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”...JUST AN IMAGINARY CITY”: ASPECTS OF TIME AND PLACE SETTING IN KAZUO ISHIGURO’S EARLY FICTION, 1982–1989

Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels enjoyed considerable success in the 1980s. Each of his novels took a major British literary prize – *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) the Royal Society of Literature’s Winifred Holtby Prize; *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) the Whitbread Book of the Year Award; and *The Remains of the Day* (1989) the Booker Prize. In *Contemporary Literature*, Gregory Mason, echoing a number of other commentators, describes Ishiguro as “Britain’s leading young novelist”.¹ Although his most recent work – *The Unconsoled* (1995) and *When We Were Orphans* (2000) – has had a more mixed reception, Ishiguro, like his contemporaries Timothy Mo and Salman Rushdie, is a seeming “outsider” (he was born in Japan, but brought up and educated in England) who has done very well indeed in the British literary world.

Ishiguro’s first three novels, for all their differences in subject matter, form a unified created world. They all depict characters and situations weighed down by a grim and terrible past. Just as his novels are concerned with the recording of history, so, too, his characters live in the shadows of national and international historical events in which they have played some part or which have shaped their lives. All three of Ishiguro’s novels take the Second World War as a central point of reference. Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens all live in the aftermath of the War; the latter two are also implicated, however peripherally, in events of the 1920s and 1930s which were connected with the “watershed” of 1939–1945.² The very complex, meandering, but never simply digressive, time-schemes of Ishiguro’s novels are also a prominent common feature, and one closely connected with the elements of history and the past in the novels.

¹ Gregory Mason, *An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro*. *Contemporary Literature* (Fall 1989) 30.3: 335.

² Patrick Parrinder, *Manly Scowls*. *London Review of Books* 6 Feb. (1986): 16.

The narrators of all Ishiguro's novels are similar – elderly or middle-aged, obsessively going over their pasts, summoning up partially forgotten memories, and revealed finally, or in the course of their acts of recall, as highly unreliable witnesses to their own and others' actions. The narrators' styles are quite distinctive also and really much of a piece in their formality (although Stevens tellingly makes a number of grammatical errors). Large sections of each novel are narrated through dialogue – dialogue that seems quite markedly indirect and trivial, but which beneath its surface is never so. All the novels also involve discredited authority figures – Ogata-San, Ono, Lord Darlington, perhaps even Etsuko and Stevens themselves. The pasts of these figures are held up to scrutiny and involve questions of betrayal and loyalty.

But for all their similarities, the novels on the surface look different in one salient respect. They are set in radically different places – two predominantly in Japan, one in England. Time settings, too, appear at first glance somewhat divergent. *A Pale View of Hills* oscillates between the 1950s and (probably) the 1980s; *An Artist of the Floating World* is set in the late 1940s and in 1950, although with excursions back into the 1920s and the 1930s; *The Remains of the Day* is narrated in 1956, but the narrator recalls events in the 1920s and the 1930s too. However, it is remarkable how much the presentation of these time and place settings has in common. To note how this is so, is to have a sense of Ishiguro's ambitions in these early novels. Through a particular configuration of time and place setting, the created worlds of all three novels are both particular and generalized, something well illustrated by the fact that the "exotic" Japanese worlds of the first two novels share so much with the "domestic" English world of *The Remains of the Day*.

A Pale View of Hills is a long act of reminiscence by the narrator Etsuko. She is a Japanese woman who has left Japan and her Japanese husband to come to England to marry an Englishman. Middle-aged and widowed now, she recalls from a roughly contemporary present in England events in her life which took place in Nagasaki in the early 1950s. The events and the act of recall are deceptively simple. "I have a few memories", Etsuko says at the end of the novel.³ "I was thinking about someone I knew once. A woman I knew once", she declares at the beginning (ch. 1). And this seems to sum up the novel's action. Etsuko's half-English daughter Niki visits her mother. This prompts a series of memories centered round some figures in Etsuko's earlier life in Japan – a mysterious woman called Sachiko who, having fallen on hard times after the war, is torn between staying in Japan and leaving with a dubious American, ironically named Frank; her daughter Mariko who is emotionally disturbed after events she has witnessed during the bombing of Tokyo and who seems to detest her mother's American friend; and Ogata-San,

³ Kazuo Ishiguro: *A Pale View of Hills*. Harmondsworth, Penguin 1983, ch. 11. All references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Etsuko's father-in-law, who visits her and her husband at about the same time as Etsuko meets Sachiko and Mariko. But nothing is quite as simple as it seems, and in the course of the novel we come to distrust Etsuko's account of the past, even to wonder if Sachiko and Mariko ever existed as such, and if Etsuko may not be telling her own story through theirs. private

The novel has two principal place settings – Nagasaki in the early 1950s ("American soldiers were as numerous as ever – for there was fighting in Korea" (ch. 1)), and a small, unnamed English town in what seems a much later, roughly contemporary period. Place settings are both specific and rather generic. For example, the district in which the narrator and her husband live is described as follows:

My husband and I lived in an area to the east of the city, a short tram journey from the centre of town. A river ran near us, and I was once told that before the war a small village had grown up on the riverbank. But then the bomb had fallen and afterwards all that remained were charred ruins. Rebuilding had got underway and in time four concrete buildings had been erected, each containing forty or so separate apartments. Of the four, our block had been built last and it marked the point where the building programme had come to a halt; between us and the river lay an expanse of wasteground, several acres of dried mud and ditches...

The occupants of the apartment blocks were much like ourselves – young married couples, the husbands having found good employment with expanding firms... Each apartment was identical; the floors were tatami, the bathrooms and kitchens of a Western design... I remember an unmistakable air of transience there, as if we were all of us waiting for the day we could move to something better. (ch. 1)

The two descriptions of the Nakagawa district (ch. 2, 8) and even of the "Peace Park" in the city (ch. 8) share this quality of being at once localized and general. In the descriptions of Etsuko's home detail is sparing and many of the features could belong almost anywhere in Japan and perhaps elsewhere – "an river," "four concrete blocks", "an expanse of wasteground, several acres of dried mud and ditches", "Each apartment was identical." The English landscape which Etsuko and Niki move through is similarly general, and unlike Nagasaki the village is not even named.

When we arrived at the village I took Niki to the tea shop where I sometimes go. The village is small, just a few hotels and shops; the tea shop is on a street corner, upstairs above a bakery. That afternoon, Niki and I sat at a table next to the windows, and it was from there we watched the little girl playing in the park below. (ch. 3)

We had come to the end of the orchard. Niki stepped out on to a small winding lane and crossed to the other side, towards the wooden gates of a field. I followed her. The grass field was large and rose gradually as it spread away from us. At its crest, we could see two thin sycamore trees against the sky. (ch. 11)

The time settings of the novel are also both vague and precise. On the one hand, the novel's time-scheme not only foregrounds questions of time

and the relation of past and present, but also marks very clear temporal distinctions. There is the present in the English village and the past in Nagasaki. But, on the other hand, the text interweaves past and present through Etsuko's memories so that the borders become less clear and precise. Etsuko moves from the English present to the two overlapping aspects of her Japanese past (Sachiko, and Ogata-San's visit) and back to the present throughout the novel. But time references can be fairly precise. The war in Korea has started, and later "The newspapers were full of talk about the occupation coming to an end and in Tokyo politicians were busy in argument with each other" (ch. 7). However, there is a marked lack of specificity too. When is the novel's present? When did Mariko see the woman drowning her child - before or after the end of the war (ch. 5)? Etsuko's comments about time are also rather vague. "It was towards the beginning of summer - I was in my third or fourth month of pregnancy by then" (ch. 1). She cannot remember precisely how or when she first met Sachiko (ch. 1), and Ogata-San's visit occurs "[a]round that same time, in early summer" (ch. 2).

A large number of critical comments on *A Pale View of Hills* have pointed to its setting in post-war Nagasaki as crucial to a reading of the novel⁴. While this is certainly true, it is also worth pointing to the general and imprecise aspects of setting as well. The novel aims to achieve resonances beyond the setting in post-war Nagasaki and even in post-war Japan. Only one precise date is given in the novel, and that is by Shigeo Matsuda when he confronts Ogata-San with his past actions - "the sacking and imprisoning of five teachers at Nishizaka. April of 1938, if I'm not mistaken" (ch. 9). The precise dating makes the accusation stand out very clearly and brutally indicates the inescapability of the past, at least for Ogata-San and Etsuko. However, one should stress that the incident itself is left rather unspecific (what did old Ogata-San do, and why, precisely?), and generic.

The created world of Ishiguro's second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), bears similarities to that of both *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Remains of the Day*. The war and what led to it; history and its shaping power; memory and its movements and deceptions; shifting values, betrayal, and loyalty - these are all key components. The discredited authority figure, so important in the other novels, is central here, and indeed tells his own story. The novel has four sections, each dated (October 1948, April 1949, November 1949, June 1950), and is narrated by Masuji Ono, a painter of some standing (he claims) in pre-war and war-time Japan, now discredited and inactive under the new post-war dispensation. His younger daughter Noriko's marriage arrangements have broken down once already because of his political past. Now he is prompted by his older daughter Setsuko to take some precautions to avoid the same thing happening again. He begins to reflect tortuously on his past, on what led him to act as he did in the 1930s

⁴ See, for example: Edith Milton: *In a Japan like Limbo*. New York Times Book Review 9 May (1982): 12.

and 1940s, and on how he reached his present position as a lonely, discredited old man, haunting an empty bar in an increasingly derelict pleasure district. He goes over his past, his present, his betrayals, and his loyalties. In the end, he achieves some kind of insight into what he has done, and, although abandoned and isolated in the new time, is able in part to wish it well. Although his life is full of mistakes, follies and evasions, the conclusion may be judged more optimistic than that of Ishiguro's other novels.

As in *A Pale View of Hills*, place setting is at once specific and generic. Ono tells his story in and about an unnamed Japanese city. He gives names and details of districts and buildings, parks, people and houses, histories of its prominent citizens, but the effect is finally a general one. This could be any Japanese city, or perhaps, in truth, any city with a similar history of cataclysm and change, of mistaken purposes and disaster. This is noted by Kathryn Morton in the "New York Review of Books". "His unnamed city", she writes, "is generic, full of Japanese place names that give it the sound of authenticity".⁵ Ishiguro himself insists:

It's just an imaginary city, for various reasons. Once I set it in an actual city, then the obligation to actually check up would become boringly relevant, and there seemed to be no point. It was of no value to me if I could claim that it's authentically set in Tokyo or not. In fact, in many ways it would play into the hands of a certain kind of misreader, who wished the book to be simply some kind of realist text telling you what Tokyo was like after the war. By setting it in an unspecified venue, I could suggest that I'm offering this as a novel about people and their lives, and that this isn't some piece of documentary writing about a real city. And it just gave me a lot more freedom.⁶

Time references are very specific however, or at least many of them are. We have already noted the section headings which give the month and year of Ono's reflections. In addition, Ono constantly gives dates, most of them precise, but some much vaguer. "One evening not so long ago", he remembers seeing smoke from fires in the former pleasure district he haunts (27). However he recalls precisely that it was "two years ago last month" that he held a funeral ceremony for his son Kenji, killed in the war in Manchuria.⁵ "I believe it was in 1931", he tells us, when a tramline was laid to the suburb of Arakawa (61–62), but it was in "1933 or 1934" that Yamagata enlists his help to establish the patriotic bar called Migi-Hidari („right-left" in Japanese). Ono remembers precisely when he came to the city, "in 1913" (65), that he took the tram to Arakawa "[y]esterday" (85), and that he received an important prize and enjoyed a moment of great triumph "in the May of 1938" (202). But he is less precise elsewhere – he first met Matsuda "almost

⁵ Kathryn Morton: *After the War Was Lost*. New York Review of Book 6 June (1986): 19.

⁶ Mason: *Interview*, p. 340.

⁷ Kazuo Ishiguro: *An Artist of the Floating World*. London, Faber 1986, 57. All references are to this edition and appear in the text.

thirty years ago" (89); of his first encounter with Dr. Saito he says, "It must have been all of sixteen years ago now" (131); and the Tortoise has to tell him how long they have painted together (162). Ono's memory seems selective in its precision; certain crucial, dangerous and unhappy moments seem to produce a vagueness in time-setting. Questions are already raised about the reliability of his memory and his account.

The Remains of the Day is a much-feted novel. Critical consensus seems to be with the opinion of the reviewer in the "Times Literary Supplement": "It is a strikingly original book, and beautifully made", and only Gabriele Annan in the "The New York Review" is a really dissenting voice.⁸ In 1989, the novel was awarded the Booker Prize. The reader who is familiar with Ishiguro's fiction must be struck by how much *The Remains of the Day* has in common with his other novels. There are major differences, of course – in subject matter, in elements of humor (largely lacking in the earlier fiction), in some quite prominent genre mixture (although this is present, too, in *A Pale View of Hills*). But, surprisingly, the movement from an "exotic" Japanese to an English subject matter leaves much of the created world of Ishiguro's third novel unaltered. As Anthony Thwaite notes in the "London Review of Books": "This is the first Ishiguro novel to be set wholly in England. But the change is not as marked as one might suppose".⁹ Later he remarks of the novel's protagonist and his situation that "It [Stevens, in *The Remains of the Day*] is another version of Ono, the artist of *An Artist of the Floating World*, who misjudged his loyalties in pre-war Japan, and who finds that history will not forgive him".¹⁰ Salman Rushdie concludes his review of *The Remains of the Day* thus: "It seems that England and Japan may not be so very unlike one another, beneath their rather differently inscrutable surfaces".¹¹

The similarities among the three novels are obvious. The novel is narrated by Stevens who, like Etsuko and Ono, reflects from a complicated present on his past career, on his choices, loyalties, and betrayals (betrayals which still continue in the present). Steven starts his narration in July 1956, and the novel follows (with one break) some six days in which he travels westwards to visit a former colleague, Miss Kenton, to whom he still clearly feels an attachment. Stevens is a butler, formerly to Lord Darlington, and now to the American gentleman Mr. Farraday who has bought and taken over Darlington Hall, and Stevens with it. It is his new employer who suggests a brief holiday to Stevens and who supplies a vintage Ford for him to take it in. For the first time in thirty years, it appears, Stevens leaves the immediate environs of the Hall.

⁸ Galen Strawson: *Tragically Disciplined and Dignified*. Times Literary Supplement 19–25 May (1989): 535; Gabriele Annan: *On the High Wire*. The New York Review 7 Dec. (1989): 4.

⁹ Anthony Thwaite: *In Service*. London Review of Books 18 May (1989): 17.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹¹ Salman Rushdie: *What the Butler Didn't See*. Observer 21 May (1989): 53.

Despite what seems a radically different world (England not Japan), many features of setting are familiar from Ishiguro's other novels. Place is once again a curious mixture of the specific and the generic. Darlington Hall is named, but it is scarcely described in detail. It is a generic great country house, full of the rooms, artifacts, servants, social gatherings, stairs, and passage-ways implied by such a building. Stevens hardly describes it except as it relates to his work. This illuminates his character, but it also makes Darlington Hall quite generic. Similarly, although Stevens visits documented places in the course of his journey west – Salisbury, Weymouth, and other towns (actual or merely verisimilar?) in Dorset, Somerset, and Cornwall – again the effect is a general one. The stages of Stevens's journey could be anywhere in Southern England, and perhaps even beyond. Note, for example, his description of the Rose Garden Hotel in Little Compton.

The Rose Garden Hotel, while hardly luxurious, is certainly homely and comfortable, and one cannot begrudge the extra expense of accommodating oneself here. It is conveniently situated on one corner of the village square, a rather charming ivy-covered manor house capable of housing, I would suppose, thirty or so guests. This "dining hall" where I now sit, however, is a modern annexe built to adjoin the main building – a long, flat room characterized by rows of large windows on either side. On one side, the village square is visible; on the other, the rear garden, from which this establishment presumably takes its name. The garden, which seems well sheltered from the wind, has a number of tables arranged about it, and when the weather is fine, I imagine it is a very pleasant place to partake of meals or refreshments.¹²

There is just enough detail here to localize and make concrete, but too little to make it particular and idiosyncratic. Indeed, the main point Stevens wishes to make about the landscape he observes on the first day of his journey is that in its "very *lack* of obvious drama or spectacle" (28) it is quintessentially English.

What I saw was principally field upon field rolling off into the far distance. The land rose and fell gently, and the fields were bordered by hedges and trees. There were dots in some of the distant fields which I assumed to be sheep. To my right, almost on the horizon, I thought I could see the square tower of a church. (26)

Stevens's Southern England is as general as Etsuko's Nagasaki and Ono's unnamed Japanese city.

Like Etsuko and Ono too, Stevens is moving through a landscape which is familiar to him, and yet not. Not long after he has left the Hall, he finds he does not recognize the countryside, "and I knew I had gone beyond all previous boundaries" (24).

¹² Kazuo Ishiguro: *The Remains of the Day*. New York, Vintage/Random House 1989, p. 205. All references are to this edition and appear in the text.

The feeling swept over me that I had truly left Darlington Hall behind, and I must confess I did feel a slight sense of alarm – a sense aggravated by the feeling that I was perhaps not on the correct road at all, but speeding off in totally the wrong direction into a wilderness. It was only the feeling of a moment, but it caused me to slow down. And even when I had assured myself I was on the right road, I felt compelled to stop the car a moment to take stock, as it were. (24)

Etsuko too has clearly "passed beyond all previous boundaries" in her English village, but also in her life in a transformed Nagasaki. Ono also wanders through a city where the physical and moral landmarks of the past have vanished.

Aspects of time in *The Remains of the Day* are also similar to those in earlier novels. The title itself foregrounds time, as do chapter headings („Day One" and so on). The novel's prologue dates the text's present – July 1956 – and throughout, time references are quite specific. We know when Stevens's father and Miss Kenton first come to Darlington Hall (the spring of 1922) (50), when the first major international conference is held there (March 1923) (70), and when Miss Kenton leaves service (1936) (11). We know that Stevens gives thirty-five years' service to Lord Darlington, and we can work out the beginning and the end of that service (1918 and 1953) (119, 126). The novel's time-scheme too oscillates between present and past, between events in the 1950s and Stevens's memories of the 1920s and 1930s. Stevens himself explicitly reflects on time, and our understanding of it in our pasts and in our presents.

But what is the sense in forever speculating what might have happened had such and such a moment turned out differently? One could presumably drive oneself to distraction in this way. In any case, while it is all very well to talk of "turning points", one can surely only recognize such moments in retrospect. Naturally, when one looks back to such instances today, they may indeed take the appearance of being crucial, precious moments in one's life; but of course, at the time, this was not the impression one had. (179)

All this should be quite familiar, *mutatis mutandis*, from the earlier novels.

What do these configurations of time and place setting tell us about Ishiguro's aims in these three early novels? Two aspects are particularly striking. Setting is usually both localized and strangely generic in these novels. The first two are certainly set in Japan, and there is considerable specificity of detail about the Nagasaki of *A Pale View of Hills* and the unnamed city of *An Artist of the Floating World*. But these are also peculiarly generalized places; to some extent, they might be anywhere, as well as somewhere. Time setting, however, although there are vague aspects in its presentation, is altogether more precise and specific. When there are ambiguities, these usually reflect the narrators' evasions. But the historical-temporal framework is usually rather clear in all three novels. The reader knows, or can work out, most of the relevant dates in the texts. Thus, it

seems that Ishiguro is concerned to fix his texts in time, much more than in space. The implication is that the events he depicts, the poor choices, the dishonesties and the compromises, might take place anywhere, and are not safely cordoned off from the reader in a distant place. The specificity of time settings, however, suggests something rather different – that it is a particular set of choices and situations which the implied author wants us to consider, largely connected with the Second World War, its causes and its consequences. There is an interesting tension in this contrary pull, on the one hand towards generalization, on the other hand towards specificity, a tension that gives these novels a particular quality.

It is remarkable how frequently the word "delicacy" occurs in reviews of Ishiguro's fiction. The word seems to be connected with Japanese qualities critics perceive in his work. It is often compared to that of Japanese writers, and even seen as exemplifying Japanese aesthetic principles. Indeed, some reviews treat his novels as sources of information about Japan and the Japanese mind. This achieves quite absurd levels in "The Partisan Review" article on *The Remains of the Day* by Pico Iyer.¹³ Whatever else that novel is, it would surely never be seen as revealing a Japanese mentality if the author used a more "British" pseudonym. However, it must be acknowledged that Ishiguro's work does lend itself to such treatment. The first two novels are set in Japan, and, as Anthony Thwaite notes, the qualities which mark Ishiguro's writing – restraint, formality of diction, obliqueness – are all ones associated with Japanese literature.¹⁴

Ishiguro has expressed himself forcefully on the whole matter.

I feel I'm very much of the Western tradition. And I'm quite often amused when reviewers make a lot of my being Japanese and try to mention the two or three authors they've vaguely heard of, comparing me to Mishima or something. It seems highly inappropriate. I've grown up reading Western fiction: Dostoevsky, Chekov, Charlotte Brontë, Dickens.¹⁵

In the same interview with Gregory Mason, Ishiguro insists that the situations he depicts in his novels are of general application, that Japan is a metaphor for him, and that it is in a large measure a Japan concocted from vague memories and post-war films.¹⁶ Indeed, in a very illuminating article, Mason charts Ishiguro's echoes of *shomin-geki* Japanese domestic films of the 1950s.¹⁷

The Japanese, exotic subject matter of Ishiguro's first two novels is clearly a crucial component of both texts. They provide them with that

¹³ Pico Iyer: *Waiting upon History*. *Partisan Review* 3 (1991): 585–589.

¹⁴ Anthony Thwaite: *Ghosts in the Mirror*. *Observer* 14 Feb. (1982): 33.

¹⁵ Mason: *Interview*, p. 336.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 339, 340, 341, 342.

¹⁷ Gregory Mason: *Inspiring Images: The Influence of Japanese Cinema on the Writings of Kazuo Ishiguro*. *East-West Film Journal* 3.2 (June 1989): 39–52.

cosmopolitan aspect which is, in fact, so typical of the output of his British contemporaries.¹⁸ In addition, Ishiguro does use stereotypical aspects of Japan and the Japanese in his novels – suicide, a brutal history, indirectness, polite, over-formal discourse. All these could come up in a cultural lexicon as connotations of Japan in contemporary English. However, as Etsuko warns us at the beginning of *A Pale View of Hills*, it is dangerous to jump to conclusions based on such easy associations as suicide and the Japanese (10). We have noted, for example, the generic nature of Ishiguro's Japan (and of his England). The actions played out in it have quite general applications. It is also striking that a shift to a quite different setting and literary culture – the English country house and the P.G. Wodehouse novel – leaves so much of the created world of the Japanese novels intact. Ishiguro's "Japan" in any case always did have a lot in common with England. It, too, is a broken, defeated imperial country, haunted by the war and by an inescapable past, and tormented by an altered present. Only the notes of future resurgence might be seen as alien by many commentators.

¹⁸ For a discussion of this topic, see: David Malcolm: *That Impossible Thing: The British Novel 1978–1982*. Gdańsk, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego 2000, p. 143–151.