

Evasion and/or expiation? – Telling/reading stories in *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* by Kazuo Ishiguro

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Abstract

A belief in the therapeutic role of writing seems to be Kazuo Ishiguro's motivation for writing. Melancholy and grief permeate his fictions, all of which, as critics seem to agree, arise from the author's own separation from his Japanese origins. Departing in his early childhood his motherland, Ishiguro places the action of his first two novels (*A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*) in post-war Japan. The first person narratives of these two novels are intended to free the storytellers from distressing feelings begotten by psychological wounds caused by their war experiences. The narrators (Etsuko, in the former, and Ono, in the later text) are both writers and readers of their stories. Does the telling, writing and/or rereading of an incapacitating, but also discomfoting, past from hindsight have a recuperative and therapeutic value? The aim of this paper is to examine whether the unreliable narratives of Etsuko and Ono, through their mutual stratagems, lies, and omissions, effect a catharsis. Reading Ishiguro's two early novels through the lens of reader-response criticism, Paul Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics and Linda Hutcheon's postmodern theorization of nostalgia helps uncover to what extent his narrations propose the view of the writing/reading process as a therapeutic activity.

Keywords: Ishiguro, therapy, past, narration, war

Abstrakt

Jedną z przyczyn, dla których Ishiguro został pisarzem, jest prawdopodobnie wiara w terapeutyczną funkcję pisania. Jego proza przeniknięta jest melancholią i żalem, co, jak zgodnie twierdzą krytycy, jest skutkiem oderwania autora od jego japońskiej ojczyzny, którą opuścił we wczesnym dzieciństwie. Akcja dwóch pierwszych powieści Ishiguro, *Pejzażu w kolorze sepii* (*A Pale View of Hills*) i *Malarza świata uludy* (*An Artist of the Floating World*), osadzona jest w powojennej Japonii. Zamysłem tych opowiedzianych w pierwszej osobie historii jest uwolnienie narratorów od bolesnych uczuć, których źródłem są rany psychologiczne spowodowane przez wojenne doświadczenia. Narratorzy, Etsuko w pierwszej powieści i Ono w drugiej, są zarówno „pisarzami” jak i czytelnikami własnych historii. Czy opowiadanie/pisanie/ponowne odczytywanie obezwładniającej, ale także niepokojącej przeszłości z perspektywy czasu może mieć leczniczą i terapeutyczną wartość? Celem niniejszego artykułu jest próba zbadania, czy nierzetelne narracje Etsuko i Ono, poprzez podstępne zawilości, kłamstwa i niedopowiedzenia skutkują osiągnięciem katharsis. Czytanie dwóch wczesnych powieści Ishiguro z perspektywy teorii rezonansu czytelniczego (reader-response criticism), filozoficznej hermeneutyki Paula Ricoeura i postmodernistycznej teorii dotyczącej nostalgii Lindy Hutcheon pozwala zbadać, w jakim stopniu te narracje traktują proces pisania/czytania jako czynność terapeutyczną.

Słowa kluczowe: Ishiguro, terapia, przeszłość, narracja, wojna

In one of his interviews Kazuo Ishiguro, a contemporary British writer of Japanese ancestry, confesses: “I think a lot of [writers] do write out of something that is somewhere deep down and, in fact, it’s probably too late ever to resolve it. Writing is a kind of consolation or a therapy” (Shaffer and Wong 2008, 85). Ishiguro’s biography, his sudden and irreversible severance from the fatherland and the strong family ties at an early stage of his emotional development, undeniably, points to the nature of his own urge to write: the strong conviction that writing has a therapeutic nature. The creative process viewed as having a therapeutic function for Ishiguro as a writer is an immediately recognizable aspect of his narratives. The other, subliminal, and far more intriguing stratum, though, is the one relating to the type of narrative voice and the stylistics he deploys to create his protagonists/first person narrators. Ishiguro construes them as curious writers/tellers of

their own stories, who possibly might undergo a therapeutic/cathartic process through storytelling. They are crafted as narrators concurrently building and dismantling their discourses, as well as levelheaded readers capable of distancing themselves from their narratives, and interpreting what they have said in a contradictory manner, producing thus disturbing and confusing accounts of their lives. Through their stories they both reveal the truth about themselves, and paradoxically, conquer it and amend it, perpetually denying such a revelation.

One central concern of Ishiguro's fiction, frequently traced and commonly discussed by reviewers, will not constitute the overriding subject matter of this paper. Sorrowfulness and melancholy permeate his fictions, all of which, as critics seem to agree, arise from the author's own separation from his Japanese origins. Almost all of his novels happen in Japan, to which he nostalgically returns through writing, disclosing in several interviews his need to recreate the image of Japan from his childhood. The place of action of his first two novels (*A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*) studied in this paper is post-war Japan.

An analysis of another aspect of Ishiguro's fiction, the character of his narratives as construed by protagonists/narrators who as much reveal as fear revelation, suggests an awareness of condemnation, where concomitantly and at all costs the texts avoid it, in turn unleashing queries as to the therapeutic nature of storytelling. Ishiguro artfully uses narrators whose knowledge of language is such that it is equally well destined to expiate and condemn, the language which constantly undermines its depictive and reflective viabilities. On face value the first person narratives of *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* seem to be intended to cleanse the storytellers of distressing feelings begotten by some deep psychological rift in connection with experiences of the Second World War. The question arises, however, if telling/writing/rereading the incapacitating past from hindsight really has a recuperative value? Does it beget solace? The aim of this paper is to examine whether the unreliable narratives of Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills* and Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World*, through their mutual stratagems, lies and omissions, effect a catharsis. The critical perspectives deployed to execute such a task are reader-response criticism, Paul Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics and Linda Hutcheon's postmodern theorization of nostalgia.

According to the reader-response critic Wolfgang Iser, communication in literature is an interaction between revelation and concealment. Reading Ishiguro's two early novels through the lens of reader-response criticism shows that the truth in those texts is being dynamically constructed and is amendable to the narrative's movement from revelation

to concealment in which the seeming therapeutic function of the narrators' stories is patently belittled or gets lost. The narratives effectively hamper the spontaneity of the healing process as they continuously generate tacit, unspoken meanings disabling the first person narrators' innermost thoughts and feelings to run free, pushing them into some ethical and ideological vacuum. Moreover, the narrators' memory is shown as depleted and deflected, which impedes a true reconciliatory rendition of a most discomfiting past.

Both *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* are written on two time plans; the present narration reminisces the past of the characters struggling to rebuild their lives after the atrocities of the Second World War. Each of the texts creates a heart-moving portrait of a human being capable of an industrious self-study. Unambiguously, Etsuko, the widow/narrator in the former, and Ono, the widower/narrator in the later text are both 'writers' and readers of their stories. *A Pale View of Hills* is narrated with a tint of the macabre by Etsuko, a Japanese widow living alone in England, brooding upon the recent suicide of her daughter, and recollecting one particular summer in Nagasaki when she as a young woman expecting a child faced the calamities of war and its difficult aftermath. *An Artist of the Floating World*, in a similar fashion, is narrated by a Japanese widower, an artist, whose life lived according to the tranquil rhythm of simple household activities, is marred by memories of violence, betrayal, aggression, and the post-war rise of Japanese militarism.

The narratives of the two novels are deceptive stories whose confessional manner is bound to generate paradoxes. Self-narration by its very nature is always open to suspicion, and the unreliability of the understated, economic narratives of Etsuko and Ono makes them demonstrably dubious. However, even if these narratives pose the question of reliability, they somehow inescapably proceed towards at least partial revelation of the truth since the reader uncovers, by the timidity of the hints and traces and the tentative aura, the unwarrantable, the hidden, and the shameful past of the storytellers. One is moved by Ono's and Etsuko's manner of articulating the past since through the unshaped and misty memories come to the surface the unpardonable deeds, the sorrows and regrets, and the storyteller's humane compulsion to tackle, to relive, or to explain.

By means of preordained elisions Etsuko's and Ono's narratives provide perfect models of how texts exist according to reader-response criticism. Wolfgang Iser claims that "it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain on its dynamism" (Iser 1992, 216). The seeming inexpressibility, the storyteller's reliving of the past experiences is of no more than provisional and inadequate nature, the images of the past are more excerpts saturated with meaningful absences rather than descriptions of events in

their true state. Etsuko's and Ono's narratives attest to contemporary approaches to narration, showing that the narrative is performative rather than constative; it constructs a version of truth rather than provides an absolute truth. The narratives of the two novels also subscribe to the realist illusion of confession. The reader expects the truth to be unveiled, whereas the very impulse to search and present the truth by means of words is flawed by language constraints and imperfections.

The permeating sense of the discomfiting past is precipitated in the narrative of the first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, by a structurally and thematically interesting device. Ishiguro creates a foil character, Etsuko's alter ego, Sachiko – a wealthy woman reduced to vagrancy, whom Etsuko makes friends with one particular summer. This is an intriguing invention, as on the one hand, Etsuko's narrative depicting a portrait of a woman's friendship is rendered in a succinct, elliptical manner, on the other hand, though, paradoxically Sachiko and her uneasy relationship with her daughter bespeak the very truth about Etsuko; Sachiko anticipates and mirrors Etsuko's own drama of losing her daughter and the troublesome memories. Sachiko, serves for Etsuko as a perfect narrative mirror. What is most private and excruciating is revealed, and the parallel experience narrated in retrospect appears to be a less painful wound. One can say that Etsuko actually sees herself in the other woman, reads her life story through the prism of Sachiko's life experiences and through telling about the other woman's experiences (Holmes 2005, 13). The duality of her narrative, the concurrent writing and reading of her own life in the light of another's experiences, proves to be an apt device. While we are on tenterhooks, wishing to hear the truth about the relations in Etsuko's family and the cause of her daughter's suicide, we are to make do with scraps of information; a fragmented, enigmatic story of Sachiko's dishonorable liaison with an American, and her daughter's psyche disturbed by the dreadful images of the war and its aftermath. We are to be invariably content with making connections and inferring meanings on our own.

Although some light is shed on Etsuko's life from the perspective of its similarity to Sachiko's, and in this we seem to be closer to the resolution of the enigma, this comparison is very misleading as her narrative in its entirety is organized in such a way as to display the stripping away of layers of disguise. Ultimately, this is only to make us discover that storytelling/writing is an unstoppable and ultimate disguise, and that the cathartic process is beyond the power of writing/story telling. The translucence of vision is non-existent as the aspirations of "writing"/telling in order to depict, to explain, but also to cure are incessantly undermined. Until the end of the novel Etsuko remains in actual fact unconsolated and astonishingly calm in her pain. In the final instance the mystery enveloping

her daughter's death remains unsolved. Thus, telling the story of her Japanese past remains merely an obscure retrospection, the titled pale view of 'things'. Her narrative, though hoped to cleanse her of the harrowing memories, does not fulfill its function. Even the dialogue parts of the present story line – Etsuko's attempts of talking to Niki, her younger daughter about the elder daughter's death – do not satisfy her need to overcome the trauma as the dialogue again is fraught up with strategic silences. Etsuko tries in vain to open her heart as Niki's former, antagonist feelings towards her sister, Keiko, die hard, and she happens to be an imperfect interlocutor. While Etsuko strives to calm her mind by bringing back and converging the images of her dead daughter as a small child and the little girl that she used to know in Japan, Niki does not react, and none of the methods to manage the tormenting feelings seems to be successful.

Etsuko's narration is a long nostalgic spiritual journey back in time aiming at restoring the positive, whereas neglecting and forgetting the negative and disagreeable. She is searching in her memory for the time of her youth, and her remembrances are wholly dominated by nostalgia's emotional power to distance her from the true account of the past, by its potential to deflect and construe preferable versions of the past. Etsuko's narrative accurately subscribes to Linda Hutcheon's analysis of how nostalgia affects our consciousness. Here we come to the very heart of the paradox of Etsuko's story. It simultaneously invokes catharsis and shackles it. The very act of recalling the past undergoes a constant mental reorganizing of the memorized bits and pieces of the past; Etsuko's memory appears to exert its curative propensity, only to build an illusion of soothing the nerves and remaking of most distressing feelings, while its intrinsically selective and evasive nature instantaneously disorganizes and chains the narrative, discarding its spirit-lifting power. Hutcheon's definition of nostalgia sheds light on memory's penchant for cleansing the mind and its concomitant fettering of such a capacity:

Nostalgia in fact, may depend precisely on the irrevocable nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia's power – for both conservatives and radicals alike. This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire. In this sense, however, nostalgia is less about the past than about the present. It operates through what Mikhail Bakhtin called an "historical inversion": the ideal that is not being lived now is projected into the past. It is "memorialized" as past, crystallized into precious moments selected by memory, but also by forgetting, and by desire's distortions and reorganizations. Simultaneously distancing and proximating, nostalgia exiles us from the present as it brings the imagined past near.

The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present – which in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational (Hutcheon 1998, 3).

As a result of the conflicting forces constituting Etsuko's mental composure, on the one hand memory's potential to purify the mind, and on the other, its proclivity to obstruct its recuperative function, Etsuko's imagining of the past becomes a projection of an idealized past, distancing, discriminating and emotionally careful, which surmounts the disagreeable while construing an insipid image of the past.

In his second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro uses a similar narrative technique to the one that he employs in his first novel. The first person narration of an aging artist Masuji Ono, recalling the difficult time after the Second World War, through unspoken, implicit meanings opens up space for an alternative understanding of his story. Ono narrates on two time planes: respectively, recalling his past as a prominent artist and describing his present situation as a widowed father looking after his family. He speaks on four separate occasions within the span of two years from 1948 to 1950, and as the novel progresses, his story is slightly modified as each of the entries is told from a different emotional position. Ono accumulates details and his story apparently seems to acquire a more complete form. What emerges, however, is an altered version attuned to his sense of acceptability; his lies are not outright lies, but careful evasions resulting from an anxiety that some unwanted elements will come to light. Peter Verdonk's thorough lexical and stylistic study of the opening paragraph of the novel, which is in fact symptomatic of the whole text, shows how in the narrator's discourse the use of certain linguistic devices not only presupposes the presence of the reader, but also originates from the narrator's ideological perspective conveying the subjective nature of his perceptions and observations. Significantly, these observations bespeak the inner conflict of ideologies and an ambivalence of attitude (Verdonk 2003, 38-39). Verdonk explains that at certain points the permeating sense of Ono's artistic appreciation of his surroundings is interwoven with the voice of materialism, of someone for whom possession is of great importance despite his frequent denials. The inherent conflict in the attitudinal positioning of Ono leads to uncover the dynamic aspect of the narrative:

sometimes the narrator seems to be confidently assertive, sometimes tentative. It is difficult to pin his position down. And this seems to be borne out by the very syntax he uses. His sentences are formal and carefully wrought: they unfold as complete and finished

patterns without a flaw. Their very measured correctness can be said to reflect an ordered and analytic mind, and one disposed to propriety and decorum. At the same time, the style seems just a touch too well organized, so controlled as to seem contrived, and we might suspect that the surface features of the narrator's syntax, suggestive as it is of coherence and logical control, is being used to disguise an underlying conflict of attitude (Verdonk 2003, 39).

Drawing upon Peter Larmarque and Stein Haugom Olsen's *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective*, Cynthia Wong, in a similar fashion to Verdonk's, comments upon contrivance in Ono's narrative discourse: "Contrived utterances particularly indicate that sense-making is related to attitudinal responses [such as] sympathy, revulsion, amusement" (Wong 2005, 39). Wong notices that, "Ono's way of telling his tale stems directly from the care he takes to direct a listener's response to his cause of self-relieve". Deepening her analysis by using Jacques Derrida's classic discussion of the 'trace', she further broods on the pervasive effect of the meaningful cues in constructing Ono's narrative explaining that: "At the same time he proclaims to be telling the truth, he calls attention to his own distortions; Ono's slips may be read as accidental, or as moments when his façade shows off. Literally, Ono leaves traces for the reader's detection of his insincerity, while he remains ambiguous about his own knowledge of those slips" (Wong 2005, 39).

Similarly to Etsuko's narrative, Ono's discourse reinforces the sense of alienated consciousness, and consequently one is left to believe that the narrative endeavor is always profoundly elusive. Ono's writing/telling of story about the past events constantly undermines its depictive capabilities as his narrative oscillates around the unstated, the consciously distorted, or even the lies and half-truths, and concomitantly rebuts its therapeutic proclivity. Using the example of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in an analysis of identity in *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Mark Curie explains thoroughly the possible functioning of narrative as therapy:

If self-narration can function as a form of therapy by recognizing the truth about a past lie, it can do so only at the expense of this kind of narrative self-consciousness because it has to present itself as reliable narration in order to distance itself from the unreliability of what is narrated. In other words, in order to stabilize one's identity as narrative, one has to erase or naturalize a new kind of madness which is performed in the process of narrating oneself as if one were another person, exposing the schism of the past by disguising the schism between the present and the past (Curie 1998, 118).

In this light, an analysis of Ono's self-narrative, in fact, shows that it does not function as a form of therapy as it fails to recognize the truth about a past lie. Ono is shown as someone who actually fails to adjust to the demands of time, his nationalist inclinations of the former period in his life, even if estimated as wrong in the present, are never openly dwelled upon. At one critical moment when forced to share an opinion on an act of salvaging honor by committing suicide, he expresses disapproval, considering it as a waste. His moral condition is that of feigned ignorance about the past. Ono's revisiting of his professional, public past is instigated by the requirements of his private, family life. He constructs a sense of a proper self in order to save his daughters' well-being. Under the advice of his elder daughter he takes steps to protect his younger daughter's marriage negotiations from failing. The schism between his 'true' self and persona deepens as he realizes an impossibility of accepting who he really was in the eyes of the public. The present which bombards him in the condemning voice of the younger generation summons to rethink and actually reevaluate his advocating of national imperialism, yet he continuously reassures himself of his own positive self-attitude. The only area in which he seems to near the self-knowledge is the private life. This, however, is not enough as such partial self-knowledge does not result in a healing revelation. Incapable of accepting the consequences in public, he mourns the lost self and continues to narrate his story as if he were another person, yet the narrative is not truly cathartic since the gulf between the present and the past lays devastatingly bare, it is never bridged and remains fully exposed. Ono lacks trustworthiness, his memory is hampered, and the free, confessional overflow of words gets shackled, the vexing reminiscences are not reconciled.

One of the helpful philosophical backdrops in an analysis of the failure of Ono's narrative to execute the possible reconciliatory function of storytelling is Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity. Ricoeur claims that it is the identity of the story which makes the identity of character. Propounding the essential narrative nature of identity, he points that identity is split. He proposes three models of intersubjectivity: translation, the exchange of memories and the model of forgiveness. David Vessey, discussing the last model of intersubjective recognition, explains that, "Forgiveness enables one's character for the present by freeing of its obligations from the past. Invoking memory could be a way of recalling debt; it could function to remind someone of an unfulfilled promise and of the continual demands of justice. Forgiveness goes beyond justice to charity, beyond recognition to the gift 'whose logic of superabundance exceeds the logic of reciprocity'" (Vessey 2004, 217). The narrative of Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*, revolving around ideas of justice, forgiveness and memory attests to Ricoeur's concept of narrative

identity. The text of the novel shows that the identity of Ono's story is indeed the character's identity. The narrative is ostensibly crafted in such a way as to camouflage the truth about an infamous past and eliminate the demands of justice, thus it never fulfills a potentially purgatorial function. Ono's narration defines its narrator; Ono is a liar, succumbing to an illusion, disclaiming the power of his memory to restore the past precisely. Ono Masuji is a loser, never admitting to himself that an alliance with the Japanese imperialism, his life as a young artist, was no more than a waste. As the character retreats into a comfortable position failing to recognize the reconciliatory powers of storytelling, the narrative impedes its liberating effort.

Ishiguro's interlacing of the concept of the first person unreliable narration and memory in *An Artist of the Floating World* results in the interrogation of the two notions from a new perspective. Evidently, Ono's memory is shown as faltering, his introspective narrative is full of suggestive voids, and the story proves false, it refutes the qualitative value of any story expected to generate meaningful revelations. Ono appears not to remember, pretends not to remember, denies remembering. His narrative discourse is construed in such a way as to avoid any clear ethical judgment, and resultantly it restrains the soothing effect. The restorative effect being patently belittled prompts no more than misty recollections. For instance, while recalling one particular event in his youth – a defense of a colleague artist, Ono ascertains his position of a storyteller in the following manner: "Of course this is all a matter of many years ago now and I cannot vouch that those were my exact words that morning" (Ishiguro 2001, 69). Such debunking of the capabilities of remembering very often reoccurs in this and Ishiguro's later novels, of which the most prominent example is his *The Remains of the Day* (Maziarczyk 2004, 68). Ono's self-justifications of not remembering well enough are echoed by Stevens's (the main character's in *The Remains of the Day*) self-effacing narration and more than frequent disclosing of his impediments in recalling a precise rendering of past events. The author's intertextual references to his other fictions cause Ishiguro's novels to read like one grand text of storytelling, memory and forgetting. Can we somehow justify the encumbering functioning of Ono's memory, storytelling and the reading of his own narrative? If one contextualizes his narrative within the spectrum of methodological querying as for the interrelations of memory and story, for instance, by means of appropriating the tenets of Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, Ono's narrative emerges not so much as diffident, but one which demystifies our notion of an expected univocal record of the past and the internal workings of human memory. Ono's narrative seems concordant with Iser's explication of how our memory works. Wolfgang Iser claims that:

Whatever we have read sinks into our memory and is foreshortened. It may later be evoked again and set against a different background... The memory evoked, however, can never resume its original shape, for this would mean that memory and perception are identical, which is manifestly not so. The new background brings to light new aspects of what we have committed to memory; conversely these, in turn shed their light in the new background, thus arousing more complex anticipations (Iser 1992, 215).

Considering such a perspective, Ono's narrative emerges as one inherently bound to produce differing accounts of the past, subverting the primarily remembered account. Thus, an analysis of Ishiguro's two early novels in light of reader-response criticism, Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity and Linda Hutcheon's postmodern musings on nostalgia and memory, foregrounds an essential insecurity in the act of narration. The narrative's endeavor to cleanse one's mind/consciousness through acts of storytelling and reading is seen, ultimately, as futile. Since the representation of truth is no more than provisional and forever unavailable, the narrative's recuperative effect is viewed accordingly as inherently thwarted. A study of the enactment of these novels' main themes – conflict between truth and lies, differing perceptions of truth, facts and beliefs, reality versus illusion, memory and forgetting – allows us to see that the supposedly plausible function of storytelling, reading and rereading to affect a catharsis gets encumbered, and the storyteller's peace of mind comes to a demise. Ishiguro's characters are crafted as subservient to a constant process of evasion; their evasive storytelling undercuts the possibility of expiation, as the utterance of the truth about the past is invariably destabilized and blocked, the mind is in a state of a spiritual dispossession, hence expiation becomes unattainable. Finally, searching for the possibility of a healing effect in writing/storytelling helps uncover yet a different facet of Ishiguro's early fictions, suggested at the beginning of this paper. Through an evocation of sadness, nostalgia, sorrowfulness and regret, and an observance of events and happenings in hindsight, Ishiguro establishes his first person narrators as imagoes that have come from his unconscious and surface in a disguised form as characters that may express the author's own feelings of bereavement and nostalgia. An analysis of this aspect of the narratives exceeds the limits of this paper, though, and would seek the results of applying a psychoanalytic approach in an examination of Ishiguro's early narratives as potentially exerting a cathartic function.

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