, or to stop a society disintegrating into chaos and war? On the other hand, can stable, free nations really be built on foundations of wilful amnesia and frustrated justice?" ("Twentieth Century" 11). Both options have dramatic, negative consequences.

The reader may part company with Gawain, then, when he begs "Leave this country to rest in forgetfulness" (311), because this phrase makes clear the condition of living death which amnesia causes. It may save some from actual death but robs all of an authentic lived experience (and even the dead do not have their memory honoured). The most ethically complex character is Axl, who clearly has a violent past which he resists. Even he, though, cannot be condemned for this since it comes to light—so briefly and vaguely that the reader may miss it—that Axl managed to broker a truce and the semblance of peace before Arthur broke it and eventually had to resort to Merlin's magic and Querig. Gawain catches Axl out by referencing "your great law," since Axl does remember how "The law was well held on both sides until that day" (298), and it is this which causes his break with Arthur (297). While the reader believes the narrative to have been leading up to the knowledge that Axl was complicit in the amnesia from which he suffers, he was only involved in the events prior.

Much as the mist which merges remembering and forgetting, Ishiguro uses *TBG* to blur the divides between such supposed binary opposites as individual/collective, love/hatred, war/peace, and implicitly shine light on their shared qualities. Ultimately, though, the novel offers little in the way of reconciling them. In writing about a life without individual or collective memory, Ishiguro enquires into and critiques modes of living which embrace only part(s) of their existence. Ishiguro looks set to write more on this, since "Recently I've been interested in the difference between personal memory and societal memory," and in particular how while a negative era is part of a larger picture for a nation, "an individual who happens to live through the Nazi era in Germany, that's his whole life" (Gaiman). Ishiguro has put issues of nationalism on the international agenda, using the end of his Nobel speech to admit we live in "a present in which Far Right ideologies and tribal nationalisms proliferate." Echoing *TBG*'s title, he goes on to note that racism "is once again on the rise … like a buried monster awakening" ("Twentieth Century" 14-15). The present has its problems, Ishiguro's speech and novel assert, and this is in part due to a lack of perceived community. The fragility of national identity is clear in *TBG*'s narrative of forgetting, where it is not so much one nation under God, indivisible,[17] as one(ish) nation under a she-dragon's amnesia-inducing breath.

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17 Indeed, God does not appear in *TBG* though is suspected of being "so deeply ashamed of us, of something we did, that he's wishing to forget" (83).

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