

# EXHUMING THE NARRATOR IN *THE BURIED GIANT*

GENRE AND INTERTEXTUAL INFERENCE IN THE NOVELS OF KAZUO ISHIGURO

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## Abstract

*This thesis takes the critical response generated by Kazuo Ishiguro's The Buried Giant, his most recent novel, as an invitation to re-examine the overall literary 'experiment' of his body of work. Ishiguro's novels, regardless of their genre, message, or cultural moment, create experiences in which the reader engages with each narrator as if they were a human being. His attention to stylistic and formal detail foregrounds our awareness of his art in each text, and much scholarship focuses on overarching discussions of memory, identity, and history; however, this all relies upon the empathy that the texts generate between the character-narrator and the reader. The commitment to mimesis over the synthetic or thematic dimensions of the text, to draw on the theoretical model of character presented by James Phelan, often remains covert throughout each novel, but character mimesis nevertheless acts as both an accessible entry point to the novels, and a consistent touchstone throughout and across the texts.*

*Upon the publication of The Buried Giant, Ishiguro was met with criticism and dissatisfaction from numerous reviewers and scholars, despite general public appreciation of the novel. At the heart of this dissatisfaction lies a sense that Ishiguro's foray into fantasy lacks the affective power of his iconic artlessness. Specifically, The Buried Giant appears to lack a central, consistent, human voice to hold together the synthetic and thematic work that the text performs.*

*This thesis presents an argument that finds within The Buried Giant the presence of a first-person voice that, rather than diverging from each of Ishiguro's previous narrators, takes his experimentation with the first-person voice to a new extreme. This reading allows me to locate The Buried Giant more squarely back in conversation with the rest of Ishiguro's oeuvre, by identifying a covert but vital thread that exists beneath the shifts in genre, thematic and synthetic choices, and context of the novel. I explore the establishment of character mimesis across Ishiguro's body of work, how this feeds into both the dissatisfaction with The Buried Giant and my reconciliation of the novel to his earlier works, and finally how The Buried Giant and its shift to both a covert narrative voice and the genre of fantasy provides an opportunity to re-examine Ishiguro's use of non-mimetic structures and generic conventions in his first six novels around the central, mimetic narrator.*

*As suggested, this approach draws significantly on the theory of character presented by James Phelan, which allows for comprehensive consideration of diverse textual functions that occur both throughout a given text and across several texts of widely varying genres and perspectives. I touch on notions of unreliability, memory and subjective history, trauma, and identity performance, each of which are central to many pieces of scholarship on Ishiguro's novels; however, the aim of this project is to swiftly push beyond readings that prioritise synthetic and thematic dimensions of the novels to reach the heart of how the voices who capture their own stories completely entrance Ishiguro's readership.*



## Introduction

The advent of a new novel by Kazuo Ishiguro always creates a certain excitement in the wider literary community. Haruki Murakami—a favourite for the Nobel Prize in 2017, when Ishiguro received the award—captures something of the spirit with which Ishiguro’s expansive readership approaches his new works:

There are some writers who, when one of their new novels comes out, send me running down to the bookstore to buy a copy; then I put aside whatever else I am reading and bury myself in their work. These days, only a handful of writers have this effect on me, and Kazuo Ishiguro is one of them. (‘Foreword’ vii)

Murakami also reveals that there is not only excitement, but enormous expectation upon Ishiguro as an author for whom it is worth running down to the bookstore. The release of Ishiguro’s latest novel, *The Buried Giant*,<sup>1</sup> in 2015, was surrounded with similar anticipation. While many readers approached this seventh novel in Ishiguro’s oeuvre with optimism and found in return a unique but worthwhile reading experience, the text was also met with considerable scepticism and dissatisfaction.

The division and confusion of critics toward *TBG* is largely expressed in emotive terms; there are numerous attempts to codify its iniquities, but most fall back upon how the critics ‘feel’ about the novel, using affective power as the primary condition for aesthetic success or failure.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after *TBG* was published, the fantasy novelist and comic writer Neil Gaiman released a review that tries to praise Ishiguro for his foray into fantasy, but concedes that, while “‘The Buried Giant’ is an exceptional novel [...] my inability to fall in love with it, much as I wanted to, came from my conviction that there was an allegory waiting like an ogre in the mist” (2). Gaiman attempts to locate his dissatisfaction in the text’s thematic concerns, but relies upon his affective experience of the novel to make his point. For many readers, Gaiman among them, dissatisfaction with *TBG* is tied to their sense that the novel radically departs from Ishiguro’s typical method of exploring his recurrent themes. However, attempts grounded in thematic readings to explain why *TBG* falls short of expectations have proven insufficient. This is because the shift in how the text’s thematic concerns are represented is the result of deeper formal

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, *TBG*. Ishiguro’s titles are shortened in this manner after their first usage, except where the wording of the title is significant, or the thesis shifts in tone or focus and reintroduction is useful.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Martin explicitly terms *TBG* “affectless fantasia.” Even more tellingly, *The Guardian* published a ‘review’ by John Crace in which, unable to find the words to describe his evident distaste, he instead wrote a 700-odd-word scathing parody representing how he felt reading *TBG*.

departures. Several months later, Gaiman and Ishiguro appeared together ‘in conversation’ for *New Statesman*, where they discussed the purpose of genre and the historical place of that which we now call ‘fantasy.’ Their discussion is extensive and engaging, but does not further explain why Gaiman could not “fall in love” with *TBG*. The nature of the interview was such that it could not facilitate extensive academic discussion, but they do suggest that our conflicting expectations of ‘literary’ fiction and popular genres may be to blame. The formal qualities of *TBG* draw upon two traditions often seen as distinct, and which do function in markedly different ways. They are nevertheless able to exist alongside and in dialogue with one another, despite the resistance of Ishiguro’s critics to a text that attempts to bridge the two traditions.

Ishiguro’s foray into fantasy demonstrates the tendency of readers to evaluate new novels based upon an author’s previous works, relying on expected patterns and thematic concerns from earlier novels in their approach to new texts. Deviations from the author’s expected method or message are framed by readers and critics as inconsistencies, even though each new novel is an entirely distinct text, written in different circumstances and published into a changing social and literary environment. When we read *TBG* with the expectation that we will encounter identical thematic discussions to his realist work, such as *The Remains of the Day*<sup>3</sup> (1989), or even his take on science fiction or detective fiction, in *Never Let Me Go*<sup>4</sup> (2005) and *When We Were Orphans*<sup>5</sup> (2000) respectively, disappointment is inevitable. *TBG* is not and should not be a superimposition of Ishiguro’s previous narratives onto a fantastical story-world. Fantasy is the most obvious variable that Ishiguro alters in writing *TBG*, and therefore the novel’s generic status comes under the greatest scrutiny in attempts to explain the novel’s supposedly sub-par examination of Ishiguro’s characteristic themes: memory, trauma, personal history, and human experience. This scrutiny is not misplaced, and examining how fantasy allows meaning to be conveyed in *TBG* generates further understanding about Ishiguro’s entire oeuvre. However, conducting such an examination in thematic terms cannot fully account for the actual variations in the text that resulted in the novel’s poor critical reception. Several pieces of scholarship that consider the thematic dimensions of *TBG* have been produced, but these have each moved on from the problem of critical reception to discuss *TBG*’s

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter, *ROTD*.

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter, *NLMG*.

<sup>5</sup> Hereafter, *WWWO*.

themes *given* that the novel is what it is, and do not engage with aesthetic merit or with Ishiguro's divergent formal choices.<sup>6</sup>

The largest deviation of *TBG* from Ishiguro's previous work, which has been identified by a small number of scholars, is not a thematic shift, but a formal one: *TBG* appears to lack a first-person narrator with whom the reader personally and emotionally engages as if they were human.<sup>7</sup> While criticism of *TBG* has frequently noted the dominant third-person perspective, only those critics who recognise the apparent lack of a first-person narrator as the text's primary problem begin to make sense of how the novel uniquely approaches its thematic concerns. Two years following the novel's release, Toby Lichtig wrote a review of *TBG* that may not reach a conclusion about exactly why he was dissatisfied with the novel, but does ask questions grounded more in Ishiguro's craft and technical choices than in the novel's thematic purpose or affective power. Lichtig still frames his review in terms of aesthetic merit, but this framing does lead him to engage with issues of narration, structure, and style. Lichtig suggests that *TBG* takes many of Ishiguro's hallmarks—especially the “artlessness [that] has always been a key to Ishiguro's [...] success” (2) and the “major theme [...] of memory” (5)—and situates them around a “central, crippling problem” (6) that causes their expected affective power to fall flat: “we are essentially in the hands of a third-person narrator, which means that the strangely stilted style, so effective in his other writing, is no longer the expression of an individual consciousness in psychic pain.” This explains why much of the pre-existing scholarship that takes a formal approach to Ishiguro's writing is suddenly unable to account for *TBG*, as the predominant interest in unreliability loses salience without a first-person voice. The apparent hollowness of the novel's exploration of memory, trauma, personal history, and human experience becomes grounded in a formal origin, rather than simply being felt, when we recognise that we have been denied the heightened engagement with a first-person narrator that we expect from Ishiguro's writing.

This thesis examines the covert ways in which first-person voices function in Ishiguro's writing, especially when they seem to be absent. It considers all seven of Ishiguro's novels, and provides readings of three of these novels in addition to *TBG*. The centrepiece of the argument that follows closely examines *TBG* itself, and identifies a

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<sup>6</sup> See Lorek-Jezińska's “Testimonies of Absence,” Lukić's “Individual Versus Collective Memory,” and Usui's “Once-upon-a-Time.”

<sup>7</sup> See Charlwood's “National Identities” and Bedggood's “Alternate Histories.” Charlwood assumes a heterodiegetic narrator, and explores the odd positioning of this narrator between “the ancient past and [...] modern readers” (32). Bedggood identifies “various first-person narrative voices” including the “sinister” boatman (114), designed to generate readerly displacement and as barriers to resolution (115).

central, personal voice that remains hidden for much of the text, but nevertheless speaks from a first-person perspective and evidences an individual consciousness in psychic pain. In a review of *TBG*, Nathaniel Rich claims that “Each of Kazuo Ishiguro’s seven novels has a ‘buried giant’—a monstrous secret that is gradually exhumed, with unsettling consequences” (44); Rich is referring to the forgotten war and themes of loss and violence revealed at the novel’s conclusion, but we are in fact required to exhume the novel’s very narrator in order to fully understand *TBG*. This thesis demonstrates that fantasy, rather than disrupting Ishiguro’s ability to meaningfully explore themes of memory, etc., instead broadens Ishiguro’s opportunities to experiment with the first-person voice. The consequence of such experimentation is indeed a shift in how Ishiguro’s thematic concerns manifest, but they are still structured around a consistent, affective core. The purpose of this thesis is not to defend the aesthetic value of *TBG*, but to examine its place within Ishiguro’s literary experiment, seeing *TBG* as both a logical end-point to a series of progressively more genre-based texts, and an opportunity to re-evaluate both the formal and thematic dimensions of Ishiguro’s six previous novels.

All of Ishiguro’s novels engage their reader, as Lichtig suggests, with an individual consciousness in psychic pain, but each does so in a distinct way. Of central concern to this thesis is how Ishiguro’s shift into fantasy in *TBG* expands the formal parameters and possibilities of this engagement. *A Pale View of Hills*<sup>8</sup> (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World*<sup>9</sup> (1986), and *ROTD* all present the reader with narrators who we readily engage on human terms; they each live a life likely dissimilar to our own, but which nevertheless broadly adheres to the laws and norms of our reality. These narrators frequently misrepresent their surroundings and experiences, but we still treat the narrators themselves as realistic individuals, and can generally reconstruct the details and events of their story-worlds and lives that lie beneath the narration. *The Unconsoled*<sup>10</sup> (1995) shatters our expectations of a stable story-world that adheres to reality, casting the reader—along with Ryder, its narrator—into what appears to be an unextraordinary central European city, but which defies our understandings of time, distance, and interpersonal boundaries. The constant (though unreliable) presence of Ryder’s perspective holds the novel together; in addition, we still recognise our reality in Ryder’s altered reality, and we are guided to attempt to reconcile Ryder’s experience with our own experience, even though this frequently proves futile. *WWWO* and *NLMG* both shift

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<sup>8</sup> Hereafter, *PVOH*.

<sup>9</sup> Hereafter, *AOTFW*.

<sup>10</sup> Hereafter, *TU*.

more explicitly into the territory of genre fiction, featuring as their narrators a subverted consulting detective archetype and the inhuman figure of a clone respectively. Christopher Banks, from the former, stretches his story-world and the events of his narrative, allowing him to superimpose the kind of order only possible in genre fiction onto a world that we reconstruct as tragically and chaotically ordinary. Kathy H., from the latter, not only observes a world that diverges from our own scientifically, historically, and socially, but is herself part of the science fiction as a clone. Kathy's subjective representation of her story-world is less drastic and ethically questionable than Banks', instead downplaying the extraordinary but subtle horrors that form a very real part of her existence.

When readers acquainted with several or all six novels read *TBG*, we encounter familiar first-person pronouns narrating in the past tense in the opening pages, but these quickly become detached from the narrative present, as they belong to a seemingly heterodiegetic figure. Soon, this first-person voice disappears entirely. Though several other voices are interpolated to varying degrees throughout the novel, we do not engage with another first-person voice grounded in the narrative present until the final chapter. This chapter presents us with the figure of the boatman, who briefly appears as a character narrated in third person in the novel's second chapter, but this time commands the narrative with a first-person voice speaking in the present tense. My reading of *TBG* argues that the voice that opens and the voice that closes the novel are one and the same. The boatman is more inhuman than even Kathy H., and he narrates a world equally unstable to Ryder's, but is nevertheless an individual consciousness whose narration of the novel is more than just incidental, but motivated by the desire to express personal psychic pain. Such a reading reintroduces both the salience of Ishiguro's thematic concerns and the role of concepts such as unreliability to the reading experience of *TBG*. The boatman certainly differs from Ishiguro's previous narrators, but the modification to the narrative perspective can be understood as a matter of degree not kind. Instead of a text in which Ishiguro's common concerns are ungrounded, we instead find one that pushes his experimentation with the individual voice to the extreme. The reading of *TBG* presented in this thesis places the text squarely in conversation with the rest of Ishiguro's oeuvre, rather than at a disconnect.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I have only encountered two readings that identify the boatman as the narrator. Jess Engebretson, a graduate student, released an essay online in 2017, in which she suggests that the boatman speaks to the souls of the dead across time. Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun mentions the boatman's status as narrator (37) and connects him to the figure of Charon (33), but does not examine the formal aspects of his status. She

Many critics who were dissatisfied with *TBG* do attempt to locate it within the wider conversation that exists across Ishiguro's novels, but do so with an expectation of conformity. In many ways, recognising the presence of a first-person voice in *TBG* does reveal greater conformity with Ishiguro's first six novels than a third-person narrative would. However, this common link between *TBG* and its predecessors provides the novel a voice, in some ways quite literally, with which it comments on and reframes Ishiguro's other works. *TBG* does more than provide new answers to questions that Ishiguro has previously asked. It directs new or reconsidered questions back upon his earlier works, with which the literary community previously felt comfortable. *TBG* demands that we re-examine in Ishiguro's writing the role of the fantastical, the connection between human status and human experience, and the subjective and temporal nature of memory, and the novel does so without the generic confines of his previous writing.

This approach to *TBG* and Ishiguro's overall oeuvre may not absolve the novel of its sins for many readers. A first reading experience cannot be recaptured, and *TBG* does diverge from Ishiguro's typical narrative formula, perhaps to its detriment. In some ways, our emotional engagement with the boatman is reduced in direct proportion to our limited exposure, because much of the text *is* functionally third person. Viewing Ishiguro's work as an ongoing experiment, however, allows us to approach his writing with an awareness that even a potentially unsuccessful experiment yields results from which new understandings can be generated. The divisions between genre and literary fiction continue to collapse within the contemporary literary marketplace, and the line between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' publications is constantly being blurred. It is important, therefore, to consider which of our analytical tools and pre-determined expectations will continue to serve useful functions or generate rewarding reading experiences. As the interview between Ishiguro and Gaiman demonstrates, by putting a touchstone author of narrative unreliability in conversation with an author known for visual storytelling and dark fantasy, *TBG* marks an unmistakable shift in our understanding of where realist literature ends, and popular fantasy begins.

The tension between readings that prioritise analysis of formal qualities or of thematic concerns underlies the mixed reception that *TBG* received. However, to fully unpack what the novel does that caused such division, we must also consider a third aspect of Ishiguro's narrative construction: the degree to which the represented story-

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simply parses his role as that of a historian, who symbolises that all histories inevitably become fictions with time, even when recorded by 'objective' historians (34).

world and its events adhere to our understanding of reality. Parallel to the generic trajectory of Ishiguro's novels is a related shift away from verisimilar story-worlds, moving from the real to the surreal, to the speculative, and finally to the fantastical. Just as *TBG* is the most extreme deviation in genre and thematic concerns from Ishiguro's other works, so too does it exhibit the least relation to the laws and norms of our world. Though all three are set in the English countryside, and though readers and critics tend to associate science fiction and fantasy together in opposition to realism, *ROTD* and *NLMG* are comprehensible through the broad strokes of our reality, despite their generic differences, whereas *TBG* appears to stand alone.

These three facets of Ishiguro's narration, far from being separate considerations, are deeply intertwined. Both the level of verisimilitude and the themes being explored inherently rely upon the formal choices that Ishiguro makes, as they are constructed from these choices. In addition, because each novel asks us to engage with its narrator as if they were human, despite our awareness of their constructed nature, the texts' thematic concerns are affected by whether Ishiguro successfully and accurately depicts his characters as human within human worlds. It is easy for us to engage with Stevens on human terms for the duration of *ROTD*, because he is not only denoted as human, but lives a recognisably human life in an explicitly human world, even for readers at distance to his specific experiences. When we reach *TBG*, we manage to empathise to some degree with the plight of its elderly protagonists, Axl and Beatrice; however, we are not provided with direct access to their interiority via first-person perspective, so the reader familiar with Ishiguro is at least subconsciously aware that Axl and Beatrice should not be our sole point of engagement. Additionally, the boatman is clearly represented as inhuman and in possession of inhuman experiences; he seems immortal, outside of linear time, near-omniscient, and able to only appear to those he wishes. The text nevertheless asks the reader to engage with the boatman on human terms, which pushes us to examine the relationship between the three aforementioned facets of Ishiguro's narratives with care.

Verisimilitude and realism are not simple categories to delineate in fiction. In Ishiguro's novels, fraught with unreliability, misdirection, and the 'artful artlessness' that defines his literary style, often the impossible or unreal is glossed over and garbed as ordinary, while the small tragedies and commonplace chaos of human life are painted as exceptional despite their familiarity to the reader. In addition, that which is accurate or probable does not always appear realistic in fiction; coincidence almost always appears contrived, even though we experience coincidences daily, while tidy developmental or

romantic arcs are treated as natural. Fantasy and realism are able to produce many of the same effects, as both can express familiar emotions and generate human empathy, despite the fantasy's frequent divergence from or abandonment of verisimilitude. We must see Ishiguro's formalistic choices, thematic concerns, and level of realism as forces working within the texts simultaneously, though in different proportions and to different degrees. Ishiguro complicates our ability to simplistically label his character-narrators as human or inhuman, but the effect of this is that we engage with them as if they were human, regardless of whether they hold this status within their story-world, and despite their ontological status as fictional constructs.

## Method and Theory

To account for these three facets within Ishiguro's writing in a systematic manner, I draw primarily upon the work of the narrative theorist James Phelan, who (in addition to having written on *ROTD* himself) offers a comprehensive theory of character that maps precisely to the problems that I have outlined. Phelan's rhetorical model of narrative addresses the multi-faceted role that character-narrators play in fiction.<sup>12</sup> They must speak to both their specific narratee and an authorial audience, and they must simultaneously exist as characters in the narrative present and storytellers in the narrating instance. Phelan therefore divides the work performed by narrative, specifically in reference to character-narrators, into three 'dimensions': synthetic, thematic, and mimetic. These dimensions, respectively, account for the constructed, symbolic or representative, and recognisably human aspects of character. Each of these dimensions exist at all points in a given narrative as latent potential. A description of a certain colour, for example, has the potential to call attention to the nature of description itself, stand in for a larger metaphor or repeated motif, or reinforce the realism of the description. However, not all possibilities are realised in any given instance, remaining empty dimensions until they serve a specific purpose in the text, at which point they become 'functions.' In addition, an identical description may at different points in the same text serve different functions. Within the readings that follow, attention is given to the functions that play most significantly into the overall reading experience and meaning-making process, and which readers and critics expect to find as they continue reading a

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<sup>12</sup> My account of Phelan's theory primarily draws upon *Reading People, Reading Plots* and *Living to Tell About It*, the latter also including his theory of unreliability based upon *ROTD*.

given text or body of work. The aggregate of such functions form, as it were, the *commitments* of a text.

The functions that are realised within a given instance in a text are not simply switched 'on' or 'off,' however. Often within Ishiguro's writing, dimensions may be realised as functions but nevertheless remain undeveloped or covert in several ways. Certain thematic concerns introduced early in a text may draw attention to specific language, objects, or concepts, only for these themes to be revealed as inconsistent with the narrative's overall tone. They nevertheless served a purpose, by directing the reader's attention toward or away from certain aspects of the text. In the case of synthetic functions, since all fiction is artificially constructed through language, everything within a text serves a synthetic function, and all thematic and mimetic functions are built upon the synthetic work that a text performs. However, texts may or may not guide their readers to notice the artifice at work, and active synthetic functions can remain covert. Finally, mimetic functions are also often unregistered, because readers assume a mimetic baseline in most fiction—characters are human, time is linear, colours match those of our world, etc. The specific work performed by mimetic functions may go unnoticed or be completely ignored in our interpretation and analysis, because mimesis is expected and seen as commonplace. In addition, one type of function might end up, over the course of an extended narrative, serving a commitment that we predominantly associate with another function. As I shall explore in the specific case of Ishiguro, the synthetic and thematic functions at play are often more explicit throughout a given text, but they reinforce an underlying mimesis of character, a commitment which ultimately defines our reading experience over the smaller synthetic and thematic functions that contribute to it.

The assumption of a baseline mimesis is an idea that Phelan frames as an "impulse to preserve the mimetic" (*Living to Tell* 25). This happens primarily when readers encounter instances of "redundant telling," in which homodiegetic narrators provide information for the authorial audience's benefit that is not needed by their narratee. Readers find themselves proposing or filling in mimetic explanations for parts of writing that serve synthetic functions, and the synthetic function is not passive in its own right, but suppressed beneath the projected mimetic explanation. That is, we often read additional meaning into the information that the author interpolates into the narrative to justify the otherwise slightly broken diegetic boundary. Beyond this, readers tend to assume mimesis in the form of verisimilitude unless told otherwise, even when redundant

telling is not present, because texts must *tell us* that they are diverging from the basic parameters of reality for reality to be diverged from. We assume verisimilitude “not because there is anything explicit in the text to make [our frames of reference] true, but rather because there is nothing to make them false” (Lewis 42, qtd. in Fonioková 73). This impulse, as I suggested above, often results in the role of mimetic functions being ignored on a conscious level, even while we invent mimetic justifications for synthetic functions without being aware of it.

The definition of mimesis that Phelan works with is divided along several lines, which further complicates our ability to delineate realised mimetic functions, but also reinforces the diverse role of mimetic functions within a given text. Phelan suggests that “as we read, characters do not come to us first as attributes which we recognize as dimensions which then become transformed into functions [...] they come to us already in the process of being shaped into functions, or [...] as already functioning” (10). While this applies to all three functions, it most importantly accounts for our strong attachment to the verisimilitude of characters unless told otherwise. Our experience of reading can attest to the dual nature of mimesis as both a static state and an ongoing process; we may only become invested in a character over time, but we accept rather than question that characters adhere to the laws and norms of our reality when we first encounter them. In addition, mimesis defines both what is being represented and how it is being represented. That is, realised mimetic functions can be defined as either: A) successfully verisimilar descriptions, wherein the representation of something is accurate to its form in the real world; or, B) the representation of something within the story-world (accurate to reality or otherwise) as if it were literal and real. For example, a description in a realist novel of a character’s brown hair can be potentially identified as serving a mimetic function, because it provides information that cements the character’s realism in our mind and situates them within a familiar category from our reality. However, the detailed description in a fantasy or science fiction novel of a character with luminescent hair can also be potentially identified as serving a mimetic function, because it grounds the character within their non-verisimilar story-world and, simply by providing additional, internally consistent information of any nature, the character is fleshed out and thus more ‘mimetic.’

We can extend Phelan’s theory beyond the predominantly realist fiction that he specifically addresses, thanks to the flexible definitions of his categories, to consider fiction that draws on speculative and generic conventions. Mimesis as a term does not

break down when we shift from memoir to fantasy, or confessional to science fiction. We must nevertheless adjust our approach to the unique ways in which mimesis manifests itself within non-mimetic writing, and the broad terminology allows the mimetic functions that we do identify within genre fiction to be compared to the mimetic functions present in realist fiction. Thematic and synthetic functions likewise manifest differently in genre fiction, but since these functions do not rely to the same extent on the verisimilar or non-verisimilar nature of the story-world, shifts in genre do not complicate these terms to the same degree.

Intentionally obscured or distorted mimetic functions can limit our ability to identify the thematic and synthetic functions being realised within a text, as well as make it difficult to identify and adopt a text's overall commitment and ethical stance. This is unlikely to occur within realist fiction. In works in which realism breaks down beyond a certain point—that is, where verisimilitude and the principle of minimal departure cannot be relied upon for absent information<sup>13</sup>—so too does the neatness of Phelan's categories break down. However, far from being inapplicable in such situations, Phelan's categories still allow us to determine how our reading experience is being intentionally distorted and where our clear-cut engagement with the narrator and the text's overall commitments are obscured. The typical meaning-making processes of fiction—thematic functions revealing overall themes, etc.—cease to be readily available as tools for the reader. Instances within a text that would typically support a thematic commitment may no longer resonate with the text's overall tone, but can allow us to identify anti-mimetic, anti-thematic, or anti-synthetic tendencies or commitments within the text. Such commitments, though inversions of the functions that Phelan outlines, remain explainable within his theory as they are direct opposites rather than incompatible categories. Fantasy and science fiction can be blatantly anti-mimetic and heavily allegorical at times; however, in Ishiguro's novels, visible constructedness and extensive thematising often eventually pay off in service of character-mimesis by the end of the novel.

In 2018, Phelan released an article intended to drastically revise Seymour Chatman's narrative communication model, as well as his own previous position on the topic. Phelan posits that Chatman's model presents an oversimplified means by which narrative communication occurs between author/implicit author and the authorial and

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<sup>13</sup> Marie Laure Ryan's 'principle of minimal departure' suggests that "we reconstrue the [story]-world [...] as being the closest possible to the reality we know" and "project upon the [story]-world [...] everything we know about the real world," making "only those adjustments which we cannot avoid" (406).

actual audience, by giving too much prominence to the role of the narrator/narratee. In any given text, though an author and reader are always present, the primary mechanism that the former uses to communicate with the latter is variable. This can still include narrator/narratee, alongside numerous textual features such as character, voice, style, and many others. Among these he identifies genre and intertextuality as potentially significant communicative resources ('Authors, Resources, Audiences' 7). It is worth noting Phelan's decision to inject into this moment in narrative theory a call to diversify what we pay attention to when approaching a new text. As his theory of character demonstrates, texts are rife with various latent potentials that must be realised in order to serve the overall meaning-making processes of the text. In expanding my study beyond Ishiguro's largely realist writing to include his genre fiction, it is important to consider resources available to the author that work alongside the narrator/narratee, upon which theories of 'literary' fiction are so often based. In the case of Ishiguro's novels, especially when we reach *TBG*, the generic conventions being employed vary more than the kind of narrators we meet, and we must therefore look to the effects of genre as a resource to determine how to read Ishiguro's less verisimilar or realist writing. As I have already suggested, how Phelan's theory of character applies to fiction changes when a shift in genre occurs. However, the ability to recognise this shift and account for it within our interpretive approach allows us to see genre texts in conversation with realist fiction without theories such as Phelan's losing salience or relevance in the presence of generic and speculative conventions. Additionally, the privileging of chronology and pre-determined expectations in approaching Ishiguro's novels is further opened for challenge by Phelan's complication of the linearity of Chatman's model, especially by Phelan's indication that the potential, exhaustive list of resources is functionally infinite. Phelan's own work on Ishiguro primarily focuses on the communicative functions of the narrator/narratee in Ishiguro's most realist novel, *ROTD*. I consequently take his latest revision of his stance on the narrative communication model as an additional invitation to re-examine Ishiguro's novels.

## Chapter Overviews

This thesis takes into consideration all of Ishiguro's novels, but is primarily structured around close readings of four texts: *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*, then *The Buried Giant*, and finally *The Unconsoled*. Through the application of Phelan's

theoretical model, I identify and explore the assumptions, expectations, and patterns that originate in Ishiguro's earlier novels, which subsequently both provide a point of access to and foreclose certain readings of his less realist works. I pay close attention to the formal qualities of each text, thereby inevitably considering the synthetic functions at work across Ishiguro's writing, as well as observing the changing ways in which Ishiguro's common thematic concerns appear in each novel. However, the role of mimesis in Ishiguro's writing forms the core of my analysis, and in many instances my discussions of synthetic and thematic aspects of the texts serve to demonstrate the larger mimetic commitments that are present but covert.

My first chapter establishes the source of the assumptions and pre-determined patterns that we bring to *TBG* by examining in depth the presence of character-mimesis as an underlying commitment in *ROTD* and *NLMG*. Prior to the publication of *TBG*, these two novels represented the most polar uses of genre in Ishiguro's writing, at least in their formal categorisation, falling under the broad labels of realism and science fiction (or alternative history) respectively. This chapter compares these two very different novels to show that, even though the parameters of the story-worlds are radically divergent, both novels prioritise the generation of character-mimesis. Both texts require us to draw upon our literacy of their various genres, and can be best understood when we account for their complex generic lineages. In *ROTD*, we encounter in Stevens a narrator who epitomises the position of bystander to history, and who attempts all of his life to convince himself that he plays an important role in the bigger picture. By contrast, Kathy H. in *NLMG* is located at the heart of the events of her alternative history; though she has little agency, she is both the issue over which the ethical debates of her time are divided and the tool with which the two sides defend their case. Yet Kathy pushes to minimise the nature of her experiences as anything other than common, attempting to naturalise the science fictional elements of her life and identity. These motivations that drive the narrators to tell their stories, though divergent, are both painted within their respective novels as undeniably human. No matter how far from his verisimilar reality Stevens' unreliable narration strays, or how strange the story-world beneath Kathy's representation of her life is revealed to be, mimesis is upheld in the narrators themselves as characters. We are provided with powerful thematic considerations of memory, history, and identity that resonate throughout the pages of both novels, and Ishiguro wields his craft as a writer in a self-aware manner that causes us to revel in the small synthetic details. However, both commitments hinge upon the greater, covert commitment to mimesis of character. We as

readers and critics continue to expect such mimesis in each of his novels that we encounter, even if we are unaware of what we seek, and believe ourselves instead to be looking for the message being told or the craft at work.

The second chapter turns to *TBG* itself, performing in detail the reading in which the boatman holds the role of narrator for the entire novel. It also considers the implications of this reading for the meaning-making processes of the novel, as well as discussing the interplay between how Ishiguro makes use of fantasy and how fantasy dictates Ishiguro's choices. I consider the role of the dominant synthetic functions in the text, which are highly visible in the apparent absence of a first-person voice. These synthetic functions, however, ultimately reveal not only the covert presence of the boatman-as-narrator, but also his motivations for remaining covert, and for telling this tale in the first place. The reading of *TBG* that I perform offers an alternative approach to the patchwork attempts to redeem the text, by analysing the continued presence of a central but covert commitment to character-mimesis, which finds a coherency and unity in the novel (while also leaving the rhetoric of redemption behind). In the boatman, we not only find a consistent narrating voice throughout the novel, but the extreme embodiment of the thematic concerns of memory, history, and identity that appear in different ways in each of Ishiguro's narrators. Though in many ways the boatman is the least human of Ishiguro's narrators, he possesses certain traits that ultimately allow Ishiguro to extend his representation of the individual consciousness in psychic pain: his a-temporal and a-historic nature, his lack of meaningful social connection, the sheer magnitude of tragedy that he has experienced, and so on. The fantastical structures of *TBG* do limit our access to and consequent empathy with the boatman for much of the novel, but the instances where we do engage with the boatman reveal an attempt by Ishiguro to escape the limitations that come with a mortal, human narrator.

In the final chapter, I return to Ishiguro's earlier writing, using *TU* to explore how Ishiguro has previously made use of fantastical conventions within non-fantasy texts. New interpretations with different consequences for our reading experiences become available in light of the questions and possibilities raised by my reading of *TBG*. We see in *TU* distortions of the temporal, spatial, and relational experiences of Ryder, a distortion potentially located in Ryder's own narration, the story-world itself, or somewhere in between. Many scholars, drawing on Ishiguro's own comments, read this novel as a dream, attributing to the surreal elements a dream-logic, which is to say a lack of logic. Approaching *TU* as a novel that draws on fantasy, we can instead identify throughout the

text a fantastical logic that is unlike the laws and norms of our own world, but nevertheless has an internal consistency. *TBG* does not suddenly simplify the strangeness at the heart of *TU*, for this is central to the reading experience of this novel. Rather, it allows a new way of interpreting and understanding how the strangeness works. The truth of Ryder's story-world remains hidden beneath his complex, unreliable narration, but the fantastical structures that appear explicitly in *TBG* provide a framework for exploring how the same structures appear covertly in *TU*. Though *TU* draws most heavily on fantasy out of Ishiguro's first six novels, this approach extends to apply to all instances of the surreal in Ishiguro's writing. The fantastical helps us to delineate instances of unreliability from genuine divergence from reality, and provides a pre-established rhetoric that is both robust and accessible, given the pervasiveness of the genre of fantasy, for discussing the formal qualities of Ishiguro's more experimental works.

Overall, this thesis discusses the use of genre across the works of Ishiguro, one that sees all of Ishiguro's novels in conversation with each other, without confining that conversation to a chronological hierarchy. The position of *TBG* in Ishiguro's career is something that cannot and should not be ignored; *TBG* produces as much of its meaning in how it responds to the questions that Ishiguro's previous novels have asked as it does through its relationship with other fantasy. However, we must also approach each new text written by Ishiguro with a willingness that allows the latest novel to reopen discussions about texts with which we previously felt comfortable.



## Chapter One – Establishing Expectations of Mimesis

If Ishiguro's career as a novelist had to be simplified to one consistent priority and one frequent variation, it would be fair to say that Ishiguro is always interested in capturing the humanity of his characters, and that he rarely writes in the same genre twice. Our attention as readers, the messages of each novel, and the visible display of Ishiguro's craft all centre around the relationship between the diverse story-worlds and the evocation of the humanity of the character-narrators that inhabit them. This chapter presents close readings of *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*, both of which foreground the character-narrators' defence of their own humanity (in Kathy's case, quite literally). These two texts also represent the most extreme differences in genre that appear in Ishiguro's first six novels, broadly falling into realism and science fiction respectively. The narratives that Stevens and Kathy build for their narratee are frequently at odds with the facts and ideals of the story-worlds, which we reconstruct beneath what we are told. In Stevens' case, his reality generally conforms to our own, and his unreliable representation of it adds symbolic meaning and unwarranted grandeur. For Kathy, the world of *NLMG* is genuinely estranged from our reality and the fate set before her is genuinely horrific, but she glosses over the ramifications of her inhumanity and obscures her understanding beneath the mundane. These two novels present radically different story-worlds, and the identities of their narrators are grounded in their divergent genres, but our experiences of engaging with Stevens and Kathy share a very human element, centred around a dominant commitment to character-mimesis.

Both narrators, often through unreliable narration, reveal the insufficiency of narrative to alter reality, emphasise their artificial natures by the act of telling, and fail or refuse to align the representations of their story-worlds with the pre-supposed facts and ideals. In turn, our attention is drawn to the synthetic functions in the novels, and we are tempted to focus on reconstructing the truth of the story-worlds from the subjective narratives we receive. Yet, however key to Ishiguro's writing diverse story-worlds and the genres that facilitate them are, he is primarily interested in the construction of character, rather than the building of worlds. Genre and story-world, especially when they are most foregrounded or most fragile, are not ends in their own right, but tools that Ishiguro employs in service of underlying character-mimesis. Genre and story-world are used to highlight the inconsistencies in the narratives and the synthetic functions of the texts, which happen most noticeably in instances of unreliability, the representation of

space, and the narrators' struggles with their own histories and identities. However, it is precisely when we are most aware of the narrators' limitations and the artifice of the texts that we see in the narrators very human impulses and experiences.

## **Realism and The Remains of the Day**

Every aspect of *The Remains of the Day* exists in service of producing an experience for the reader in which we engage with Stevens as if he were human. In some ways, this claim is obvious: we receive a first-person perspective from a narrator who (within his story-world) believes that he exists. The fictional illusion is constructed across the entire text, and any of the text's other commitments rely upon the reader's engagement in this illusion. Much criticism on *ROTD* supports this notion, claiming that Ishiguro's novel touches on the heart of human experience and memory. Groes and Lewis suggest that Ishiguro's narrators, Stevens most of all, "are not necessarily likeable characters, but Ishiguro's craftsmanship [...] provokes a human, sympathetic response" (2). However, many critics also claim that *ROTD* is very aware of its own textuality, consciously bringing instances of artificiality and unreliability to our attention. David James identifies how *ROTD* "places heavy demands on the reader," especially in its use of first-person narration. We are "encourage[d ...] to know how, and why, we are becoming absorbed," but we do not become "so self-conscious [...] as to jeopardize the sympathy we develop" (54). Despite some dissenting voices,<sup>14</sup> the critical consensus remains that *ROTD* says something important about human experience, even while it has also "become something like a model unreliable narrative" (Fonioková 22). The following argument examines the distance between these two distinct readings of the novel. As we read, how do we engage with Stevens on human terms—i.e. we acknowledge the novels' commitment to character-mimesis—while consistently aware of the text's self-aware synthetic nature?

Rather than distracting from the commitment to character-mimesis, the synthetic functions of *ROTD* are used to further our engagement with Stevens' humanity. Phelan examines the way in which synthetic functions are often covert, existing as formal structures on which mimesis is built. If a mimetic function is successful, the synthetic nature of the text is rendered invisible, or sufficiently invisible that it does not endanger the mimetic illusion, though never disappearing entirely (*Reading People* 5). Conversely,

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Terrence Rafferty suggests that Ishiguro "spends all of his imaginative energies in 'artifice' rather than an expression of life" (qtd. in Gehlawat 491).

in *ROTD*, many inherent synthetic functions are foregrounded, rather than obscured, but Ishiguro uses these synthetic functions to guide us to engage with Stevens on human terms. *ROTD* is fraught with attention to its constructed nature, with unreliability, and with Stevens' failure to accurately represent his real or ideal self and environment, all of which contribute to our reading experience. We do not always believe what Stevens tells us about himself or his world, nor are all of Ishiguro's descriptions necessarily realistic. We are constantly sceptical toward Stevens, and Ishiguro works to reveal more of Stevens' limitations and even failures as a narrator as the text progresses. Yet we leave *ROTD* with the unshakeable impression that it is *Stevens* as an individual who is limited, with his failures being Ishiguro's triumph. Technically, we as readers are addressed as the authorial audience by Ishiguro. However, when we recognise Stevens' limitations as a narrator, and our attention is consequently drawn to the synthetic nature of the text, we nevertheless continue to respond as though we are Stevens' narratee. Whether we are aware of it or not, we acknowledge the text's primary commitment to character-mimesis when we situate ourselves opposite Stevens as if he were an individual rather than a construct.

Scholarship on Ishiguro readily embraces approaches that unpack narratives as fictional constructs, or that project onto narratives symbolic or allegorical meaning, yet scholars often treat first-person narrators as if they were human in the same breath. In many ways, the synthetic and thematic aspects of narrative are simply what such critics have chosen to make their focus. In the case of *ROTD*, this temptation is not only strong in its own right, but also encouraged by the text. However, we must account for the underlying expectation of character-mimesis that we hold, often subconsciously, when we encounter character-narrators.<sup>15</sup>

One of the key features of Ishiguro's method is how he manages the inherent tension found in unreliability. On the one hand, unreliability by definition draws our attention to the synthetic dimensions of the text. On the other hand, unreliability is also something that cultivates character-mimesis, by showing us the complex flaws of characters. Ishiguro does use unreliability to directly emphasise his narrators' humanity, but also

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<sup>15</sup> Monika Gehlawat explicitly discusses how Stevens-as-narrator 'fails' to accurately represent his actual and ideal selves, and his present and remembered story-world. Ishiguro likewise does not represent Englishness mimetically, instead representing a "rearranged, formalized [...] version of England" (508) that becomes "extra-English" (512). Ishiguro's 'failure' is seen as deliberate, and it draws attention back to Stevens' own failures. Yet, Gehlawat engages with Stevens throughout her reading on human terms, attributing agency and individuality to Stevens. There is mimetic 'success' unaccounted for in Ishiguro's representation of Stevens.

specifically draws our attention to the constructedness of the text. In turn, Ishiguro leverages the foregrounded synthetic functions to further our engagement with the humanity of his narrators. In *ROTD*, Stevens inhabits a story-world that is largely verisimilar, the mimetic representation of which is eroded by Stevens' unreliability. The presence of unreliability emphasises the distance between our reality and the constructed story-world that Stevens inhabits, but this simultaneously provides an opportunity for Ishiguro to reveal more of Stevens' character and identity, especially his very human flaws, meaning that character-mimesis remains dominant. Phelan uses *ROTD* to outline his theory of unreliability, which locates unreliability in the narrator's misrepresentation of their story-world and its events, rather than in textual representations of narrators themselves (*Living to Tell* 49-53). Consequently, even when the story-world is estranged from our own, a narrator can be reliable by accurately representing their non-mimetic story-world, or unreliable through inaccuracy or misevaluation. None of this necessarily inhibits the character-mimesis of narrators themselves. That is, we might encounter narrators who are unmistakably inaccurate, in story-worlds entirely unlike our own, but still engage with them on human terms. Indeed, as we will see in *NLMG*, it matters little to character-mimesis whether the story-world is remotely verisimilar.<sup>16</sup> We are capable of engaging with characters in fantastical or science fictional settings as if they were human, and often readily do so. In the verisimilar story-world of *ROTD*, Ishiguro can (and does) maintain character-mimesis in Stevens, even while Stevens' own representation of his story-world breaks down or Ishiguro alters the facts of Stevens' reality.<sup>17</sup>

Using this framework, we can turn to *ROTD* proper, and begin to examine the formal origins of the mimetic expectations that are established beneath the novel's artifice, which we hold to for the duration of the novel itself, as well as in reading Ishiguro's subsequent works. The generation of character-mimesis, or, in Phelan's terms, our experience of "participating in the mimetic illusion" (*Reading People* 5), is a process that occurs throughout a given text. Mimesis exists as a potential at any given moment, but only

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<sup>16</sup> A verisimilar story-world does support character-mimesis, however. *ROTD* still "broadly coincides in its regularities with our actual-world model" (Margolin 848), and our natural tendency as readers is toward the mimetic: "Readers [...] are aware that the fictional world is not the actual world, but they behave as if it was" (Fonioková 68). Since Ishiguro is working within traditions that typically privilege mimesis (memoir, post-war novel, the English country house, etc.), Stevens' "ontological deficiencies [are] counterbalanced by underlying traditions and conventions" (Margolin 849).

<sup>17</sup> Zuzana Fonioková draws a connection between unreliable narration and Genette's theory of person (cf. Genette 243-252), suggesting that unreliable narrators, who are typically homodiegetic, are bound to the facts and norms of their pre-supposed story-world. The generation of story-world mimesis is not one of their textual functions; they can only alter the representation of facts through unreliability (cf. Fonioková 62-63).

becomes significant to our reading if it has a function, or plays into the overall commitments of the text. The commitment to character-mimesis in a novel is not simply the sum of tangible details that we are given about the character-narrator, but an end in its own right that the text must endeavour to reach. However, we must also remember Phelan's suggestion that characters "come to us [...] as already functioning" (10). When Stevens is first introduced in the text, we are already willing to see him represented as mimetic. However, *ROTD* still performs extensive work to establish character-mimesis in its opening pages, where we first meet the esteemed butler of Darlington Hall. There is no action represented in the prologue, and we receive few details about Stevens himself, but the novel's mimetic trajectory is already evident. *ROTD* opens with the line: "It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days" (3). We are not yet aware (*sans* paratext) of the novel's genre; the expedition could even be extra-terrestrial in destination. We have not been told the speaker's age, gender, or any other category with which we distinguish one person from another; the speaker could be ageless or unexpectedly aged, genderless or unexpectedly gendered, or not even human, as in *NLMG*. We can only assume that these possibilities are not the case.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the lack of detail, the opening line of *ROTD* does provide us with important information: we are given a character, a sense of time, and a potential for narrative progression. More importantly, the mimetic dimensions that are present already perform important mimetic functions. The character that is introduced is recognisable, though undefined. We know that this character is self-aware (they imagine and use the first person), temporal (they place themselves within a personal timeline), and possess a unique voice (they can communicate, and do so in a formal, educated, but nevertheless idiosyncratic language). Furthermore, this character is evidently capable of abstract, non-linear experience through the act of memory. These traits, though less explicit than hair colour or skin tone, suggest that this narrator can be treated as mimetic, and engaged on human terms. Though one line is not proof that this text's primary commitment is character-mimesis—Phelan calls seriously made claims from insufficient information "act[s] of literary incompetence" (*Reading People* 9)—we are being shown what to look for, and this line creates certain constraints for the rest of the text (cf. *Reading People* 1). For example, we expect the novel to continue in first person, but even if this expectation

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<sup>18</sup> We instinctively employ "generic inference" (Margolin 848), without which too many possibilities are open to us to properly function as readers.

is broken or only partially fulfilled, the choice of first person for the opening line would still be significant. Ultimately, *ROTD* does fulfil this expectation, and the entire novel is told in Stevens' voice. We therefore retain each dimension of character-mimesis already provided (identity, temporality, voice, etc.), in addition to any other details that Stevens tells us or leads us to infer, collectively continuing to flesh out the portrait of Stevens. First-person narration does not guarantee a commitment to mimesis, but it readily facilitates the mimetic by offering heightened access to character, showing internal processes, and increasing awareness of any unreliability.

Many specific details about Stevens are not provided directly. Stevens' narratee, commonly assumed to be a fellow butler ("somebody like himself" [Hammond 97]), does not require Stevens to introduce himself, and such an introduction would risk breaking the still fragile illusion of Stevens as mimetic by overemphasising his role as a synthetic vessel of information. However, the second sentence reveals a location ("England" [3]), and begins establishing his relationship with Mr Farraday, who is used to tell us more about Stevens. In the first paragraph, we learn that Farraday employs Stevens, and then Farraday addresses Stevens at the beginning of the following paragraph, providing his name. It takes until the seventh paragraph for Farraday to reveal that Stevens is "a man" (4), and then another three paragraphs for Stevens' role to be specified as Farraday's "butler" (5). By this point, despite the specific details being few and far between, we have already begun engaging with Stevens on human terms. The synthetic functions present in this chapter, such as that which Farraday performs by providing Stevens' name, remain covert, because we have already bought into the mimetic illusion around Stevens. As we are further immersed in Stevens' perspective over the following chapters, the synthetic functions return to the fore, but for now they are suppressed to cement Stevens' humanity.

The majority of description and action in the novel takes place in Stevens' memory, where we at once obtain greater access to Stevens' interiority and see story-world mimesis decay through Stevens' misrepresentation of his environment. Being immersed in Stevens' memory tells us with every stroke of the narrative more about Stevens himself (through 'indirect disclosure' [Fonioková 54]), even as our doubts grow about the ability of Stevens-as-narrator to uphold story-world mimesis. In the third chapter of the novel, titled "Mortimer's Pond, Dorset," we find a rare, concrete description of Stevens' present location (119-133). The overall episode, which involves Stevens needing mechanical assistance from a chauffeur, takes up less than a third of this chapter, and the description

of the pond itself barely requires a single page. Uncharacteristically, Stevens pauses to reflect, not introspectively, but on his actual surroundings. Following the description of the pond, Stevens suggests, "It is no doubt the quiet of these surroundings that has enabled me to ponder all the more thoroughly these thoughts which have entered my mind over this past half-hour or so" (128), thoughts which occupy most of this chapter. In one sense, Stevens hits the mark exactly, identifying that reflecting upon this quiet location creates an ideal opportunity for furthering our understanding of him. However, Stevens becomes lost in his tangle of self-justification, using this chapter to justify to his narratee that 'dignity' comes from the household, rather than the individual butler, and he fails to recognise his own complicity in the life with which he now feels dissatisfied.

This passage, however, tells the authorial audience much more than Stevens intends. Stevens' description of Mortimer's Pond parallels what we have learned about his character by this point in the novel. The description opens with the line: "I now find myself quite indebted to the batman [...] he has allowed me to discover a most charming spot which it is most improbable I would ever have found otherwise" (127). We know that Stevens has planned his trip around an outdated travel guide—*The Wonders of England*, by Mrs. Jane Symons<sup>19</sup>—a plan which never seems to come to fruition. The novel juxtaposes the lauded but fruitless past (i.e. the travel volume) with the scorned but capable present (i.e. the local batman). The other butlers that Stevens describes mirror this juxtaposition: his father, though "lack[ing] various attributes one may normally expect in a great butler" (35), is attributed with 'dignity' and 'greatness' because of some nebulous quality that cannot be observed or defined; meanwhile, Mr Jack Neighbours is consistently associated with "the best [...] technical flourishes" (43), which count for nothing in Stevens' opinion. The reader does not entirely disregard Stevens' philosophy; we accept that surface ability does not guarantee greatness of character. However, we understand, which Stevens does not, that he is employed by Mr Farraday solely for his technical capability, which he struggles to maintain within increasing regularity. The batman may lack finesse and status, but he demonstrates both abstract dignity and numerous practical abilities. We cannot help but see Stevens' philosophy as misapplied, even if understandable. The batman's suggestion, unsurprisingly, leads to a pleasant experience for Stevens. Stevens does admit some debt to the batman, but he does this by

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<sup>19</sup> Hammond, who I quoted earlier on this point, suggests that Stevens' lack of experience as a traveller mirrors his lack of experience as a narrator; he is, however, a competent reader, and "puts Mrs Symon's volume to its intended use" in both planning and narrating his trip (99), just as he "uses the language of love stories" to fill in for his own feelings about Miss Kenton (102).

praising the scenery not the batman himself. Even then, Stevens' comments indicate that the batman merely altered the probability of Stevens making the discovery of the pond himself. The passage continues in such a fashion. Stevens cannot "walk around the perimeter" of the pond, because he fears "sustaining damage to [his] travelling suit," and therefore claims that he is "content" to simply sit and observe (127). He finds a position from which he can "command a view of [the pond's] entirety." Yet, Stevens' vantage provides no real 'command' of what he sees, because of the presence of "strong lights and shades." Stevens believes that his station as a butler provides him with a unique vantage from which to see and sometimes to command the affairs of the world and the intricacies of human relationships. However, Stevens does not directly participate in these affairs, and does not truly understand them; he has less access than he believes and is unable to observe Lord Darlington objectively. Stevens also cannot sate his suppressed desire to experience "human warmth" (258) without risking his professional façade. If, as Stevens later claims, dignity "comes down to not removing one's clothing in public" (221), then the pleasant if muddy circumnavigation of the pond would be as detrimental to dignity as choosing to outwardly love Miss Kenton.

On the one hand, Stevens presents in his description numerous mimetic dimensions that perform mimetic functions. We are provided with a detailed description of a physical location, and this description feeds into the story-world's mimesis. However, identifying the thematic or synthetic functions in the passage contributes more to our understanding of the novel as a whole. Stevens uses this calm space to defend his view of dignity and of the understated greatness of England and Englishness, which are both thematic concerns of the text. In addition, we are made aware of how little of the narrative is dedicated to Stevens' actual journey in contrast with his introspection; we continue to see cracks in Stevens' ability as narrator; and, we recognise the dissonance between Stevens' claims and the truths of his reality. These foreground the synthetic nature of the text. Yet, as we read the description of the pond, we do not feel as though we are learning something about the construction of a text. Likewise, we do not feel as though we learn through a vessel that symbolises humanity. Rather, we believe that we are learning something about an individual, and something about humanity, through a being that experiences human existence in a personal way. The physical details of Mortimer's Pond are most salient in the synthetic and thematic functions that they perform, but these functions further the novel's more primary commitment to character-mimesis.

Mortimer's Pond exemplifies how Stevens favours description of "mock" spaces, to borrow a word from Farraday's guests, over spaces that are verifiably real (130). His narrative primarily takes place in spaces that are reimagined, more banal than they are represented, or overlaid with meaning retrospectively. The representation of mock spaces frequently leads to mimetic failure, which increases our awareness of the text's synthetic functions. Consequently, in line with what we have already seen, the mimesis of Stevens' character also grows when we are immersed in the 'mock' environments in which his memories take place. David James posits that "we can be entirely absorbed in the experience of following Stevens' recollections while also remaining alert to the fictional and fabricated nature of what we are being told" (60). He also suggests that "the pleasure of becoming absorbed in Ishiguro's style is balanced with awareness of the artifice of that style, highlighting [...] controlled omissions and digressions [that] are themselves the very stuff of tragedy." Our reading experience of *ROTD* relies upon our awareness of the synthetic nature of Stevens as a character and a narrator, which is strongest when we enter the mock spaces of his memory, but this in no way detracts from our ability to engage with Stevens as if he were human.

Take, for instance, the two spaces of Stevens' pantry and Miss Kenton's parlour. Where Mortimer's Pond is still tangible despite how Stevens projects himself onto it, the pantry and parlour become entirely lost beneath the symbolic labour with which Stevens' burdens them. Indeed, there is little actual description of either space, and Stevens' physical management of these spaces denies the possibility of further, meaningful description. As with Mortimer's Pond, Stevens reconstructs these spaces in his memory to align with their purpose in his personal narrative, making them a 'mock' of reality. In addition, Stevens has carefully controlled their physical characteristics in the past to reinforce the validity of these reconstructions. Stevens layers Darlington Hall with meaning several times over, in both his literal construction and narrative reconstruction of his spaces, until they become "very skilful, but mock" (130).

We are first introduced to Stevens' pantry when it is invaded by Miss Kenton, who brings flowers to "brighten [his] parlour a little" (54).<sup>20</sup> This occurs only shortly after "Miss Kenton had joined the staff," and therefore Stevens has not yet defined the boundaries of their relationship. Miss Kenton "entered before [Stevens] had bidden her to do so" and speaks "with a smile." Stevens' pantry, she points out, is "dark and cold [...]"

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<sup>20</sup> To avoid confusion, though Miss Kenton refers to Stevens' pantry as his 'parlour,' we shall reserve this term as often as possible for her space, which shares the same name.

when it's such bright sunshine outside." Stevens responds to Miss Kenton's insistence that the room is "stark and bereft of colour" by claiming that he is "happy to have distractions kept to a minimum" (55). We do receive some detail about the room—its darkness, dampness, etc.—and we might read something about Stevens' character into these details. However, the limited description here denies the possibility of further opportunities for description. In some ways, the bare space mirrors his stoic disposition, but the darkness of the room does not symbolise an inner dullness, nor does the dampness represent a lack of human warmth, even though he does possess these traits. Rather, the room is rendered formless and non-descript to connote as little emotional information about Stevens as possible. Moreover, when Miss Kenton fixates on the walls' dampness (54), Stevens' insistence that it is "Merely condensation" denies that the dampness is an inherent quality of the space, transforming it into a temporary and inconsequential phenomenon. Stevens' rejection of Miss Kenton's flowers does not indicate a distaste for flowers, colour, or life. Indeed, the garden is as important to Darlington Hall as any other aspect. Rather, he rejects Miss Kenton's gift because to accept the flowers would be to relinquish control, not just of the physical space itself, but of the space's status as a blank slate on which Stevens can construct his image of himself.

Stevens' control of his space is akin to how he controls his narrative. Stevens carves out for himself a blank space in history: the untold side of Lord Darlington's story, the now-empty Darlington Hall, the invisible plight of the servant, etc. He believes that this blank space allows him to possess full control of the narrative he constructs therein. In the same way, Stevens believes that the literal blank space of his pantry provides him with complete control the image of him that it presents. However, by rejecting the inclusion of personal and intimate details in both his physical spaces and his memory of them, "he has denied himself personal history" (Hammond 105). This loss of personal history also extends into Stevens' attempt at narration: "Life-long commitment to a profession that requires self-effacement has prevented him from developing the ability to self-narrate that promotes a sense of having led one's own life" (104).

Just as Miss Kenton threatens Stevens' physical spaces, she is also a threat to the narrative that he constructs. Stevens may accidentally betray himself at times, but he controls the version of Miss Kenton that appears in his memories. However, the novel follows Stevens' attempt to bring Miss Kenton back to Darlington Hall, and thus back into his life in the present. Stevens' entire holiday is constructed around the assumptions that he reads into her letter, but Miss Kenton swiftly destroys these when she enters the action

of the narrative. Before they meet in the narrative present, Stevens believes that Miss Kenton's absence from Darlington Hall poses more of a threat than her presence would; she could help him return to his past heights as a butler, and she would come back under his control within the domain of Darlington Hall. The doubts that grow in Stevens' mind about whether Miss Kenton actually wants to return arise when he begins to recognise that he alone is at fault for his lack of control over Darlington Hall. Stevens becomes uncertain that bringing her back will indeed restore his control, not only literally of Darlington Hall, but also because her voice in the narrative will undermine the image that he has created of himself.<sup>21</sup> From Miss Kenton's perspective, she simply wished at first to brighten Stevens' room, and then later to express her affection for him. Stevens, however, sees in her a threat to his ideal self. Of course, Miss Kenton *is* a genuine threat to Stevens' identity, but only because the path that he follows is inherently futile.

In contrast to Stevens' pantry, Miss Kenton's parlour is characterised by warmth, though we get equally little meaningful description of its details. The narrative first enters the space to reveal Miss Kenton and Stevens sharing hot cocoa (155). We learn that they meet like this "at the end of each day," suggesting that Stevens is willing to invade Miss Kenton's domain regularly, even though he is unwilling to give her any agency within his pantry. This is a moment of brief hope for the reader; we are most happy for Stevens when he appears to acknowledge and appropriately react to Miss Kenton's affections. Here, we see Stevens' genuine, if buried, desire to share in life with Miss Kenton. However, we also see a continued push for control. "These [meetings] were," Stevens tells us, "overwhelmingly professional in tone [...] several days could go by without our having an opportunity to exchange even the most basic of information. Such a situation, we recognized, seriously jeopardised the smooth running of operations." The reader knows that Stevens is rationalising something that is primarily for pleasure, but we do not expect any different by this point in the novel.

Stevens is unconvinced by his own rationalisations; even when we see into Miss Kenton's space for the first time, we also see Stevens abandon it. Stevens abruptly leaves her parlour after a tense discussion moments later, and, by the end of the chapter, he has declared that "there is no need at all for us to continue with these evening meetings" (183). This decision is a response to an explicit challenge of his control. Stevens states, "You are increasingly tired now, Miss Kenton. It used not to be an excuse you needed to resort to,"

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<sup>21</sup> Fonioková examines the signalling of unreliability that occurs when a voice privileged in a narrative also contradicts it, such as Miss Kenton's voice is, given her importance to Stevens and his story (50-51).

to which Miss Kenton replies, "Mr Stevens, I have had a very busy week. I am very tired. In fact, I have been wishing for my bed for the last three or four hours. I am very, very tired, Mr Stevens, can you not appreciate that?" Though only a minor challenge, this is the culmination of several quarrels, and Stevens reduces his contact with Miss Kenton so that he does not have to deal with any further conflict, even if her challenge was justified. In addition, Stevens subconsciously recognises the danger of being within Miss Kenton's domain. Though their evening meetings are ostensibly so that he can exert his control by micromanaging the household, his image requires isolation and autonomy. Miss Kenton's greatest 'challenge' to his authority is not her defiance, but the fact that she shows vulnerability. By allowing him in her spaces, Miss Kenton is inviting Stevens to share in vulnerability with her, which Stevens is unable to reciprocate. It is in remembering this as Stevens reminisces, even if he continues to bury his realisations, that his doubts about Miss Kenton's potential return to Darlington Hall grow.

The real spaces of Darlington Hall are obscured through lack of description, but are then made hyper-visible in their modified forms as Stevens constructs and reconstructs them. Consequently, they become ultimate 'mocks' of reality. If they cannot be controlled by Stevens, they are rejected, and if they can be controlled, they are entirely repurposed for the sake of the image that Stevens uses his narrative to construct. Stevens strips these spaces of their mimetic potential, which emphasises their artificiality in his memory and their synthetic and thematic function in the text. However, the tension that this creates in the novel also emphasises the tortured complexity of his own character, and the primary commitment to character-mimesis is reinforced. Extended descriptions, on the other hand, may have caused Stevens' character to become lost within story-world mimesis. However, in the novel as it stands, every description (or lack of description) centres on Stevens' attempt to control his identity, and all that we are effectively left with is Stevens himself. This defines our experience of *ROTD* as a whole. Though ostensibly about a journey through the English countryside and nostalgic recollections about the past, Stevens consistently strips the world around him of its tangible, mimetic qualities and floods these spaces with the image he wishes to construct of himself. Therefore, we are constantly assaulted with the synthetic aspects of Stevens' narrative and the heavy-handed themes that are drawn from his life. Ultimately, however, Ishiguro uses this impulse that Stevens possesses to reveal more about his character, as well as to generate greater empathy with him, pushing us to engage with him as if he were human. It is exactly

when the text seems most synthetic, and the narration strays furthest from the truth into unreliability, that the underlying commitment to character-mimesis is strongest.

### **Science Fiction and *Never Let Me Go***

When readers move from *The Remains of the Day* to *Never Let Me Go*, the initial shift is less drastic than the generic categories of each novel would otherwise suggest. At first, the changes appear cosmetic, primarily seen in the narrator's different gender and age, and Kathy is neither Ishiguro's first younger or female narrator. The broad strokes that define Stevens and Kathy H. are also remarkably similar. We encounter, in *NLMG*, an individual who has reached her last years, and who provides a retrospective narrative of her life, partially set within an outdated English country-house in the tranquil English countryside, a backdrop which is used—along with strained but nostalgically-represented relationships—to guide the reader's understanding of the story-world and characters, which the narrator never directly provides. The fact that Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy are clones who exist solely to donate their organs, in a story-world that diverged from our reality sometime after the Second World War, is a surprisingly minor factor within our reading experience. The science fictional elements of *NLMG* are central to Ishiguro's construction of the text, and they shape the plot and story-world. However, the divergences from our reality are not thematised to the extent that we might expect. Instead, character-mimesis is prioritised, and the novel's thematic concerns are built upon our engagement with Kathy and her friends as human, not as clones.

Character-mimesis is reinforced throughout *NLMG* despite the anti-mimetic potential of science fiction, which often not only departs from reality but also defamiliarises the familiar. However, even with the commitment to character-mimesis, we cannot ignore the science fictional status of *NLMG*. We are not made explicitly aware of the clones' nature until part way through the novel, but the novel's paratext—for example, Margaret Atwood appears as a reviewer on the Faber & Faber's 2006 edition—and the unsettling hints within the opening chapters make it clear to the reader that we are not dealing with a world that accurately or inherently follows the laws and norms of our own. A blatant science fiction text immediately demands our willing engagement with its divergence from the principle of minimal departure. The genre's conventions, markers, and alterations to reality require active negotiation for the narrative to be readable. *NLMG*, by comparison, evades our generic radar with subtle misdirection and suggestions

of realism. The novel is always hinting, but only introduces its heaviest science fictional elements once we are invested in the text's apparent realism. The moments of revelation in the text are jarring and filled with affective power, which a rereading of the text can never hope to recapture. At first, we may not expect to find ourselves reading science fiction (horror or thriller perhaps), but we are nevertheless waiting for the moment of divergence away from realism into the territory anti-mimetic genre fiction. As Andy Sawyer suggests, the typical science fictional vision of an "extrapolated future is eschewed for [the] domestic English landscape" (241), but the novel still guides us to recognise that the story-world is not entirely accurate to our own. Consequently, we approach *NLMG* with the kind of attentiveness that genre fiction asks of its readers, but do so with an ease more akin to how we read realist fiction.

Even after the 'big reveal,' as it were, the narrative continues to dwell more in realism than science fiction, but we are nevertheless required to make use of our knowledge of science fiction to navigate the text. Sawyer refers to our experience as being "on the threshold between genres" (242). He also examines the insufficiency of being either too dependent on or too dismissive of the role that science fiction plays:

The reluctance of some readers to view *NLMG* as science fiction is quite rightly based upon the reductive nature of the kind of reading which concludes that human cloning is a 'bad thing.' However, we should be reluctant to impose an equally reductive humanistic reading by which the short lives of the clones merely function as metaphors that prompt us to contemplate our own morality. (243)

Similarly, Daniel Bedggood draws out Margaret Atwood's use of the word 'disquieting' to describe how *NLMG* "manipulates expectations" (114), suggesting once again that we cannot divorce the novel from either its mimetic or anti-mimetic generic heritage.<sup>22</sup> Thus, our reading experience of *NLMG* does diverge notably from *ROTD*. *ROTD* is readily accessible to readers familiar with texts to which the principle of minimal departure applies, and it gradually unveils Stevens' unreliability through his inability to mimetically represent reality. In contrast, *NLMG* asks the reader to consciously engage with its anti-mimetic story-world, and Kathy's unreliability manifests as a consistent normalising of her world. The shift in genre, therefore, rarely requires us to engage with story-world estrangement; *NLMG* never ventures into the territory of space flight or time travel.

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<sup>22</sup> Many readings of *NLMG* engage with its science fictional status. However, the novel is often not treated as "hard-core sci-fi, but rather a tale that borrows certain themes and trappings of the genre to explore perennial issues about the human condition" (Lewis 200). This statement rings true in many ways, but the leap to claiming that "cloning is a mere pretext for other concerns" is insufficient and reductive.

However, Ishiguro's use of science fiction does radically alter the relationship between the narrator, reader, and story-world. Though Kathy's narrative demonstrates familiar markers of unreliability, we cannot simply superimpose the classic unreliability that we see in *ROTD* onto *NLMG*.

Take, for example, the trip that Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy make to 'the boat' while Kathy is Ruth's carer (216-223). The events of this scene mirror the Mortimer's Pond scene from *ROTD*. The trio of protagonists take uncharacteristic time away from their regular routine to follow hearsay of a location where they might enjoy the view. They fear that the route may cause them to become lost, but they ultimately find, breaking out from the shadow of the trees, a marshy area in which a fisherman's boat is stranded. They cannot proceed due to the muddy ground, and retreat to their car and to their routines, after making several 'profound' comments about their lives. What this scene contributes to the narrative, however, is altogether different from Stevens' representation of his detour to Mortimer's Pond. Stevens treats Mortimer's Pond as surreal when it is actually mundane, and the scenery takes on thematic qualities coloured by his sensibilities and preoccupations. Stevens wants the pond to mean more than it does; he embeds his sensibilities within his description, and attempts to use the pond to represent himself. Despite this, Stevens downplays his interest to his narratee, and the episode is relegated to only a few pages. In contrast, the boat visit is built up in Kathy's narrative with anticipation. We watch the rumour spread "from centre to centre, right the way across the country in a matter of days" (211), and Ruth keeps "bringing it up" (213) over the course of several weeks, until the trip (with Tommy in tow) becomes a reality. The trip enables the reunion of the three protagonists, while also showing the changes that have occurred in them since they were last in one place, changes mostly for the worse. We therefore expect the outing to be thematically or emotionally significant to the text. The boat could symbolise part of Kathy's character, in the way that Mortimer's Pond does for Stevens. When the boat scene arrives, there is sufficient detail to enable a thematic reading if we wanted to find one. However, recognising the lack of deeper meaning in the boat itself allows us to see the role that the boat plays in the text's wider meaning-making processes.

Both the kind of unreliability at play and the overall, anticlimactic effect of this scene complicate a straightforward thematic reading of the boat. After braving vague, illegible directions, a barbed wire fence, and dark woods, we finally reach the moment where Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy break "through the trees and into the clearing, and [...] could see the boat" (219):

Actually, we hadn't really stepped into a clearing: it was more that the thin woods we'd come through had ended, and now in front of us there was open marshland as far as we could see. The pale sky looked vast and you could see it reflected every so often in the patches of water breaking up the land. Not so long ago, the woods must have extended further, because you could see here and there ghostly dead trunks poking out of the soil, most of them broken off only a few feet up. And beyond the dead trunks, maybe sixty yards away, was the boat, sitting beached in the marshes under the weak sun.

'Oh, it's just like my friend said it was,' Ruth said. 'It's really beautiful.'

We were surrounded by silence and when we started to move towards the boat, you could hear the squelch under our shoes. Before long I noticed my feet sinking beneath the tufts of grass, and called out: 'Okay, this is as far as we can go.'

The other two, who were behind me, raised no objection [...] (219-220)

Though we receive a brief description of the boat a few pages earlier (212), this is second hand, and we get no other commentary on the boat itself. In *ROTD*, Stevens attempts to represent his environment as meaningful, just as his entire narrative attempts to defend the unremarkable events of his life. Phelan suggests that Stevens 'misreads' his settings, the representations of which are "both accurate and sincere," but nevertheless laden with additional meaning (*Living to Tell* 51). Additionally, Stevens is on some level aware of his biases, which shifts his unreliability from neutral naivety to ethically questionable 'misregarding' of his milieu.<sup>23</sup> Either way, Stevens is unreliable because he projects onto the world around him, shaping his represented story-world away from mimesis through the addition of information, emotion, and meaning. Kathy, on the other hand, is unreliable because she subtracts from the story-world; she, in Phelan's terms, 'underreads' or 'underregards' (*Living to Tell* 52). Kathy's indoctrination throughout her childhood limits her ability to see the horror of her life, which causes her to underread. Kathy begins underregarding when she shows a growing—if still limited—realisation of the twisted nature of her story-world.

Though Kathy never truly breaks away from the status quo, her acceptance of her reality is not just passive; her unreliability is a "coping mechanism" to avoid the horrific truth (Lochner 229). The stranded boat holds no deeper meaning: we are not expected to

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<sup>23</sup> Hammond claims that to read Stevens as naïve "robs him of what little agency he has, while absolving him from responsibility for his part in the infamous history of Darlington Hall" (96). She, using Phelan (among others) as a point of contrast, attributes to Stevens a self-awareness, without which the novel loses much of its nuance and tragedy. Consequently, Stevens' otherwise "unnecessary or spurious" explanations "reveal continuously and subtly [his] desire to control his autobiography."

read into the boat a science fictional origin, nor is it a metaphor for Kathy's life. Nevertheless, Kathy is most unreliable when she provides descriptions of ordinary objects and events.<sup>24</sup> As Ruth suggests, the Hailsham students find 'beauty' in the mundane. This is because the protagonists subconsciously recognise the absence of human normality in their own lives, not by any fault of their own, but because it has been stripped from them, as much socially as biologically (cf. Lochner 230-232). The mundane is beautiful because it is unobtainable, just as the boat is unobtainable, separated from the protagonists by a marsh that their embedded fear of contamination forces them to avoid. More than this, the clones have a deep need to seek the mundane and ordinary to negate the oppressive force of their extraordinary fate. The legend of the boat turns out to be banal, precisely because Kathy's reality is anything but. We do not immediately see through the banality, and nor does Kathy, because she 'underthinks' her existence. Not only does she seek out the mundane, but her representations of these mundane objects and events are designed to reinforce the already-present lack of depth. The actual description of the marsh in which the boat lies, though "vast," reveals that it is dead and stagnant, under a "weak sun" in a "pale sky" (219). In the context of Kathy's drear description, Ruth's comment only emphasises the meaningless, washed-out scenery.<sup>25</sup> There can be beauty in the ordinary and the desolate, but our image of the landscape is based upon the described insipidity. Kathy's unreliability does not change how she represents her story-world to the reader. Rather, her unreliability is obscured beneath anti-climax and banality. My suggestion that Kathy and the others have a need to seek out the mundane and call it beautiful remains beneath the surface as we read, kept out of the reader's immediate awareness just as Kathy keeps her awareness of her fate out of her mind.

As with *ROTD*, we engage most with Kathy as if she were a human when she is most unreliable. However, where Stevens warps his story-world (which is verisimilar to our own) to mirror his biases and desires, Kathy instead represents her anti-mimetic story-

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<sup>24</sup> Various critics have suggested that "Stevens is [...] unreliable in a very reliable way," but that "It is not so easy with Kathy" (Shibata 52). D'hoker even claims that "Kathy is perhaps the most reliable of Ishiguro's narrators" (164). Though it is true that Kathy speaks with remarkable candour and does not actively filter her words to the extent that Stevens does, her narrative still 1) belies suppressed emotions and understandings, and 2) requires us to piece together the details of story-world for ourselves. Therefore, treating her as unreliable provides us with further access to how she functions as a narrator.

<sup>25</sup> Groes gives a convincing reading of the boat as "an image of historical time eating away at all material structures [...] a vision of decline, death and meaninglessness in the face of time's destruction of human memory" (212). However, much as Phelan describes readers' fear of redundant telling (cf. *Living to Tell* 25-29), Groes' reading belies our desire as readers to give every part of a text a meaningful but discrete thematic reading. Acknowledging the anti-climax of the boat scene instead reveals its function in service of the greater commitment to character-mimesis, as well as its part in the text's overall thematic concerns.

world in a way that causes it to look more like our reality. With Stevens, we grow to realise that the truth is simpler and sadder than what we are told, which we believe less as time goes on. Kathy, however, diverges from the truth by attempting to ‘normalise’ a demonstrably abnormal variant of our world. We begin *NLMG* in a world that seems ordinary, but we are guided to prepare ourselves for a moment of divergence that removes our ability to rely upon the principle of minimal departure. After all, Kathy is not someone who passively experiences the differences between her science fictional world and our own, in the way that Stevens sits on the side-lines of history. She is herself part of the science fiction, part of the estrangement. However, though we gain greater knowledge of Kathy’s reality as we read, the text resolves its tensions, represents its characters, and paints its landscapes in a manner that consistently adheres more with realism than science fiction. We can never ignore the novel’s science fictional status, but Kathy’s unreliability guides us to see her as normal, generating what appears to be greater realism in the text. When Kathy is most successfully unreliable, her representations of her story-world and herself both seem most similar to that which we are familiar with in our reality. And yet, rather than engaging with Kathy as if she were human because her unreliability makes her appear ordinary on the surface, it is our awareness that she is desperately attempting to resist her inhumanity that causes us to engage with her most powerfully.

The iconic example of Kathy’s dance to the song titled ‘Never Let Me Go’ allows us to see the inhuman and the human directly contrasted in a way that reinforces Kathy’s humanity. While still a student at Hailsham, Kathy purchases a tape by the fictional singer Judy Bridgewater from one of the semi-regular ‘Sales.’ We easily recognise the novel’s titular song as a generic love song from the perspective of a woman fearing the loss of her lover. Young Kathy, however, projects her own buried fears onto the lyrics, believing the woman to be singing about a “miracle” baby, “partly because she’s so happy, but also because she’s so afraid something will happen” (70). As Kathy dances to this song, Marie-Claude, who the Hailsham students know as ‘Madame,’ sees her through the doorway and begins to cry. Unbeknownst to Kathy at the time, Madame is largely responsible both for the bliss and the ignorance that the Hailsham students live under, free from the dehumanisation that other clones experience.<sup>26</sup> This scene explicitly juxtaposes a clone

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<sup>26</sup> The notion of Hailsham ‘freeing’ the clones from the horrors of their reality is a significant point of discussion about the novel, with many seeing it as a force that ensures that the clones cannot resist and rebel (cf. Lochner 232). From the perspective of both Madame and the older Kathy, however, the intention of Hailsham was indeed to give its students freedom, and in this it succeeded while it lasted.

who does not understand that she is inhuman with a non-clone who is trying to keep humankind from abandoning its humanity in its reliance on the cloning programme.

In this moment, Kathy's ignorance and naivety are foregrounded, while the reader, Madame, and Kathy-as-narrator are all very aware of young Kathy's misreading and misregarding of her situation and the nature of her existence. We are on high-alert for signs that the science fictional story-world is diverging from reality. Not only this, but we see this scene through Kathy's retrospective narration, at a point in time long after the event itself occurs, as well as after she has met and learned the truth from Madame and the head guardian, Miss Emily. This scene is therefore distorted multiple times over<sup>27</sup> by a narrator who knows more than she did as the child we see, and cannot erase present knowledge and biases from her memory. Consequently, we are also alert to places where Kathy's unreliability causes her narration to diverge from the facts of her story-world. As a result of these two factors in the scene, Kathy is on display as both an inhuman clone and an untrustworthy voice. Yet it is Madame that seems most inhuman at this moment, despite becoming one of the more developed and 'humanised' of the non-clone characters later in the novel. We are told that Madame "was out in the corridor, standing very still, her head angled to one side," and that she does not follow the patterns that the child-clones expected of their human guardians: "she was the adult, and she should have said or done something, even if it was just to tell me off. Then I'd have known how to behave. But she just went on standing out there, sobbing and sobbing, staring at me" (71). More than once, we see Madame in shock, not knowing how to act, and becoming suddenly still. In comparison, Kathy, though she is at a loss as to how to behave, is at this moment the one who is in motion, whose emotions are laid out for us, and who is aware that the expected patterns of their relationship have broken down. Kathy's first-person perspective interpolates the reader into her emotion and her confusion about Madame, rather than into Madame's experience; Madame is undoubtedly in equal turmoil, but her interiority remains inaccessible to us. Therefore, not only does Kathy express human emotion just as Madame does, and not only does Kathy seem the most natural of the two, but our access to Kathy's interiority generates a natural empathy toward her.

In this way, the novel does not merely push us to see Kathy as an inhuman entity who is attempting to normalise herself. Rather, we see her clinging to her *inherent* humanity against those who cannot help but see her as inhuman, even when they are

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Barry Lewis' application of the 'Concertina Effect' (199-209) to and Mark Currie's examination of time (91-103) in *NLMG*.

sympathetic, like Madame. Kathy's life is constantly framed by her science fictional story-world, even if she suppresses it in her narrative, and it is in relief of the story-world that her character-mimesis is strongest. Even when the other clones, Ruth and Tommy included, seem to give into their inhumanity, our access to Kathy and her resistance of her fate (even if her indoctrination allows her little real agency) maintains our engagement with her as if she were human throughout the novel. The novel's conclusion shows that Kathy has the opportunity to escape her fate, but instead she appears to accept it. Just as the other donors eventually do, Kathy gives into her inhuman status when she chooses to "drive off to wherever it was [she] was supposed to be" (282). However, the commitment to the mimesis of Kathy's character throughout the text shades this instance in a different light than Ruth and Tommy's acceptance. Kathy's upbringing and life, in which she was allowed to develop her humanity, simultaneously strips her of the agency to make this choice. Just as we recognise that the individuality and agency that Kathy demonstrates throughout the text is part of her humanity, we also acknowledge that the final erasure of her individuality and agency are equally and tragically human.

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Stevens and Kathy, similar in so many ways, are faced with similar vistas, and each feels the need to express something about their own existence by narrating what they see. However, because of the different generic forces present in each text, Stevens paints the ordinary as extraordinary, whereas Kathy seeks amidst the extraordinary for the ordinary. Consequently, our reading experiences involve two markedly different kinds of engagement with the two narrators, grounded in unique forms of unreliability and requiring distinct tools to fully appreciate and understand. However, while these two novels diverge in the details of our engagement with their narrators, they never stray too far beyond the familiar to disrupt our reading experience. Both novels share much in terms of style, setting, memory, trauma, etc., all of which remain visible across the shift in genre. More importantly, there is a common core of character-mimesis, allowing the reader to bring to *NLMG* the expectations and assumptions about how we ought to engage with Ishiguro's character-narrators that *ROTD* establishes.

The tragedy that we feel when reading Ishiguro's fiction is grounded in the strong establishment of character-mimesis, so that we feel the pain experienced by his narrators at the close of each novel as very human, overpowering any attention that we have paid to the novels' thematic or synthetic strands. Both Stevens and Kathy try to bring a sense of logic to their lives through the act of narrating, and our awareness of their roles as

narrators frequently draws our attention to the synthetic and thematic components and functions in both texts. And yet, as we negotiate various forms of unreliability, generic forces and conventions, and the tension between mimesis and anti-mimesis in each text, our reading experience is always grounded in our relationship with the narrator. We see the need to tell one's history, the desire to rewrite this history in a better light, and the fear that rewriting history is a futile task all as irrefutably human impulses. Kathy and Stevens both battle throughout their narratives to reshape their lives through story, resulting in story-world mimesis breaking down again and again, but nevertheless leaving the reader unable to engage with them in any other way than as if they were human.



## Chapter Two – *The Buried Giant* and Pushing Beyond Mimesis

The narrative perspective of *The Buried Giant* lies beneath many of the issues that critics raise when discussing the novel, whether we recognise this or not. Those who address the text's dominant narrator (or potential lack thereof) point to an apparent inconsistency between multiple narrative voices: there is an initial, heterodiegetic, first-person narrator; there are large portions of the text that effectively function as third person; and, there are occasional and unexpected intrusions of homodiegetic, first-person voices throughout the novel. It seems that, for many critics, a consistent, explicit narrator throughout the text, of the kind seen in the rest of Ishiguro's novels, would resolve, or at least lessen, a multitude of the text's supposed sins.

What I propose in this chapter is that we can identify in *TBG* a single, consistent, first-person narrator. The existence of this narrator allows us to situate Ishiguro's thematic concerns around a specific voice, and places *TBG* more squarely in conversation with the rest of Ishiguro's novels. Recognising the presence of this narrator enables the reader to make effective use of their experience with Ishiguro's previous novels in approaching this text, rather than abandoning them because the text possesses no stable narrator. However, *TBG* is not a carbon copy of Ishiguro's other novels dressed in fantasy. Indeed, a derivative novel would have been received no better. Rather, the text opens with a familiar type of voice, but then drastically departs from the territory that Ishiguro has trodden in the past, primarily through how it makes use of genre. Once we identify a type of voice familiar to Ishiguro in the novel, we can more confidently approach the unfamiliar territory that this novel enters.

My reading takes the figure of the boatman, who appears as a first-person, present tense, homodiegetic narrator in the novel's final chapter, as one and the same with the unnamed, heterodiegetic narrator who opens the text. However, we are not given enough information to draw this conclusion until we reach the final pages of the novel, and the novel therefore forces us to radically reform our understanding of how the text functions in retrospect. This basic structure is one that Ishiguro's readers might anticipate, based upon experience drawn from reading his earlier novels. That is, readers of Ishiguro are familiar with reading experiences in which all of the pieces to the puzzle are not available until the final pages, at which point crucial information is provided that makes previously discrete aspects of the text coherent. In addition, Ishiguro's revelations tend to centre upon the narrator's identity and nature. In *TBG*, this revelation is more delayed than

elsewhere in Ishiguro's work, requiring us to trust the author and endure a longer suspension of comprehension and closure, but this trust is rewarded by the novel when it finally reaches the point of revelation.

The boatman functions as a Charon-esque figure of death, as his title (but otherwise lack of an actual name) suggests.<sup>28</sup> Though some details indicate that the boatman has a literal, human existence within the story-world, the text simultaneously guides us to treat him as more than the sum of the literal, human details provided. On the novel's final page, when the boatman ferries Beatrice across to the island where their son's grave lies, promising Axl that he will return, the text guides us to treat this literally, and trust in his return. Simultaneously, however, we recognise that Axl and Beatrice are being separated by Beatrice's death, both from a literal wound and a physical journey to the afterlife. The boatman wishes to be genuine in his promise to Axl, but is bound to his role, in which he may care for the souls of the dead, but cannot provide an exception for this couple. When Axl turns away from the boatman and wanders from the shore, though he seems to do so mindlessly, the text likewise asks the reader to see Axl's subconscious recognition that his beloved Beatrice cannot be reunited with him this time, because she has submitted herself into the hands of not just some man with a boat, but the boatman.

The reading of *TBG* that this chapter explores frames the main narrative as the boatman retelling the tale that Beatrice shares with him in the final chapter, and which Axl subsequently corroborates. However, this is not merely one of an unending number of tales that the boatman has heard, but a story that he deems worth preserving. The story-world, until the end of the novel, is afflicted with a supernatural amnesia in the form of the mist, before which it was steeped in tragedy and trauma, resulting from war and plague. The stories that the boatman listened to during the war and plague would have been filled with violence, loss, and betrayal, followed by those told during the mist's amnesia, when there was no memory from which to form meaningful stories. In addition, now that the mist has been dispersed, and memory of the past has returned, the stories to

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<sup>28</sup> Charon is an accessible ferryman figure for modern readers. However, Ishiguro's boatman has more in common, unsurprisingly, with Irish and Celtic mythology. Manannán mac Lir, a sea-god, is in both Irish and Celtic mythology the lord of several islands (including Emain Ablach, a variant of the Arthurian paradise, Avalon) where certain worthy individuals can travel to escape death. He can conjure a mist that makes him invisible and possesses a cloak that makes people forget one another, which have clear resonances with *TBG*. Manannán mac Lir is also sometimes a trickster god, which a less sympathetic reading of the boatman could parallel. The afterlife proper in Irish mythology (Tech Duinn) and Welsh mythology (Annwfn) are also typically islands. These myths are not directly borrowed into *TBG*, especially considering Axl and Beatrice's England has already adopted Christianity, but they add to the weight of the boatman's underlying archetype. See MacKillop, 'Annwfn,' 'Avalon,' 'Emain Ablach,' 'Manannán mac Lir,' 'Otherworld,' and 'Tech Duinn.'

come will be filled with violence, loss, and betrayal once again. Nestled in the brief lull between the end of the mist and the inevitable onslaught of renewed violence arrive Axl and Beatrice, who, despite their own tragedy and loss, have a story of tenderness and hope. When Axl and Beatrice briefly encounter the boatman earlier in the novel, unaware of his role, he raises the possibility of exemption to the separation of death in exceptional circumstances. Ultimately, however, no exemption can be made, even for ones such as Axl and Beatrice. Unable to preserve their union in the physical world, therefore, all that is left to the boatman is the preservation of their story.

In this way, though the boatman remains covert throughout the text, Ishiguro does give us as our narrator an “individual consciousness in psychic pain” (Lichtig 6). This pain, though not the direct result of tragedy, trauma, or loss in the boatman’s life, is the guilt that he feels after separating Axl and Beatrice, and the grief that he experiences vicariously through their story. Though he hears tales of tragedy time and time again, it is the exceptional story for which he cannot make an exception, no matter how much he wishes to, that finally brings the boatman to grief. Therefore, more than simply preserving Axl and Beatrice’s story, the boatman’s retelling also acts as a form of atonement for the sorrow that he was unable to prevent in Axl’s life. Furthermore, we can continue extending this reading to locate direct psychic pain within the boatman’s existence. Though the text gestures at the boatman’s human history within the story-world, we are primarily asked to treat him as an individual outside of time, human experience, and reality as we understand it. Axl and Beatrice’s story stirs in the boatman the desire to experience time-bound, human existence, something which he cannot fully understand. The boatman fades in visibility as narrator for large portions of the narrative, choosing to present the events primarily in third person, not merely as a stylistic oddity, nor only to preserve the authenticity of Axl and Beatrice’s tale. Rather, the boatman recedes in an attempt to experience this unreachable, time-bound, human existence, using the narrative that he tells to foreground Axl and Beatrice’s cares and concerns, and thereby immerse himself in their humanity.

Ishiguro’s use of fantasy in *TBG* allows him to explore memory and an individual consciousness in psychic pain in a way unique from all of his previous novels. That is, a human narrator cannot provide Ishiguro with the means to move beyond his previous experimentation with memory in narrative. Within the genre of fantasy, however, he can embody in the narrator absolute inhumanity, and embody in Axl and Beatrice absolute humanity. We are shown freedom from the tragedy that memory and memory loss bring,

alongside fraught identities reliant on fraught memories. The boatman is not entirely omniscient, but his comparative lack of temporal and physical limitations allows him to live without the fear of losing his identity—both because his identity is unique, and because his memory is complete and unchanging. In this intersection of the ultimately human and the ultimately inhuman, Ishiguro is able to push his exploration of memory to the extreme. We see in *TBG* an attempt to represent both what it would mean to truly have no memory and what it would mean to not fear the loss of memory and identity—and, finally, why each of these positions might find the other enviable.

### **Intentional Awkwardness and Synthetic Commitments**

Before examining the boatman's role in *The Buried Giant* in detail, it is worth considering his absence. The novel hinges on the retrospective reforming of our understanding that the final chapter brings, but this reading naturally requires an account of the fact that, until the final chapter, the reader engages with the novel without knowing the narrator's identity. The text must initially function without the cohesive force generated by a dominant first-person narrator present in the rest of Ishiguro's novels. However, as explored in the previous chapter, it is not merely the presence of a narrator that generates cohesion in the novel. Rather, it is the narrator's function (until now, the narrator's *mimetic* function) that reveals to us the text's overall commitment (until now, the text's *mimetic* commitment). However, the claims applied to *ROTD* and *NLMG* cannot necessarily be made for *TBG*. It seems ludicrous to ask the question: Does every aspect of *TBG* exist in service of producing an experience for the reader in which we engage with the boatman as if he were human? To put it another way: Is there even still a commitment to character-mimesis? For anyone currently immersed in reading *TBG*, the natural answer would be 'No.' However, while the final understanding of the novel that we are left with may only come in the final chapter, this chapter is built upon the work performed by the rest of the novel, which does not always serve the commitment to character-mimesis in an obvious way. We must ask, therefore: What kind of reading experience does the novel (*sans* final chapter) ultimately produce?

Phelan's theory is primarily concerned with character, but his general categories of mimetic, synthetic, and thematic can be readily applied to other aspects of fiction. Objects, spaces, sensory information, textual patterns, etc. can all be described within this terminology. In the absence of a consistent narrator, it is necessary to look elsewhere for

indication of the text's commitments. In this section, I explore three aspects of the text in which something other than character-mimesis clearly dominates: the novel's fantastical story-world, stilted dialogue, and episodic action. Each of these aspects have latent thematic and mimetic components, along with inherent synthetic functions. The text's meaning-making processes can be seen in the use of all three components in each example, but also in how certain potentials are consciously resisted and left unrealised by the text. A dominant synthetic commitment becomes evident as we are made aware of how Ishiguro uses and rejects the thematic and mimetic potential generated within each instance. However, as we have seen with *ROTD* and *NLMG*, moments where synthetic functions are foregrounded frequently work toward an overall commitment to character-mimesis.

### *The Fantastical Story-World*

Axl and Beatrice's England is defined by its fantastical elements. Even terms such as 'Briton' and 'Saxon' (let alone 'ogre,' 'pixie,' and 'dragon') create distance between our reality and their story-world, despite also offering a historical point of connection. In addition, *TBG* is most fantastical because it not only integrates mythical creatures into an otherwise realistic past, but the world in which the Britons, Saxons, and mythical creatures live follows rules different to those of our own world. Most significantly, both memory and death look drastically different in Axl and Beatrice's story-world than we might initially expect.

When characters in the novel do retain memory, there is nothing particularly unusual about how or what they remember. However, their memories are not lost through a natural process, but are taken by forces external to each individual. The elder in the Saxon village that the couple visit suggests that "it might be God himself had forgotten much from our pasts [...] And if a thing is not in God's mind, then what chance of it remaining in those of mortal men?" (73). The reader does not expect this explanation to be the final solution to the mist, but it nevertheless resonates thematically throughout the novel. A few pages on, Beatrice proposes that "Perhaps God's so deeply ashamed of us, of something we did, that he's wishing himself to forget" (87). Consequently, though this entire line of speculation is proven false, the absence of memory in the novel transitions from being merely literal—i.e. that somehow, within this world, something tangible has caused a collective forgetting—to being highly symbolic. We are left looking for an

explanation to the memory loss that is not merely mechanical, but that justifies its necessity, both in the story-world and to the narrative. Any number of messages could be read into *TBG*: forgetfulness is a punishment for violence; violence is a punishment for forgetfulness; the only way to move on from past violence is forgetting; forgetting past violence cannot last as a means of maintaining peace; enforced forgetting is preferable to unchecked violence; violence is worth risking in order to escape forgetfulness; etc. Within such readings, the experiences of Axl and Beatrice are representative of a social or even universal ‘truth,’ about which “some proposition or assertion [is] allegedly made by [the author]” (*Reading People* 3). That is, there is a thematic dimension present that, if we adopt one of these various readings, could serve a thematic function.

However, the novel makes frequent use of deflation, especially in moments that would otherwise reinforce the ‘message’ that is being conveyed. For example, when Ishiguro describes Querig for the first time, it is a surprisingly pitiful and banal description:

it took a moment to ascertain this was a dragon at all: she was so emaciated she looked more some worm-like reptile accustomed to water that had mistakenly come aground and was in the process of dehydrating. 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. (325)

In many ways, Querig is the thematic heart of the text. This is the creature from which the mist originates, and through this mist comes most of the novel’s symbolically-charged moments. However, the description is demystifying and anti-climactic. Querig is not used as an antagonist in the text to assert that Merlin’s mist is *wrong*, nor does Querig defend herself, physically or through speech, in a way that supports the mist being *right*. Rather, as Master Wistan approaches the sleeping she-dragon, though he sends “stones and gravel cascading down the slope,” “Querig [gives] no response” (337). The novel’s logical climax—the death of an evil dragon—ends quickly and suddenly, with the restoration of Axl and Beatrice’s memories still to come.

We might instead see Querig as serving a mimetic function. When we expect to encounter the embodiment of the text’s message, we instead find something surprisingly corporeal but also banal. We are given grounded, specific details about the she-dragon. Her anatomy is somewhat believably extrapolated from reptiles and fish. She can be identified as old and ill by all of the same indicators that we would recognise in a real creature. The text demonstrates the demystification that the protagonists experience

upon seeing Querig for the first time, which we also experience by extension. As I examined in my 'Method and Theory' section, the genre of fantasy complicates the simplicity of the term 'mimesis.' Mimesis is both the representation of that which exists in the real world faithfully and accurately, and the representation of that which exists in the story-world (real or otherwise) as if it were literal and real. In fantasy, one might find an accurate, 'mimetic' representation of something which exists in the reality alongside a literal, 'mimetic' representation of something impossible in reality. Despite this, however, the commitment of this passage to mimesis is unstable. The mimetic representation of Querig cannot eliminate her thematic role, and the novel's purpose is certainly greater than convincing us to believe in dragons for the duration of our reading experience.

The deflation of thematic potential and odd placement of mimetic description draw our attention to the synthetic components of the text. The role of death in *TBG*, which is balanced with equal instability between the mimetic and the thematic, demonstrates this clearly. On the one hand, Beatrice is dying of a literal wound. However, Beatrice also 'dies' in the final chapter when she is transported across the water to the island (i.e. the afterlife) by the boatman. Yet Axl and Beatrice hope to find a literal island upon which their son's literal grave lies, and do not frame this island as an afterlife. The novel refuses (partially because of the use of the boatman's perspective, to which I will return) to resolve the tension between thematic functions (e.g. the island as symbolic of death) and mimetic functions (e.g. the island as a physical location reachable by a real boat). What we are left with is an awareness that the tension has not been resolved, and we cannot know whether violence returns to England, whether Beatrice actually dies, or whether the boatman returns to take Axl to be with Beatrice on the island. Within Phelan's model, synthetic functions always remain even when the mimetic and thematic functions are stripped away. While Phelan refers to the inherent synthetic functions found at all times in all writing, Ishiguro specifically uses this tension and intentionally closes the novel with an uncertainty that ultimately foregrounds synthetic functions. Though reading the boatman-as-narrator complicates this claim, the text's synthetic commitments are nevertheless vital to our overall reading experience.

*TBG* presents the reader with two possible approaches to the text—one thematic and one mimetic—but continually denies the dominance of either approach, by way of anti-climax, banality, and incomplete information. Even in the final chapter, Axl and Beatrice's story does not reach closure, and though the boatman's role as narrator comes to light, the lack of resolution and closure continues to colour our experience of the text.

In doing so, Ishiguro draws our attention to the challenge of balancing the thematic and mimetic aspects of narrative in fantasy—of maintaining the thin line between the literal and the allegorical—and therefore to the formal and structural mechanics that he employs in constructing the text.

### *The Stilted Dialogue*

The dialogue of *TBG*, most notably that between Axl and Beatrice, is at times surprisingly stilted even in comparison to Ishiguro's typical simplicity of style. Toby Lichtig attempts to approach the topic of this novel's dialogue from several angles, but reaches no final verdict beyond a general sense of dissatisfaction: "The dialogue between Axl ('husband') and Beatrice ('princess') is so wooden it can only be intentional. [...] Is Ishiguro being playful? Is this a homage or lampoon?" (2). He posits that "artlessness has always been a key to Ishiguro's considerable and deserved success" (2) and that "The effect of this style in Ishiguro's hands *can* be breathtaking" (3, emphasis mine), but he leaves the alternative pointedly undefined. What Lichtig implies is that the dialogue of *TBG* fails to fulfil some emotional or formal function that we associate with earlier instances of Ishiguro's dialogue.

I suggest that Ishiguro constructs his dialogue in *TBG* along the same lines as his earlier narratives, only in this instance, it seems for the majority of the novel to serve the text's synthetic commitments. In an early line of dialogue, in response to Axl's comments about a red-headed woman from his hazy memory, Beatrice says, "Perhaps you dreamt her up for your own needs, Axl, even though you've a wife here beside you with a back straighter than yours," to which Axl replies, "It's true you've hardly aged at all down the years, princess" (8). Various syntactical choices evident here become noticeable as one continues reading. Contractions ('you've') are used even when it would be more natural to use the full phrasing. Similarly, the word 'that' is zealously avoided, which is natural enough in many instances, but its absence becomes conspicuous in others, leaving phrases feeling incomplete or unnatural. Despite these two reductions, the couple often spell out what they are saying in greater detail than necessary, such as Beatrice's claim, "though you've a wife here beside you," which is riddled with redundancy: 'have,' 'here,' and 'beside' all suggest Axl's possession and proximity to Beatrice, as does her use of third person to remind him of their marital status.

We could imagine a story-world explanation for the dialogue, in which Axl and Beatrice's fear of forgetting causes them to flood their speech with reminders of their relationship and affection, beyond what would otherwise sound natural. This reading has value, but it does not seem entirely satisfactory. Such a reading exposes our desire to preserve the mimetic whenever we encounter redundant telling (see Phelan, *Living to Tell* 25), and it also does not resolve the tension between the text's potential mimetic and thematic commitments. The dialogue could be written this way to show Axl and Beatrice's desire for constant reassurance and repetition in a world where memory disappears so easily. Or, the dialogue could be designed to demonstrate to the reader the experience of repetition, absent meaning, and discomfort that would come with a loss of memory, in order to say something about the importance of communication to identity. Yet to continually reframe the novel's dialogue as thematic or mimetic feels forced.

Ishiguro directly addresses the dialogue in *TBG* in a video interview, in which he suggests that he needed to "find a way to suggest a foreign language" for pre-English Britain, almost like "subtitles" (Wall Street Journal). Ishiguro explains that he would "subtract rather than add to the kind of English that we would use today," resulting in a "language that had a strange syntax, slightly stilted, slightly foreign, but [...] it was simple and it was easy to follow." Ishiguro uses the same word as Lichtig ('stilted'), but his opinion is that this simple language has "its own kind of lyricism." This is not a simplicity that ought to disappear in the text, becoming effortless to consume. Rather, in conjunction with Ishiguro's description of the style as 'foreign,' we are meant to experience the language on the page and recognise the distance between ourselves and the pre-English protagonists.

In 1986, Ishiguro discussed this issue in reference to his two first novels, both of which are mostly set in Japan and, therefore, have dialogue ostensibly spoken in Japanese. Ishiguro tells his interviewer that:

Because I am writing in the first person, even the prose has to conform to the characterization of the narrator. Etsuko, in *A Pale View of Hills*, speaks in a kind of Japanese way [...] it becomes clear that she's speaking English and that it's a second language for her. So it has to have that kind of carefulness, and, particularly when she's reproducing Japanese dialogue in English, it has to have a certain foreignness about it. [...] in *An Artist of the Floating World* [Ono is] supposed to be narrating in Japanese [...] It has to be almost like subtitles, to suggest that behind the English

language there's a foreign language going on. I'm [...] using a certain kind of translationese. (Ishiguro and Mason 345)

Ishiguro takes the same approach to *TBG*, and his hope for the reader's experience no doubt also remains the same. That is, as with subtitles in film, the text must trade some of its immersive quality to produce an experience of foreignness and distance. We are asked, as with Ono in *AOTFW*, to acknowledge that the language being spoken is not English, and to see the work that the author does to give us access to the narrative by way of 'pseudotranslation.' That is, we are asked to recognise the typically obscured synthetic aspect of all dialogue, as Ishiguro draws our attention to the mechanisms involved in reproducing a unique and unfamiliar experience on the page for the reader, manifested most explicitly in the translation from an 'original' foreign language.

### *The Episodic Action*

All of Ishiguro's novels could be described as episodically plotted, as a result of his use of narrative to manifest the process of remembering formally and stylistically. Both Stevens and Kathy present their narration to us in discrete sections: Kathy neatly delineates her past into stages, and Stevens relates his story each day, looking back in each chapter at a very narrow, limited period of time on his journey. In both cases, however, adjacent episodes clearly speak to one another; though Stevens and Kathy break their lives into manageable sections, they use each section as a way of understanding the rest of their lives. *TBG*, conversely, is structured around a single quest, but the amnesia caused by the mist affects the reader's ability to coherently picture the arc of the narrative, resulting in much of the novel being comprised of episodes that seem to have little relation to those before and after. In addition, since the protagonists cannot make sense of the episodes themselves, and most of the action is not framed by an explicit first-person voice, the reader's ability to draw meaning from each episode is further limited.

The second section of the novel's second chapter shows Axl and Beatrice take shelter in a ruined Roman villa some way off the road, which we only learn about in the last few lines of the preceding section. Beatrice tells Axl, "it's not far to the old villa. I took shelter there once before [...] We'll reach it if we go now" (37). By the end of the page, the couple are already standing on the threshold of the villa, calling out to see if anyone is inside. This scene encapsulates the episodic nature of *TBG*. Axl and Beatrice suddenly appear in a scenario in which they are confronted with some new obstacle, challenge, or

situation that they struggle to overcome or understand. Though the villa is not found by accident, the entire scene that takes place within has no precedent. Beatrice's memory of the villa proves correct, but it turns out to be "further from the road than Beatrice remembered," and is "obscured for much of [the] approach," which spatially distinguishes the villa from their journey so far. We are then told that "The villa must have been splendid enough in Roman days, but now only a small section was standing," which creates temporal distance. Almost all that remains are outlines of where rooms once lay; Axl and Beatrice enter a space that both literally and figuratively adheres to an unfamiliar structure, and is not fleshed out sufficiently to allow for confident interpretation.

Calling out and receiving no reply, the elderly couple enter what still stands of the building, only to find "two dark figures, one standing, the other sitting, some distance apart" (38). These new characters seem only to appear once seen by Axl and Beatrice, with no indication of their presence given before they enter the room. Only when Axl speaks again "did they unfreeze a little," and they maintain "oddly frozen stances" for most of the scene (39). It is as if they exist only within this room and within this scene. The old woman is defined solely by her elderly nature, and the man (who turns out to be the boatman) is defined primarily by his tall stature.<sup>29</sup> They function within the text as archetypes, possessing little depth beyond what is commonly associated with their defining physical characteristics. Each of the strangers tells their story, and both act kindly toward Axl and Beatrice. Though we are told that both are distressed, they tell their tales calmly, and there is no serious interjection from the other. The boatman speaks second, yet he does not seem to be responding to the elderly woman. Both strangers speak through Axl and Beatrice, commenting on the other but never by direct address. There are occasional, brief interruptions by the strangers, but they follow natural conclusions to sections of dialogue, and still refer to the other party in the third person through the protagonists. The reader and the protagonists alike are set up as if holding court, and we feel as if we are presented with a moral puzzle—as if one stranger secretly embodies virtue, and the other vice—that we must solve. Axl rightly suggests that they "don't know what has occurred between these people," and then that "This boatman seems honest, but then again, this lady may have just cause to come here and spend her time as she does" (42). Indeed, when the old woman finally concedes to leaving, the boatman calls Axl and Beatrice's words "judicious" (47).

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<sup>29</sup> Curiously, a major spectre of death in Breton folklore, the *ankou*, can be male or female, but is always depicted as unusually tall (MacKillop 'Ankou').

This section does continue to have resonances throughout *TBG*. The novel returns at various points to widows separated from their husbands by the boatman, and then ultimately returns to the boatman himself in the final chapter. The structure is nevertheless unusual. The first half of the novel provides little explanation for why things happen as they do, or why they happen at all. This section performs work that becomes significant toward the novel's end, but here it stands alone, unprecedented, and quickly forgotten. The in-world explanation, as I suggested, is the influence of the mist's amnesia upon Axl and Beatrice; they find many things that they encounter strange, and then forget these strange things quickly and move on. In addition, we ought not to expect two individuals, who loathe each other and are trapped inside during a storm, to converse warmly and freely, nor can we expect Axl and Beatrice—who are the strangers to the boatman and elderly woman—to be welcomed without suspicion or awkwardness. This is a credible explanation of Ishiguro's intention in writing a disjointed narrative, but it does not radically change our reading experience. We can rationalise the dissonance between events in the narrative—that is, project a mimetic component—but the narrative continues to withhold information that would allow us to fully interpret their experience, or see the purpose or meaning it will have for the novel as a whole. The narrative does not need to be affected by the same limitations as Axl and Beatrice, but Ishiguro embodies in *TBG* some of the protagonists' experience, allowing the reader to share in their frustration, confusion, and difficulty.

The ultimate result of this shared experience, however, is not empathy with Axl and Beatrice, or a greater understanding of the importance of memory to human identity; rather, even though we can see the logic of Ishiguro's choices, the structure still feels awkward. This awkwardness is not an aesthetic failure on Ishiguro's part, but works to further Ishiguro's experiment with *TBG*. While reading the novel, we are witness to what occurs when a text documents the story of one who does not remember their own story. Ishiguro's use of awkwardness is adopted to build characters who have lost their own identities, and therefore have no self-narrative. The text is committed to showing the reader the synthetic functions beneath what they are reading, revealing the breaking down of traditional and expected narrative structures and aesthetic conventions when something as core to humanity as memory is removed.

The boatman's appearance in the final chapter is not only coloured by our experience of the foregrounded synthetic functions, but reliant upon them. As this chapter continues, I demonstrate that the boatman's unique and often unreliable voice can be

recognised in the text's visibly synthetic moments. The boatman, perhaps more so than any of Ishiguro's previous narrators, possesses a keen awareness of his role in telling and constructing his narrative, and his psychic pain is betrayed in the formal qualities of his voice that break through the seemingly objective narration of the novel.

### **Expecting the Unexpected and Deferred Revelation**

The final chapter of *The Buried Giant* does not arrive with dramatic force, razing our previous understanding of the novel to provide a new and completely transparent interpretation of all that has come before. As with all of Ishiguro's novels, the moment of revelation comes in as little as a single line, one that is tragic but fleeting, causing us to reshuffle the small clues that the novel has given us so that they resonate with the tragedy that we have just witnessed. In *ROTD*, this moment comes with the line: "Indeed – why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking" (252). Though we are aware of the quiet tragedy of Stevens' life for much of the novel, and though this is a revelation that he comes to as the narrator of the penultimate chapter after progressive development, we must suddenly attribute to Stevens a greater extent of self-awareness, which he obscures beneath his narration for most of the text. In turn, we become aware of Stevens' pain throughout the novel as he attempts to maintain his ideal image of himself through the act of narration. Then, with his final words, Stevens assures his reader that he will approach life with renewed effort, pouring himself into the 'banter' that he believes that Mr Farraday desires of him (258). In this moment, a second wave of tragic revelation comes to the reader, as we see Stevens return, knowingly or otherwise, to an approach that cannot provide the human connection that he desires.

*TBG*, similarly, turns on the narrator's final words: "He [Axl] wades on past me, not glancing back. Wait for me on the shore, friend, I say quietly, but he does not hear and he wades on" (362). Though Axl gives no explicit indication, we know that Axl, just as he does not glance back in this moment, will not ever return to find Beatrice on the island. That is, whether he is aware of it in the moment, Axl accepts her death. The rules of the island even suggest that he will not see her again when his own death comes. This is the climax of the plot. Axl and Beatrice leave their home seeking their son's village, only to remember somewhere along the way that it is their son's grave that they truly seek. When the time comes for them to cross the water, they are separated. The causes for separation exist simultaneously on multiple levels: the water is too rough; their marriage is damaged, but

this knowledge was lost in the mist; the special dispensation to walk the island together is only a hopeful legend; and, finally, Axl cannot follow Beatrice into the death caused by her wound while he yet lives. The tragedy of the novel, therefore, resonates for all of the novel's potential thematic, synthetic, and mimetic commitments, which converge upon this final image, but nevertheless remain in unresolved tension.

However, when we look beyond Axl and the literal events of the plot, the novel's closing words also provide understanding about the narrator. The first part of the final sentence is intended to be read as a line of dialogue:

“Wait for me on shore, friend” I say.

Yet, it is formatted as unspoken narration:

Wait for me on shore, friend, I say.

We can imply that this choice shows that Axl, who the narrative primarily follows, does not hear, as the line goes on to confirm. We can also assume that the comatose Beatrice, to whom the line is not directed, does not hear either. However, we are left with the question: Why does the narrator end with this line at all? That is, if *TBG* is Axl's story, and Axl's part in the plot reaches its end without hearing this line of dialogue, for whose benefit are the boatman's final words included? The logical, if subtle, solution is that they are directed at the boatman's narratee. This is, in one sense, a redundant statement; as a narrator, everything that the boatman relates is directed at his narratee. However, this also suggests that the boatman, far from being a passive narrator through whom Ishiguro arbitrarily filters this final chapter, is conscious of his role in telling Axl and Beatrice's story, and is equally conscious that, as a storyteller, he must have an audience.

*TBG* closes on a note, therefore, that radically reshapes the narrator's status in the text, elevating the boatman from the narrator of the final chapter in only a technical sense, to a narrator who has the potential for individual agency and bias throughout the novel. Several times in the final chapter, the boatman gives commentary outside of intradiegetic speech (e.g. “Neither hears me. Perhaps it's the hiss of the rain or is it their age seals their ears?” [345]). None of these instances are explicitly anything other than elaborations on Axl and Beatrice's story or the boatman making asides to himself, which have been presented as narration by Ishiguro. With the final line, however, the fact that the narrative is consciously addressed to a narratee may be subtle and obscured, but it is nevertheless undeniable once we become aware of it.

Though Ishiguro typically defers such moments of revelation in his writing, the timing of this revelation is unusual, in comparison with the similar structure that appears in the other novels. In *ROTD*, as mentioned above, the final tragic reshaping of the novel

likewise comes in the final line. However, the reader also gains gradual awareness of Stevens' unreliability, and once this has been established, the inconsistencies in his narrative reveal his internal motivations and suppressed self-awareness. Similarly, only in the final line of *NLMG* does Kathy confirm her inability to escape her future, but we are long since aware that Kathy and her friends are clones, and that exemption from donations is unobtainable. The reader's growing awareness of the underlying tragedy in these novels does not lessen the impact of the final moments; indeed, the suspense that is created and the gratification that results from the text's hints coming together adds further affective power to the novels' conclusions. In *TBG*, however, we receive no periodic hints or gradual development toward an understanding that the novel is narrated by a single individual who is emotionally invested in preserving Axl and Beatrice's story. We can piece together the consequence of Beatrice's wound and even the reason for the mist, but the boatman's status comes as a complete, if only subtle, shock. We do simultaneously receive the emotional climax of Axl and Beatrice's story, but this does not resolve with a clear commitment to character-mimesis as each of Ishiguro's other novels do. Therefore, we are left with one conclusion that is unprecedented, and one that is unresolved.

The overall shape and final moments of *TBG* are influenced and dictated by the genre of fantasy, unique among Ishiguro's other novels. However, our existing understanding of narrative structures that Ishiguro has employed elsewhere allows us to intuit the kind of resolution that the text reaches. Ishiguro, before the publication of *TBG*, maintains two consistent structures in each of his novels, regardless of genre. The first is the commitment to our engagement with his character-narrators as if they were human. The second is the decay of our belief in the narrator's reliability, until we must reshape our understanding of the text, which alters our reading experience in retrospect. These two consistent structures are intertwined in most of Ishiguro's writing. For the moment of radical reshaping to succeed in *ROTD*, we must first engage with Stevens if he were human. In turn, this moment reinforces our engagement with Stevens as human; we are given greater access to his interiority, and the unreliability that becomes evident is deeply human. The same is true of Kathy in *NLMG*, with whom we empathise most when we realise that her narration is a desperate attempt to both preserve the memory of her life and come to terms with her reality. When we reach *TBG*, several things change. Axl and Beatrice, though they are the novel's protagonists, are not first-person narrators. Indeed, their lost memory would have limited them as narrators, without re-treading ground

covered in *TU*. The boatman, though he fills this role as narrator, is not the focus of the plot, and intentionally remains covert for much of the text. Consequently, we only engage with him to a limited degree. In addition, Kathy may not be technically be fully human, but she possesses human biology and subjectivity, whereas the boatman in *TBG* exists outside of human definition and experience. We can identify in the boatman familiar emotions and desires, but even when we do engage with him as an individual, we do not engage with him as if he were human to the same extent.

Though Ishiguro determined the boatman's form and function when writing *TBG*, it is nevertheless clearly both shaped and facilitated by the genre of fantasy. Just as Axl and Beatrice can be stripped of their memories because fantasy allows a supernatural mist to exist, the boatman's inhumanity is facilitated by the genre. In addition, the boatman's identity as a Charon-esque ferryman relies upon the reader bringing certain knowledge from fantasy or mythology, adding the weight of the ferryman archetype to our interpretation of his character. The boatman's character is not a blank slate for Ishiguro to build upon, and his inhuman nature limits the kind of character that Ishiguro can build. As a result, fantasy complicates how the structures of human engagement and deferred revelation interact within the text. We might still technically analyse the boatman's mimetic functions, which I will do shortly. However, we are no longer being guided to engage with any of the characters as if they were human in the same way that we are with Stevens or Kathy. We locate in the boatman both the psychic pain that motivates the novel and the revelation that the text works toward, but these two structures are now divorced.

Ishiguro, therefore, walks a thin line with *TBG*. He has produced something that is utterly new compared with the rest of his writing, and resists our attempts to bring many expectations and inferences from his other novels. Yet the novel relies upon our anticipation of a structure that cannot be rewarded until the text's final page. However, the understanding that is provided by this moment of radical reshaping generates a sense of cohesion for the novel as a whole (albeit in retrospect) and creates an opportunity for us to examine Ishiguro's extensive and unique exploration of humanity and memory within the novel.

### **The First-Person Narrator as a Force of Cohesion**

Just as *The Buried Giant* mirrors Ishiguro's other novels through its use of deferred revelation, so too is all of Ishiguro's writing united by the central positioning of a first-person narrator. Our ability to successfully negotiate the final chapter of *TBG* equally relies upon how we engage with the narrator. We appear to be denied the same kind of engagement with the boatman-as-narrator that we receive with Ishiguro's earlier narrators, and yet there are ways that we do engage with the boatman's narration throughout the novel. In many instances, his presence remains covert, but we are guided by the text to participate in an altered kind of engagement with the boatman that nevertheless positions him as a central force that brings cohesion to the text. In addition, though *TBG* resists our ability to reach sufficient conclusions as we read the novel, the novel is not absent of clues. That is, Ishiguro may employ a particularly extreme deferral of our understanding in this case, but the fact that we are able to reach this point of understanding necessitates that the boatman's narration is built, if covertly, into the novel as a whole.

Curiously, there is one radical departure in *TBG* from Ishiguro's typical modus operandi, in which we can begin to locate the 'psychic pain' experienced by the boatman. *TBG* follows a less linear structure than Ishiguro's earlier novels; his other novels all frequently report and look back to the past, but the narrative present is always a fixed point or a linear progression. From the perspective of Axl and Beatrice, their story is told chronologically, starting with setting out on a journey and ending with Beatrice's death. The boatman, however, hears Axl and Beatrice's story for the first time on the shore. It is in the final chapter that he discovers his desire to tell their story, and Axl and Beatrice's last moments are therefore first in his chronology; Axl and Beatrice's lives are experienced by the boatman as he retells them, and his retelling follows the events of the final chapter. This is reflected in the use of present tense in the final chapter; the boatman retells Axl and Beatrice's story from his narrative present, and the final chapter represents this in the formal choices that Ishiguro makes around tense.

Seeing the final chapter as the 'first' chapter from the boatman's perspective allows us to parse several aspects of the rest of the novel that appear inconsistent at the time of reading. There are several worth noting: the shifts between omniscience and ignorance; the purpose of the extensive seemingly third-person sections; the occasional presence of or reference to the boatman before we encounter him explicitly as narrator; the interpolation of Sir Gawain as a first-person voice; and, the strange temporal (or, potentially a-temporal) position that the narrator seems located within throughout the

novel. In examining each of these aspects of the text, we are also able to identify the boatman's motivations and biases, and the nature of his unreliability. The identification of these pieces of the boatman's character allows us to move from simply claiming that *TBG* is technically a first-person narrative, to understanding the way in which the boatman experiences 'psychic pain.'

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In the final chapter, the boatman does not use Axl and Beatrice's names, suggesting that he has no knowledge of their names. Indeed, the lack of names is particularly glaring given that the narrator introduces the elderly couple in the first chapter: "In one such area [...] lived an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice. Perhaps this is not their exact or full names, but for ease, this is how we will refer to them" (4). The narrator here demonstrates control over both knowledge and representation of the protagonists' identities, and though he does not guarantee that the names 'Axl' and 'Beatrice' are correct, we confidently assume that the narrator is providing suitable monikers in full awareness of their actual names. By comparison, the final chapter opens on an unspecific pronoun: "They came riding through the rainstorm as I sheltered under the pines. No weather for a pair so long in years" (345). The shift from focusing on the protagonists back to the 'I' is clear, and though the language used is not that of complete unfamiliarity, only easily observable details are incorporated into the narrator's representation of Axl and Beatrice. If the boatman is the narrator of the entire novel, then he undoubtedly knows their names when narrating this final chapter, but as with the use of present tense to represent the convergence of the plot with the narrating instance, the lack of names indicates that this is the first time that the boatman properly meets the individuals that he goes on to narrate. Though they meet in the ruined villa earlier in the novel, names are not exchanged, and the boatman is there in as the distraught widow's spectre of death, rather than in connection to Axl and Beatrice. We can therefore read the narrator's introduction of Axl and Beatrice in the first chapter as subsequent to his encounter with them in the events of the final chapter, having learned their names in the interim (i.e. in Beatrice's version of their story, which the boatman does not repeat). However, as a custodian of a story that does not belong to him, the lack of guarantee about Axl and Beatrice's names suggests both that he only knows that which he has been told, rather than possessing some external omniscience, and that he professes no possession over the couple's identities, letting them stand for themselves with the names with which they chose to entrust him.

The same logic, therefore, can be applied to every instance in which the narrator seems at a loss for details. His initial, seemingly heterodiegetic and disembodied nature causes the reader to infer that he is functionally omniscient. However, upon being redefined at the novel's close as a homodiegetic narrator retelling the story in retrospect, we can infer that the boatman knows much (especially in his capacity as the supernatural witness to the events of Beatrice's life), but is still telling this story without first-hand knowledge. There is an extent to which this is a purely stylistic gesture or otherwise redundant telling by Ishiguro, as Beatrice surely did not recite to the boatman every detail that appears in the text with her dying breaths, especially in the case of internal details about Edwin and Master Wistan. However, we can read these omissions as the boatman directly signalling that he does not own the story that he tells, or the boatman feeling unable to fill certain gaps with his creative licence while remaining faithful to the story told by Beatrice.

For example, the narrator occasionally does not contradict or confirm subjective or uninformed assertions by characters in the novel. Master Wistan, while leading their party to the monastery and shortly before we first meet Sir Gawain, suggests a path that allows them to avoid the road and make quicker time. This progress is not all shown, but once they reach the road again, the narrator comments that "It was hard to say if Wistan had been right about his path cutting off a corner, but in any case [...]" (117). The narrator chooses to filter the story only through Axl and Beatrice's knowledge; regardless of whether he had any external knowledge of this route, the couple's experience of their journey is more significant to the narrative than the factual details, and the boatman remains faithful to their tale by only including what they know. However, Beatrice does frequently express anxiety about the length and difficulty of their travels, and worries over which route they should take; the addition of this detail would be relevant to the text tonally as well as out of factual accuracy. Therefore, an omniscient perspective is resisted here by the boatman.

The following chapter begins with the narrator demonstrating uncertainty about Axl's thoughts and actions:

For all his tiredness, Axl was finding sleep elusive. [...] he had never slept easily above ground. Even when sheltering in barns or stables, he had often climbed ladders to a restless night troubled by the cavernous space beneath him. Or perhaps his restlessness tonight had to do with the presence of the birds in the dark above.  
(145)

This case is evidently different from the one previous, which merely pertained to factual details to which the couple had no access. Here, the narrator appears to demonstrate specific and minor knowledge about Axl concerning his fear of sleeping above ground, which Beatrice may well have not included in her tale. In addition, he creates uncertainty to teach the reader two things about Axl and his situation: his fear and the existence of the ominous birds. And yet, though the boatman potentially steps outside of his faithful adherence to their tale in providing these details, identifying a single reason would provide further access to Axl's interiority, for it would determine whether he could not sleep for a personal, longstanding reason, or as an omen of the troubled monastery within which they currently resided. While it is possible that Axl himself was uncertain about his own reasons for restlessness, the text here does not read as free indirect discourse or otherwise adoption of Axl's own perspective. All that the boatman knows is that Axl was restless, and he chooses to provide possible reasons for the reader's benefit, but cannot present one over the other as fact without compromising the authenticity of this moment in the story.

The key effect, therefore, of the boatman's periodic ignorance is his rhetorical gesture to remind us that this story does not belong to him. Recognising this gesture gives us access to part of the boatman's motivations as a narrator. By the time the story is being retold, to whatever unspecified narratee, Axl is presumably long dead, and the couple have no surviving heir and have entrusted the boatman with their story; there are few ethical barriers to the boatman assuming full possession and control of the narrative. The boatman is held back by two personal motivations, which he cannot directly express, but which result in hints that his role is merely as an observer and guardian of the story: guilt and longing, the former of which I shall explore here. The boatman's retelling of Axl and Beatrice's story is self-imposed atonement, resulting from the guilt that their account of their lives and love for one another causes him to feel upon their inevitable separation at his hands. This guilt is comparable to that which we see in Madame in *NLMG*: both she and the boatman have their hands tied, professionally and by the greater powers in their lives (in the boatman's case, his duty to the laws of his universe), and choose to allow the false rumour of an exemption from death to spread in order to keep hope alive in those under their care. Consequently, the Hailsham clones have their art collected and displayed, in an attempt to capture and document their humanity even if their lives cannot be spared. This visual account of their doomed lives is a source of hope for both the clones and those who care for them, but is also a source of confusion and uncertainty for the clones, and

something that evokes feelings of deep grief and guilt in the caretakers. The boatman's preservation of the story of *TBG* functions similarly to Madame's gallery. Though we are led to infer that exemption is not possible, the story that the boatman tells does not directly rule out hope. Yet the very telling of it suggests that the story is standing in for the couple, meaning that an exemption was never given. The boatman keeps their story alive because he believes that they are worthy of remembrance, and would otherwise be forgotten. However, keeping Axl and Beatrice 'alive' in this empty way, knowing that they did not obtain exemption from separation by death, means that the price of telling their story for the boatman is inescapable guilt.

The boatman does not feel that he deserves ownership of Axl and Beatrice's story, because he was unable to allow them to remain together after death, and therefore could not give their story the ending that he believes it deserved. In this sense, he is very aware of his culpability in the conclusion to their story, and claiming possession of their story through creative license, inauthenticity, and an expression of ego in his narration would be to deny this culpability. The boatman will not assume a kind control in the narrative that he could not assume in the events of Axl and Beatrice's lives. However, the boatman's refusal to take full control of the narrative also functions as a form of self-justification and re-conceptualisation of his role. He tells himself, through telling their story, that just as he has no right to assume control of the couple's life story, so too did he have no control over the events of their lives, including their separation upon Beatrice's death. That is, the boatman's guilt drives him to tell this story unembellished, even where he lacks information to make the text properly complete, but rather than absolve him of his guilt, the process of retelling this story gives him the chance to excuse himself of blame, at least in the eyes of his unspecified narratee. In keeping with Ishiguro's other narrators, however, we can only assume that the boatman is unable to convince himself of his innocence in the matter.

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Despite the boatman's gestures to his role in Axl and Beatrice's story throughout *TBG*, the explicit first-person voice that we encounter in the opening chapter is noticeably absent for most of the text. Many chapters open with a return to an external perspective to Axl and Beatrice's direct experience, sometimes with an explicit 'I' or direct address to the narratee. However, much of the text appears to function in the third person, especially in instances of action or dialogue. The narrator's absence, however, is not incidental, nor simply for the sake of keeping the narrative grounded within the story's actual events;

Ishiguro is demonstrably unafraid of letting his narrators wander from the narrative present. Rather, in the boatman's absence, and particularly in his refusal to insert himself into the narrative except where it is unavoidable, we can identify in the boatman a longing for human experience that likewise motivates his authentic retelling of the story he receives from Beatrice. Indeed, this motivation underlies why he tells the story at all. Consequently, in recognising the personal bias of desire that the boatman brings to the narrative, we can begin to unpack the nature of his unreliability, which greatly shapes the text even when—if not especially when—he seems the least present.

Only a few pages into the novel, though we can still occasionally feel the lingering touch of the narrator framing our reading experience, the narrator already drops away. In Faber and Faber's 2016 paperback edition, the narrator last asserts himself as 'I' by the seventh page of the twenty-nine-page chapter (except for a fleeting 'we' on page 21). The following chapter, in which they shelter with the widow and the ominous boatman himself, features direct narratorial intrusion only twice, in two consecutive paragraphs: "I might point out here" (31) and "in much the way, I suppose" (32), the latter of which is purely idiomatic. Neither advance the status of the narrator as a meaningful individual with whom we engage in a personal way. By comparison, the extended sections related entirely in third person read much more naturally. Readers may still register the experience of reading third person in an Ishiguro novel as unusual, but our wider literacy in third-person prose renders the formal qualities of these sections much more invisible than sections in which we are conscious but uncertain of the narrator's role. Shortly following the sole narratorial intrusions present in the second chapter, we receive the following description:

As Beatrice had promised, they were required to walk on the Great Plain for only a short distance. Their path, though muddy at times, remained defined and never took them out of sunlight. After an initial descent it climbed steadily, till they found themselves walking along a high ridge, moorland on either side of them. The wind was fierce, but if anything a welcome antidote to the noon sun. The ground everywhere was covered in heather and gorse, never more than knee high, and only occasionally did a tree come into view – some solitary, crone-like specimen, bowed by endless gales. Then a valley appeared to their right, reminding them of the power and mystery of the Great Plain, and that they were now trespassing on but a small corner of it. (35)

Upon inspection, we can identify the presence of the narrator in this passage. Generalisations are made (“at times”), as are comparisons that we are not expected to attribute to the characters through free indirect discourse (“crone-like”). Overall, this is evidently narrated from an external viewpoint at considerable psychic distance from the experiences of the couple. There is one brief instance where the narrator provides access to the couple’s interior thoughts (“if anything a welcome antidote”), but this nevertheless reads as a narratorial observation, rather than direct reporting of thought. This is not to say that the narrator always denies access to the interiority of Axl and Beatrice by only representing that which can be externally observed. However, the novel makes a clear shift away from the opening pages, adopting a dispassionate relation of events by a heterodiegetic narrator whose existence is merely implied.

Criticism that attempts to use absence as proof is, naturally, often fraught and speculative. Ishiguro, however, did not simply produce a dispassionate, third-person novel, into which we might desperately read an underlying bias belonging to an absent narrator. As with both *ROTD* and *NLMG*, in which the respective narrators downplay their tragedies, culpabilities, and biases, *TBG* pushes us to gloss over and forget that we begin the novel in the hands of a first-person narrator. Just as these suppressed aspects of narratorial identity in the earlier novels come to define our reading experience, *TBG* asks us to examine the apparent narratorial absence, even if the novel simultaneously works to keep the narrator covert. Indeed, for readers and critics of Ishiguro, an explicit first-person narrator who suddenly disappears ought to arouse suspicion, outside of what the text itself may guide us to read into the narrator’s absence. If Stevens’ desire to erase his culpability in his unsatisfactory personal life and Kathy’s desire to render her inhuman nature invisible are where we locate unreliability and the central meaning-making mechanisms of *ROTD* and *NLMG* respectively, then we cannot afford to ignore a narrator who all but manages to erase himself completely for most of *TBG*.

In some ways, the boatman’s absence for much of the text could indicate his reliability as a narrator. This is an especially tempting approach in light of the understanding that one of the boatman’s key motivations is maintaining the authenticity of Beatrice’s dying words. Yet, if the boatman can possess a bias toward authenticity, we must assume that he has the capacity for bias in general, and in his narration. One might stop at accepting a single bias in the narrator’s character, especially since it motivates him to accuracy. However, to do so leaves us with an incomplete understanding of the psychic pain that the boatman experiences, the gravity of which determines our ability to rank

him among Ishiguro's other, tragically unreliable narrators. For the boatman's psychic pain is not only that which he feels vicariously upon hearing Beatrice's story, but a deep and impossible longing to personally understand the truly human experience that Axl and Beatrice possessed, tragedy and all.

Therefore, the boatman's retelling of the story that we read packaged as Ishiguro's *TBG* is his attempt to learn second-hand what it would feel like to live a human life, since first-hand experience of such a life is denied to him. He does so through the process of immersing himself in Beatrice's tale. The primary focalisation through Axl could result from Beatrice's attention to her husband in her relation of her life, from the boatman's sympathy for Axl after Axl leaves Beatrice with the boatman, or even from shared gender identity; we cannot know, as the boatman remains quiet on his reasoning, as he does with so much else. Regardless, Beatrice's tale is the couple's shared story, which Axl confirms in his subsequent conversation with the boatman. More importantly, the experience that the boatman desires to obtain is grounded in Axl and Beatrice's nature as relational and emotional beings, which is in turn embodied, formalised, and externalised in their status as a married couple.

The consequence of this is the boatman's removal of himself from the story that he tells. The novel has many hallmarks of oral storytelling, and the boatman seems aware and in control of his narratorial status and capacities. Just as we can read the use of present tense in the final chapter as the boatman consciously signalling to his narratee his changing involvement in this part of the narrative, so too ought we to see his absence in much of the text as an active decision. For the boatman to obtain the linear, subjective, and often inconsistent experience that he sees in Axl and Beatrice's story, he himself cannot appear in the narrative. The boatman cannot gain an understanding of human experience without escaping his inhuman self, and he cannot escape his inhuman self if his identity invades and taints the story that he is telling.

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When the boatman does appear, it is in one of three ways: formally detached from his own identity and selfhood; filtered only through second or third-hand observation; or, framed by a separate narratorial voice. The first of these applies to his presence at the opening of the novel, the second to his appearance in the ruined villa, and the third to the interpolation of Sir Gawain's voice in the form of his 'Reveries' in the third part of the novel.

In part, the novel opens without specifying much about the narrator's identity for stylistic reasons. We would need to break from the flow of the narrative for the narrator to introduce themselves, and the informal, oral tone suggests that the unspecified narratee does not require the narrator's introduction for whatever reason, much like Stevens. However, by excluding explicit identity markers, the boatman can detach his sense of self from the voice that formally opens the narrative. In addition, the identity markers that do appear all align with traits that do not conflict with traits that Axl, Beatrice, or the narratee might possess. England, for example, is referred to as "our country" (5), but the narrator can associate himself with the English identity comfortably as it does not inhibit his ability to embody Axl and Beatrice's experiences.

The narrator's inhumanity, however, is present in small ways. There is a tension between the implied narrating instance and the narrator's implicit positioning of self into the narrative present, which provides one of the earliest buried hints to the reader of the effects of the boatman's psychic pain. The narrator is contemporary enough to our own time to refer to Axl and Beatrice's England as "the Britain of those days," but also associates himself with the past in the comment "I have no wish to give the impression that [...] we were here not much beyond the Iron Age" (4, emphasis mine). The reader must recognise that they are dealing with a narrator who does not follow the typical human lifespan. The first line of the novel, if more subtly, establishes this as well: "You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated" (3). Here, we simultaneously see a confident knowledge of two eras, one of which would necessarily be either the distant past or distant future from a human perspective. We already see in the opening chapter not only the boatman's desire to escape his inhuman identity through the removal of any markers of self from the narrator, but also the impossibility of this task.

Subsequently, the boatman removes himself entirely from the narrative, shifting into largely unbroken third person. However, the completeness of his absence from the text is threatened when the narrative reaches Axl and Beatrice's respite in the ruined villa. Here, the boatman appears in the flesh, and we are given numerous physical details, all bundled into a near-mythological archetype. It seems unusual for the first-person narrator to represent his own intradiegetic appearance in objective third person, but since the boatman's immersion in Axl and Beatrice's experiences cannot exist alongside the presence of his identity in the story, he relates his own self solely from the external observations made by the elderly couple. In addition, by focusing on the physical details

that reinforce an archetype, such as being “unusually tall” (38), the boatman can effectively contain his inhumanity within the minor, everyday oddities and unusual occurrences in Axl and Beatrice’s story-world.

This solution is far from perfect, however, and though the boatman pushes the narrative to move on from the scene at the villa as quickly and completely as possible, the reader is left expecting the image of the Charon-esque ferryman—even if not the boatman himself—to resonate throughout or even reappear later in the novel. This is particularly reinforced by Beatrice’s comments to Axl upon leaving the villa. She recalls a conversation with a woman whose “husband too had been taken by a boatman,” and the novel outlines Beatrice’s emotional response explicitly, highlighting its importance to her character: “Axl, I feel afraid” (50), and then a few pages later, “The boatman’s words have made me all the more afraid” (52). Because this fear is central to Beatrice’s experience during their journey, the boatman cannot exclude this dialogue without breaking from the trust that he has accepted from Beatrice in the events of the final chapter. He does use Axl’s words, however, to close the matter as neatly as possible; the chapter ends with the line of dialogue, “Let’s be on our way, and no more of these worries” (52), and shifts at the beginning of the third chapter to a new location and a later time—“The Saxon village” (53)—with no transition.

Finally, in a similar manner to Beatrice recalling the other woman’s story about the boatman, Sir Gawain’s two ‘Reveries’ include several references to *a* boatman, who we associate with the iterations of the boatman that we have already encountered. *Gawain’s First Reverie* begins by introducing us to “Those dark widows,” followed by a line that marks out a shift in narrator: “For what purpose did God place them on this mountain path before *me*?” (231, emphasis mine). Sir Gawain never names himself. However, the shift to a new voice is clear, from context and paratext, as well as from the use of rhetorical question, introspection, and reflective description of action, each of which are distinct traits from the boatman’s narrative style. In addition, Gawain does not make use of the second-person pronouns that the text’s primary narrator does, and though Gawain asks many questions, there is little to suggest that he is consciously addressing a narratee, even one unspecified.

We return to the yet-unexplained widows after extended introspection on Gawain’s part, and learn that they blame Gawain’s inability to slay Querig (not knowing, just as we do not yet know, that he is instead tasked to protect her) for their separation from their husbands. Specifically, one of the women explains: “When the boatman put to

me his questions, my beloved already in the boat and reaching out to help me in, I found my most treasured memories robbed from me" (236). This, of course, is a tale that we have already heard twice, first in the ruined villa, and then from Beatrice remembering her conversation with the dark-haired woman. Here, however, we shift to a shared experience, embodied in "fifteen" or even "twenty" women (235). Each woman is affected separately by the boatman, but they collectively form a picture of greater cultural trauma and loss. Gawain responds to their accusations, but remains silent on the boatman and his actions. The widows clearly resent the boatman, but both they and Gawain seem to recognise that the blame for being unable to remember their precious memories with their husbands lies not with the questioner but with the questioned.

In this moment, the boatman described is once again distanced from the boatman-as-narrator. The explicit reference to the boatman functions much as the description in third person while in the ruined villa does, erasing his individuality in favour of furthering the image of a mythological archetype. In addition, however, the use of Gawain as the narrator in this section allows for a naïve representation of the boatman; the dismissal of and disinterest in discussing the boatman's role in the widow's tragedy is not artificially forced by a biased party, but a genuine reflection of Gawain's individual preoccupations. Though Gawain's intrusion seems bizarre and unexpected within the reading experience of *TBG*, it is not unprecedented for Ishiguro to include shifts in narrative framing. For example, *PVOH* has a consistent narrator, but we read the text as shifting between the consciously retold story of her past and the incidental narration of her present. Similarly, *ROTD* sets up the prologue and the bulk of the novel as distinct documents produced by Stevens, but they are packaged into the same novel by Ishiguro. However, it is worth pursuing what exactly Gawain's narration contributes to the text, and in doing so, we can reach an understanding of why the boatman might choose to interpolate this distinct voice into his overall narrative.

The conclusion to the novel alters our understanding of Gawain's encounter with the widows in two ways. Firstly, we learn that the myriad widows lost their husbands not to a malign ferryman figure who came to take them away, but that their husbands were killed in Arthur's battles with the Saxons. Secondly, we discover that, though Axl and Beatrice can recover their memories of their past with just enough time to speak with the boatman—guilt, tragedy, and all—they cannot obtain an exemption from the separation of death. We must, therefore, re-evaluate the widows' accusations and experiences, as the boatman cannot be credited with their husbands' deaths, nor can the continued survival

of the she-dragon be blamed for the separation of husband and wife when one passes away. Introducing these widows does add yet another tragic separation of married couples centred around the boatman; however, as the novel continues, and we learn that the boatman is not solely to blame for the death of the widows' husbands, blame is shifted from the boatman. That is, the novel pushes us to realise that plague and war are the hidden causes of tragedy and trauma in the world of *TBG*, responsible for the widowing and orphaning of so many women and children. In addition, the revelation of the history of war and plague that has scarred this world positions the boatman as another victim of *human* violence, as the war and plague are responsible for the increased trauma that the boatman must vicariously experience as part of his duty to humankind. Gawain's perspectives are not specifically part of the boatman's attempt to experience human existence, but they allow him to give his narratee a wider view of the story-world beyond Axl and Beatrice, not for long enough to detract from their experiences, but rather to provide context for the tragedies that plague their lives.

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Despite his attempts to absolve himself, the boatman still exists in both the narrative and story-world as a mythological figure of death. As a result, the boatman also represents the end of narrative. Death is the ultimate form of closure in narrative, more so than marriage, moral or financial stability, or the end of a quest or voyage. However, even these are frequently styled as a kind of 'death' of the characters around which they centre. As with Axl and Beatrice, though only the latter literally dies, narrative ends for both when they meet the boatman in his intended capacity. Consequently, even while the boatman attempts to keep their story alive, he is inevitably retelling a history rather than living a present reality, and thus past tense is the natural mode in which the narrative is presented. This is also the only form of access to human life that he can understand. That is, for all that he is not human, the boatman knows more *about* human life than any individual human, for he hears the experiences of all upon their death. Yet, he only ever encounters human life as a completed thing, packaged as an oral document in a finished, unmalleable form. The use of past tense, therefore, provides the boatman with the means by which he can access and interpret Axl and Beatrice's story, but it is also why he fails to fully obtain the human experience that he seeks. The stories that he hears are established as history and become unchangeable, especially considering his lack of willingness to alter Beatrice's tale. Therefore, no matter how many times the boatman attempts to live the

couple's experiences through his narration, he has no agency or autonomy in the events of their lives, and therefore cannot obtain the complete human experience.

The boatman shifts to the present tense in the final chapter in a last attempt to capture a present experience before the novel ends. The boatman pours his final moments as a narrator into a version of himself as both character and narrator that formally embodies the present. The final chapter is not included as the final chapter without purpose, or even for the sake of a 'plot twist.' Rather, the events of the final chapter are placed as the novel's conclusion because the boatman prioritises Axl and Beatrice's experience of their story over his own. However, by the time that the boatman has narrated the final moments of Axl and Beatrice's story, his attempt to experience human life from an immersive, present-bound perspective has already failed. The boatman excludes himself from the text, trying to remain objective and forced to use the past tense, but this ultimately reinforces his inhuman position and nature. Because the boatman's role in the story only truly begins during the events of the final chapter, the novel becomes cyclical. The end directs us back to the beginning of the novel again. The boatman has now heard Axl and Beatrice's tale, and is able to begin retelling it.

However, it is exactly this cyclicity that the boatman wishes to escape: the experience of hearing the story of human life over and over again, always as a completed, past tense, oral text, with his appearance only ever coming at the very end, unable to make any alterations, then left to await the arrival of another soul and another story. *TBG*, like the rest of Ishiguro's novels, does not end in the narrator's death, but we can read into each of his narrators a kind of death at the novels' ends. For Stevens, though he closes his narrative with renewed confidence, we know that this will only send him back into his routine, as he is too late in his life to make any real change. The same is true for Kathy, whose death we do not see at the end of *NLMG*, but for whom the chance to escape her fate has come and gone. The boatman uses his narrative as an attempt to understand his own limitations and longings, even if he is not always entirely aware of these underlying motivations. *TBG* closes with the most explicit death in all of Ishiguro's work in Beatrice's journey across to the island; for the boatman, however, it closes in the present tense, with the chance for forward momentum. And yet, we leave the novel knowing that this chance for escape is no more a reality than that which Axl and Beatrice could not obtain.

The boatman's life, if we can call it that, has no end. This means that he need not feel the tragedy of life winding down that Stevens and Kathy both attempt to suppress. However, the alternative—to live as an a-temporal being—is to be trapped in a cycle of

routine and duty, which Stevens and Kathy are at least able to escape one day in death. Though Ishiguro moves furthest from human experience as we understand it in his use of fantasy in *TBG*, manifested most clearly through the inhumanity of the boatman, it is exactly because of the boatman's inhumanity that he can capture for the reader the very human experience of endlessness that plagues all of his earlier narrators, but defines none of them to the same tragic extent that it haunts the boatman.

## Chapter Three – Fantasy, Unreliability, and *The Unconsoled*

Several critics suggest that Ishiguro's titles not only refer to ideas or objects from his novels' worlds, but that they also hint at the structural composition of the texts. Fonioková, for instance, claims of "*An Artist of the Floating World*" that "aspects of the narrative technique [...] can even be spotted in its title," and specifically suggests that "the 'floating world' of the title might be read as the world created by Ono's narration [...] which] is floating because it is not always clear what the narrator's words mean" (92). We might similarly unpack Ishiguro's other titles: "*A Pale View of Hills*" suggests that things at a distance become obscured, even while referring to a literal Nagasaki view; "*When We Were Orphans*" mirrors our experience of the novel from a position of displacement, just as Singapore and England are not suitable homes for Banks after the loss of his family; "*Never Let Me Go*" is not only the title of Kathy's cassette tape, or the in-narrative metaphor that Madame projects onto Kathy, but reflects how we are treated by the narrative as part of Kathy's in-group, of whom she is unable to fully let go. The title "*The Buried Giant*," similarly, can help us to summarise our expectations and experience of the novel's structure. Other than referring to the cairn—initially attributed to a literal giant, but later revealed as the mass grave from Arthur's war before the mist—the reader is aware that something significant must be 'buried' beneath the story, but this remains covert until the final moments of the narrative. In addition, the boatman himself is a mythological or fantastical being, like the story-world's giants and ogres, and he buries his presence beneath the 'actual' story of Axl and Beatrice's mortal lives. The title of *TBG* even serves a specific function, because it directs our attention toward something otherwise only briefly alluded to in the plot. While we ought to be careful of carrying this approach too far, Ishiguro's titles are convenient stepping points for identifying what each novel expects of us.

This chapter looks backward across Ishiguro's oeuvre and examines the role of fantasy in earlier parts of his career, now unearthed by his more explicit use of fantastical conventions and structures in *TBG*. My reading in the previous chapter puts us in a position to re-examine our approach to Ishiguro's central interests and commitments. Specifically, the understanding offered by my reading of Ishiguro's use of fantasy makes accessible the instances of resistance and rejection of realism in his earlier novels. As Elke D'hoker suggests in her overview of unreliability in Ishiguro's writing, each of Ishiguro's protagonists is unreliable in a distinct way, and that only *ROTD* makes it possible to fully

reconstruct the pre-supposed story-world from the information provided by Stevens. Therefore, each of Ishiguro's novels, other than *ROTD*, strays from realism to a different degree, and we can identify the influence of fantastical structures in these divergences. In particular, I centre this chapter around *The Unconsoled*. This text is frequently considered "Ishiguro's most experimental novel" (Baxter 133), as it is the most divorced from realism, and in turn the most influenced by his interest in fantastical structures. If we return to the idea of Ishiguro's titles, then, we can parse our reading experience of *TU*, and specifically our relationship with the text as a whole,<sup>30</sup> by way of the title. *TU* actively resists our attempts to reconstruct a consistent story-world behind Ryder's narration. Consequently, we are left unable to determine where we are expected to sit in relation to the text as a whole. We, like Ryder, reach the close of the novel still very much 'unconsoled.'

Almost all scholarship produced on *TU* considers the difficulty of placing this text. The text has been labelled as surrealism, fantasy, postmodernism, and Kafka-esque, demonstrating that critics of *TU* are very much aware that they tread on uncertain ground. However, the numerous ways that the novel has been classified also reveal the difficulty in determining what form this uncertainty takes. Tim Jarvis refers to an interview conducted with Ishiguro, drawing out Ishiguro's "frustration with critical approaches to his earlier work that centred on its purported verisimilitude" (157). Indeed, if one reads *TU* only in light of his realist 'trilogy,' the "radical break with the form" of Ishiguro's earlier novels certainly turns frustration back upon the critic (Fonioková 13). Fonioková suggests that "Right from the beginning, readers need to adjust their expectations of what is possible" within the story-world of *TU*. Though Ishiguro never returns to the realism of his first three novels after *TU*, verisimilitude reappears to a sufficient extent that the principle of minimal departure applies to *WWWO* and *NLMG*. In *TU*, therefore, we are left with an often bizarre and opaque text that continues to resist any singular interpretive strategy, despite its clear place in Ishiguro's career as a bridge between realist and speculative approaches.

The primary reason for the continuing opacity of *TU*, it seems, is that it stands alone among Ishiguro's first six novels in the extremity of its anti-realism. The experiment, as it were, does not go through multiple iterations. Detective and science fiction return us to a

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<sup>30</sup> Or, with the implied author, who embodies the norms and position of the text as a whole. See Phelan, *Living to Tell* pp. 40-43: Rimmon-Kenan sees the implied author as "a set of norms" and an aggregation; Chatman reframes the implied author as the "codes and conventions of the text" or "the text intent"; Nünning proposes that we instead consider "the structural whole." These definitions all point toward the idea that what we engage with, be it a hypothetical individual or otherwise, is constructed from what the text presents as the expected position of the implied reader.

position too close to the realism of Ishiguro's first three novels to provide a sufficient point of comparison. We do engage with Ryder on human terms, as with Stevens and Kathy on either side of Ryder in Ishiguro's oeuvre. However, Ryder is alone in how fantastical his experience is. Because we are familiar with Ishiguro's similarly tormented narrators, despite their diverse story-worlds, we feel that Ryder should also be read as unreliable. However, in *TU*, "not just the narrator is out of tune with reality, reality itself is tilted at an angle" (D'hoker 161). Throughout the novel, our inability to meaningfully "distin[g]uish between fact and fabrication in Ryder's narrative" (161) strangely positions Ryder as "the voice of reason and the perspective of sanity" (Howard, qtd. in D'hoker 161). By comparison, prior to *TBG*, Kathy's England is the next most estranged story-world, but the divergences of her world are frequently suppressed. D'hoker also argues that "Kathy is perhaps the most reliable of Ishiguro's narrators" (164)—she "is less self-deceiving than, say, Stevens" (Sawyer 241)—but we register that Kathy is still trapped within an illusion of normalcy that differs from the facts of her reality. Despite any secondary self-delusions that Ryder may indulge, he is not trapped in an illusion, but beset by forces external to his narration that make his story-world seem inconsistent.

*TBG* is a very different novel from *TU*. In many ways, the narrators in these two texts function as opposites. Ryder is lost within a labyrinthine landscape, slave to its whims and whimsicality, whereas the boatman presides above his story-world, not limited by the human struggles of the protagonists whose story he tells. Ryder is subject to the fantasy of the text he inhabits, while the boatman is himself part of the fantasy of *TBG*. I shall, in this chapter, complicate this claim and pursue various similarities between Ryder and the boatman. Regardless, in both the commonalities and divergences, we gain new insight into Ishiguro's covert use of fantasy in *TU* when it is examined alongside *TBG*, which equals and even exceeds the anti-realism found in *TU*. Specifically, bringing our understanding of the fantastical structures of *TBG* to *TU* allows us to examine the reader's lack of consolation (that is, reconciliation to the position of the implied author) within this novel, which is the primary barrier to stable interpretation.

### **The Illogic of Dreams and the Logic of Fantasy**

Criticism on *The Unconsoled* that has identified the novel as fantastical, prior to *TBG*, does so primarily in one of two ways. The first identifies structures that adhere to

the logic (or illogic) of dreams, or otherwise reads the narrative as a literal dream.<sup>31</sup> The second locates the fantasy within Ryder himself, either attributing strange abilities to him, or seeing him in a narrative position that provides agency over his story-world, which homodiegetic narrators do not typically possess.<sup>32</sup> Both approaches draw out significant aspects of Ishiguro's 'experiment' with *TU*. However, especially in light of *TBG*, they seem dissonant with Ishiguro's recurrent interests and commitments.

The dream-narrative is a tempting interpretive framework to bring to *TU*, especially when coming from a realist perspective. This approach rationalises the internal inconsistencies and physical impossibilities of Ryder's narrative and story-world, without needing to codify these as 'laws' or 'norms,' which estranged story-worlds in genre fiction require. Aspects of the text itself reinforce this temptation. Ryder primarily meets people he knows or alternate versions of himself, which resonates with the common myth that you can only dream of people you have met. Ryder often acts as though 'sleepwalking,' and frequently mentions his exhaustion and need for rest. In addition, a dream-narrative potentially complements the interest in memory across Ishiguro's novels. Reading *TU* as Ryder's dream, or a narrative that follows the illogic of dreams, allows us to view Ryder as trapped within his subconscious, physically and temporally re-immersed in his own history and self-constructed identity. However, the impossibility of returning to one's own past—i.e. the inability to change or even accurately recapture one's personal history—defines Ishiguro's narrators. Viewing *TU* as a literal dream implies that the 'real' Ryder is asleep for the duration of the text and cannot, in the dreamed story-world, change his past in the waking world. This is never represented within the text, and the world that Ryder narrates is read as the primary diegesis. Consequently, though he fails in his efforts, the projection of dream-logic onto the text gives Ryder the agency to communicate with and influence his younger and older selves, and to start relationships anew with individuals he has isolated in the past. Ryder's constant failure goes some way to reconcile this reading with Ishiguro's other narrators' inability to change their pasts. However, this framing of the novel generates a possibility, no matter how slim, for escape from the kind

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<sup>31</sup> A. Harris Fairbanks suggests "the events are not those of a proper dream [but] they belong to a world in which events and the main character's psychological reactions operate as they do in a dream" (604), and quotes Barry Lewis, who claims "Ryder is not dreaming within his life; he is living within a dream. Whose dream it is, is not clear" (605). Carlos Villar Flor labels Ryder's unreliability as "oneiric" (162).

<sup>32</sup> Fonioková claims that Ryder's "subjectivity interferes with fictional reality" (114), "result[ing] in an unnatural narrative" rather than an unreliable one (122); she concludes from this that "the novel calls for a metaphorical reading" (23).

of psychic pain that, time and time again, Ishiguro demonstrates that he believes is inescapable.

Ishiguro himself claims that he “was using dream as a model” (qtd. in Fonioková 113). However, he also claims that “The whole thing is supposed to take place in some strange world,” suggesting that Ryder’s story-world is not dictated by his representation of it. Though we can still acknowledge the influence of dream-narratives upon Ishiguro’s construction of Ryder’s story-world, it seems more significant that the narrative resists the complete illogic of dreams. Instead, *TU* makes literal the unease that we associate with dream-narratives within an internally consistent (even if opaque) story-world. The structure of the dream is in many ways a necessary stepping point to understand Ryder’s story-world. However, to understand how the text explores memory and character, and furthers Ishiguro’s ‘experiment’ with narration, we cannot stretch the illogic of dreams to account for every incongruous aspect of the story-world. This denies us the ability to examine the nuance of how the story-world might function with an internal logic of its own.

Attributing extraordinary abilities to Ryder himself is in some ways more compelling, and bears resonances with the position of the narrator in *TBG*. This reading attributes agency to Ryder over the facts, not just the representation, of the story-world, comparable to the boatman’s supernatural status. Waugh suggests that Ryder “is granted a kind of uncanny omniscience as he telepathically enters the minds of others” (18). From this perspective, Ryder assumes authority over the interiority of other characters within his own diegesis, a level of control usually reserved for narrators external to the story-world of the text. Though the boatman in *TBG* chooses to limit his narrative to details provided by Beatrice, we see hints throughout that he possesses knowledge beyond the elderly woman’s dying words, which occupy several minutes at most. The boatman is a seemingly heterodiegetic narrator with access to the interiority of his protagonists, who is revealed at the novel’s conclusion to reside within the same level of diegesis as those whose story he narrates, meaning that he can (potentially) transcend the typical limitations of homodiegetic narrators. Ryder is the explicit homodiegetic narrator throughout *TU*, but he possesses many typically heterodiegetic traits that the boatman also exhibits. This reading, however, leads to the same problems as approaching *TU* as a dream-narrative. As Fonioková suggests:

just as a dream is the product of one’s mind, the fictional reality of this book originates in Ryder’s mind. The laws of this fictional world are incompatible with

the laws of our own actual world, and therefore we cannot apply the rules of the extratextual world to assess the narrator's mimetic authority. (113)

The second part of this statement is self-evident, and aligns with the framework that my wider argument establishes. As she later points out, "Using our real-world frames of reference when reading *Unconsoled* would lead us to discard large parts of the narrative as utter nonsense" (123). However, our recognition that Ryder's story-world does not adhere to the laws of our own does not require the story-world to be a product of Ryder's mind. Were this the case, all first-person narrators of fantasy would be considered "unnatural," as Fonioková labels Ryder. Fantasy is distinct from the dream-narrative because, in fantasy, we pre-suppose the existence of the story-world beneath the narrator's telling of it.

Conversely, Fonioková's reading of Ryder can instead allow us to locate fantastical elements in the story-world rather than in its narrator. She claims that "Ryder's illusions are incorporated into the textual actual world" (125). The strangeness of the story-world often mirrors Ryder's mind, but Ryder himself does not necessarily shape the world around him with any narratorial authority. Rather, Ryder's fantastical story-world takes his illusions and presents them back to him in a physical form. Fonioková suggests that the reader "hesitates between a natural explanation"—i.e. that Ryder is dreaming—"and a supernatural explanation (which would [...] accept all the strange events as real [...])." This neatly summarises the challenge presented to the reader, but the suggestion that the reader lands somewhere in the middle (termed a 'generalized fantastic') seems incomplete. Drawing on Tzvetan Todorov, Fonioková says that:

Unlike in the pure fantastic [...], the (potentially) supernatural elements in this type of fictional world cease to be extraordinary but '[become] a rule' [...] the reader cannot look for a natural explanation of the unnatural elements but needs to accept the world's strange rules. (126)

To me, this is exactly what places *TU* in the realm of the pure fantastic. The impossible becomes the rule, the strange is elided with the normal, and the characters (including the character-narrator) are subject to laws existing externally before Ryder and his internal problems arrive on the scene, because these laws are not derived from his externalised psychology.

Those who see this novel as partially fantastical have not misread *TU*, but rather they 'hesitate' to commit to reading this novel as purely fantastical, because the temptation to approach Ishiguro's novels expecting story-world mimesis could not be

fully resisted until Ishiguro presented us with an undeniably fantastical text, in the form of *TBG*. However, the fantastical structures in these two texts—and to a lesser extent in *WWWO* and *NLMG*—do not reduce the simultaneous presence of character-mimesis. Rather, by viewing the estranged or fantastical elements of the story-worlds as ‘the rule,’ we can engage with Ishiguro’s character-narrators on human terms from a perspective that accepts anti-mimesis as the baseline in place of realism. Prior to *TBG*, when the parameters of Ishiguro’s story-worlds became indeterminate, critics approached the novels in ways that allowed classic unreliability to fit the texts. *TBG* allows us to recognise that, in several of Ishiguro’s novels, this indeterminacy is the baseline on which we should build our case for narratorial unreliability. When reading *TU*, we may never fully understand the parameters of the story-world, but this is akin to only receiving small pieces of history in *NLMG*. We should see the fantastical elements of the narrative as fixed, rather than dismissing them as the arbitrary results of Ryder’s psychosis. The laws that bind the boatman in *TBG* allow us to identify his psychic pain, and therefore bring him into conversation with Ishiguro’s other narrators. We should recognise that the same is true for Ryder. Despite not sharing the limitations of his mortal protagonists, the boatman’s limitations within his story-world expose the fears, desires, and personal biases that motivate his telling of Beatrice’s tale. Because the boatman is often absent, we may not consistently engage with him as if he were human throughout *TBG*, but understanding that the impossible and metaphorical are made literal in the boatman’s story-world allows us to retrospectively attribute human qualities, which we see in the likes of Stevens and Kathy, to the boatman. To appreciate Ryder’s similar psychic pain, therefore, we must see him pitted against a story-world in which he has no more agency than Stevens or Kathy.

This should not be an invitation to take a reductive view of Ryder’s complexity as a narrator. The impulse behind D’hoker and Fonioková’s projects is a unique and much needed intervention into scholarship on Ishiguro’s novels. Both rightly suggest that the term ‘unreliable’ is attributed to Ishiguro’s narrators too freely, and that we need new tools to appreciate each narrator’s individual characterisation within their respective texts.<sup>33</sup> In the same spirit, my claim that we need to identify a generically-determined baseline in each text upon which to build a case for unreliability does not confine all of Ishiguro’s narrators to the straightforward unreliability found most purely in *ROTD*.

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<sup>33</sup> D’hoker even suggests that we can best understand Ryder “only when his fantastic tale is read in a non-realist way” (162), though she believes that fantasy does not allow readings of Ryder as unreliable (161).

Instances of contradiction between Ryder's narration and the facts of his anti-mimetic story-world align with classic unreliability within my approach, but these moments are minor within Ryder's overall unreliability. Despite the novel's past tense and my hesitation to attribute to Ryder too much agency, Ryder does embody the present of his narrative.<sup>34</sup> He shares Kathy's lack of intent to deceive the reader, along with her naivety to her situation, but does not share her retrospection or layering of memory-within-memory. He shares with the boatman an unnatural story-world, but experiences it from a human position, and seeks to escape rather than embrace the present. He shares Stevens' delusions of grandeur, but instead of resisting emotional expression, he is prone to bouts of both apathy and anger. He shares supposed celebrity and social detachment with Banks, but where Banks is desperate to find a home, Ryder resists every opportunity to make the unnamed European city home, even upon finding his apparent wife and child living there.

Ishiguro's use of genre, and the way in which unreliability changes across genres, alters the relationship between reader and the implied author or text as a whole. In *TU*, we are given a structure and setting that we cannot use our own reality to understand, and we also have insufficient information to say with certainty what the norms and positions of the structural whole are. We therefore find it difficult to determine the extent of the narrator's unreliability, and struggle to reconstruct the 'facts' of the story-world beneath the narrator's representation of it. This problem is self-reinforcing: because we cannot obtain an accurate picture of the pre-supposed story-world, we cannot confidently determine the narrator's level of unreliability, and in turn we cannot determine the position relative to the narrator that we ought to share with the implied author.

The fantastical story-world and structures of *TU* not only provide a unique context for experiencing Ryder's particular unreliability, but they shape and dictate the form it takes. For example, several moments of 'pure' unreliability in Ryder's narrative occur when he retrospectively rationalises his actions during a previous encounter or event that baffled him at the time. Chance meetings are reimagined as conscious and careful interviews. Ryder wakes in a panic in the first line of the second, third, and fourth sections of the novel; this panic is soothed each time by sudden revelations (e.g. "But then" [293], "But when" [413]), even though he has learned nothing new and his subsequent actions are equally random and chaotic. And, Ryder occasionally acts with confidence that is not reflected in his narration, such as his reassurances to Miss Stratman that "I was very keen

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<sup>34</sup> In Genette's terms, he functions as a simultaneous narrator (217).

to meet and talk with [the Countess and Mr von Winterstein], but when circumstances made it impossible for me to do everything we had originally hoped, I thought they would understand” (254). Ryder is merely repeating information that Miss Stratmann provides during the conversation, but his tone suggests that he believes in his own sincerity and lucidity, despite his ignorance moments before. *TU* is riddled with ‘realisations’: “Then after a while I noticed there was an odd quality to the whole atmosphere in the room” (125); “A considerable period, I realised, had elapsed since I had [left Boris in the cafe]” (198). With each ‘realisation,’ Ryder attempts to demonstrate his growing understanding of his situation, but is undercut by the fact that either the reader infers the same understanding long in advance, or else there is nothing to realise in the first place. We as readers witness the events that initially baffle Ryder, rendering any deception impossible. In these instances, much as Stevens does for the entirety of *ROTD*, Ryder retells his past (albeit the much more recent past) to himself, to us, and to the other characters in the novel, in order to bolster his confidence in his identity.

The source of Ryder’s confusion is often embedded in the fantastical nature of the story-world, rather than his misevaluation of it. Unlike Stevens (but perhaps more like Kathy), Ryder seeks to use his narrative to normalise the abnormal. When attempting to find the concert hall in chapter 26, Ryder encounters “a brick wall running across [his] path – in fact, across the entire breadth of the street” (387). The woman whom Ryder asks for directions treats the wall as entirely ordinary, if slightly inconvenient, suggesting that a natural explanation might exist. In addition, the uncanniness of the wall is obscured beneath a banal “gift shop” with “postcard after postcard featuring the wall” (388). However, the wall is conveniently—or inconveniently—blocking the most obvious path for Ryder to reach the concert hall, and though we do not treat the wall as supernatural, its sudden appearance and sheer abnormality makes it difficult to shake the notion that the wall simply should not be there. The wall joins the plethora of other minor implausibilities that, collectively, cannot be reconciled with reality. Ryder’s response is outrage, but not disbelief: “In fact, if I may say so, this wall is quite typical of this town. Utterly preposterous obstacles everywhere.” Stevens finds barriers to his success and happiness even when none exist, and attempts to justify these imagined obstacles by painting them as tangible and oppressive. By comparison, Ryder is literally met with an implausible (if not impossible) obstacle, but he cannot see it as more than bad town planning, nor does he notice the parallel between his physical environment and internal psychology. Instead, he gets angry and wanders off, only to get lost once more. The reader

cannot normalise the wall within the principle of minimal departure, even though it is just a brick wall, because the text frames the wall as undoubtedly anti-mimetic. When Ryder encounters objects and events that are both impossible and laden with potential symbolism, his particular unreliability, distinct from Stevens' overreading and more extreme than Kathy's underreading, means that he does his best to ignore these encounters, and empties them of any significance.

## The Fantastical Groundwork

The opening chapter of *The Unconsole*d presents three examples of the story-world's fantastical nature, which establish what we ought to expect as the text continues. The fantastical elements of *TU* are developed over time, unlike the explicit introduction of ogres and other mythical creatures in the opening of *TBG*, and remain largely covert for the whole novel. They nevertheless follow many of the same structures. *TU* simply requires us to negotiate deviations from reality that are much subtler. Specifically, the opening chapter exhibits alternative rules for time, space, and individual interiority. At first, the reader glosses over encounters with the impossible, assuming natural explanations for divergences from expected reality. Only when the impossibilities are repeated do we recognise that we are reading a work of fantasy.<sup>35</sup> We begin to suspect Ryder's unreliability in the opening pages, because he demonstrates so little knowledge about the unnamed city or his reasons for being there, but we subconsciously make sense of the more extreme inconsistencies through what Tamar Yacobi terms the 'functional principle.' The reader sees instances that must otherwise be fantastical as manifestations of "aesthetic, thematic and persuasive goals" of the text ("Fictional" 117). However, we retrospectively recognise that we have entered a world dissimilar to our own from the moment Ryder disembarks his taxi. That is, the three instances of anti-mimesis that appear in the first chapter establish our obscured relationship with the implied author from the beginning.

The first fantastical instance shows how time progresses unnaturally in the novel. Ryder's bags are taken by Gustav, the elderly porter, whom we later discover is potentially Ryder's father-in-law, or an older version of Ryder in the narrative present. Ryder and

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<sup>35</sup> Fairbanks also notes the various strange occurrences of the first chapter. She explains, "Individually these anomalies might be and have been regarded as signs of various mental conditions ranging from amnesia to clairvoyance, dementia, alcoholism, and dream," but comes to the conclusion that "Collectively [...] they can be seen [...] as characteristics of normal dreaming" (606).

Gustav enter the elevator and begin discussing Gustav's views on being a porter. The conversation is eventually joined by Miss Stratmann, who is also in the elevator, though Ryder does not notice her for some time. This conversation takes up just under seven pages in the 2013 Faber and Faber edition, during which Gustav expounds his opinions in long paragraphs (5-11). We could assume that the elevator is simply slow or delayed, but Ryder treats the ride as perfectly normal, and is not agitated by the journey's duration, despite voicing his frustration when delayed elsewhere in the novel. The trip's ending is not dwelled upon or laden with any sense of relief or finality: "Just at this moment the elevator doors slid open and the elderly porter set off down the corridor" (11). Despite Ryder's lack of reaction, the text makes us aware of just how long we have been reading one conversation, creating dissonance between how Ryder seems to experience time and how we experience the same scene as the reader.

The odd duration of this scene exceeds the extent to which Yacobi's functional principle can be applied to fictional dialogue. Novels need to compress and expand time to function, and dialogue is often at once perfectly recalled but inaccurate to the messiness of conversation. We intuitively accept these divergences from reality as necessary, rather than interpreting them as fantastical. However, the conversation in the elevator stretches this convention beyond our ability to ignore. Nevertheless, we attempt to account for this as a quirk of Ishiguro's telling. As Phelan suggests, readers have a natural tendency to "preserve the mimetic component of the story by finding a plausible, naturalistic rationale for the narration" (*Living to Tell* 25). When we encounter redundant telling, our impulse is to imagine a natural reason for the character-narrator to incorporate "discourse functions" into their narrative (12). In *TU*, Ishiguro subverts this tendency. The temporal inconsistencies in Ryder's narration are easy to miss, because we as fiction-literate readers are used to assuming natural explanations for implausible or redundant telling. However, when we do notice, attempts to rationalise the strangeness as necessary on the discourse level (rather than as defective at the narrative level) are insufficient, because no apparent reason exists for the excessive redundancy. To look for a natural explanation that 'preserves mimesis' is equally insufficient. Ryder is not unaware of the trip's duration, he is simply unconcerned. We must accept that this is simply an implausibly long elevator ride, and that our impulses to explain the temporal distortion as natural or as discourse functions are insufficient and reductive.

That *TU* begins with a long elevator ride is not necessarily cause for a radical shift in our interpretive strategies for this novel. However, it allows us to begin examining the

covert position that the implied author inhabits. The inability for us to interpret time through a real-world framework complicates our ability to determine Ryder's narrating instance. Though Ryder appears to embody the present of his story, the past tense narration suggests that it is told with some degree of retrospection. This distance could be negligible, with Ryder telling each action from the subsequent moment, reflecting on the immediate 'past' from the 'present.' Ryder could be speaking from the end of each day, or otherwise when he takes time to rest, such as before he falls to sleep at the end of the chapter, comparable to Stevens' narration. Or, the narrating instance could be after the novel's conclusion, with Ryder retrospectively telling his story in an immersive style, positioning himself functionally in the narrative present. The narrating instance is vital to our understanding of all of Ishiguro's character-narrators. In *PVOH*, Etsuko narrates her past in Japan from her present in England, creating distance between her present and past selves. Her present self is unreliable because she projects her current preoccupations and fears onto her past self. Stevens' 'interpolated' narration (see Genette 217) allows us to perceive development between each narrating instance. The distance between Stevens and the position that we share with the implied author shrinks as he experiences realisation, but never collapses. His 'progress' is represented as insufficient, but it is nevertheless important that we "see the narrative [i.e. the structural whole] bring its hero to the point where the narrator awaits him" (Genette 226). We seek to adopt the implied author's 'objective' position, which we locate by comparing and evaluating the relationship between the pre-supposed story-world, the narrator's state within the narrative present, and the narrator's state at the narrating instance. This becomes almost impossible when the logic of time is stripped from us in *TU*. In Ryder's fantastical story-world, for example, the time of travel is dictated by the duration of conversation rather than the distance between two points. Consequently, though not all texts need to specify the exact narrating instance to be salient, the role and logic of time is sufficiently estranged in *TU* that the reader cannot confidently determine the implied author's position from which we are expected to interpret the text.

The second fantastical instance in the first chapter demonstrates a lack of boundaries between individuals' interiorities. This also reveals in Ryder the kind of narrator that eventually appears in a more extreme form as *TBG*'s boatman. While Gustav is showing Ryder his hotel room, Ryder adopts the role of narrator for Gustav's experiences, rather than his own. That is, Ryder creates another layer of diegesis within his autodiegetic narrative, in which Gustav is still represented in third person, but

becomes the focal figure as if he were the protagonist. Ryder somehow knows information such as which thoughts have “pushed [their] way to the front of [Gustav’s] mind” (13), and even though we read Gustav’s perspective as part of the narrative present rather than a digression, his thoughts are not readily apparent within the story-world. Ryder-as-character shifts into Gustav’s mind, but Gustav’s perspective is related by Ryder-as-narrator. Genette suggests that this kind of narrating is ‘pseudo-diegetic,’ and occurs when “a narrative second in its origin [e.g. Gustav’s experiences] is immediately brought to the first level [e.g. Ryder-as-character] and taken charge of [...] by the narrator-hero [e.g. Ryder-as-narrator]” (240). What makes this fantastical, rather than simply a subversion of convention, is Ryder’s impossible access to Gustav’s thoughts; character-narrators should not be able to “enter the consciousness of another character” (*Living to Tell*, 12).<sup>36</sup>

Ryder’s intrusion into other characters’ interiorities should not be read as a unique ‘ability,’ but as a covert aspect of the fantastical story-world. Some critics, encouraged by Ishiguro’s own comments, see Gustav and other characters whose minds Ryder invades as versions of himself from different periods of his life.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of why Ryder has access to other characters’ thoughts, this access disrupts our ability to clearly delineate where Ryder is or is not reliable. In some instances, such as the wishful story Ryder circulates about his parents’ arrival, we can interpret Ryder’s unreliability in the classic sense. However, many moments that normally would be considered overreading or misevaluating are comparatively unaffected by Ryder’s bias. When Ryder is given access to Gustav’s thoughts, we do not question the factual accuracy of the information that he reports. However, some of Ryder’s first-hand experiences, which would be mere “scenic descriptions” (D’hoker 160) in other novels, are seemingly impossible, and therefore more difficult for the reader to accept. We are asked to trust information that has passed through multiple perspectives as fact, while comparatively less-filtered information about the story-world is treated with suspicion. We cannot identify the difference between

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<sup>36</sup> Fonioková sees this as unnatural narration: Ryder is a homodiegetic narrator who possesses authority over the story-world that is usually reserved for heterodiegetic narrators. In most novels, this would be a flaw or quirk on the author’s part, or a sign of unreliability, whereas Fonioková suggests that an unnatural narrator can break these boundaries within the structure of the text (122-127). Unnatural narrative theory sees the manipulation of the narrator’s limitations, such as Ryder’s narrating of Gustav’s experiences, for stylistic purposes, and does not consider the implications of Ryder being a genuinely unreliable and entirely limited narrator within a fantastical world. Fonioková does suggest that it “enables us to read [unnatural instances] as a message about the human condition” (123); this brings us closer in some ways to engaging with Ryder on human terms, but also prioritises a thematic reading.

<sup>37</sup> This reading works well within my own, but will not be pursued here, given its robust consideration elsewhere. See Fonioková (116) and D’hoker (162).

Ryder's accurate and altered representations of his story-world, because his unreliability is melded with the fantastical forces that shape his reality. Consequently, our ability to determine the type or extent of Ryder's unreliability obscures the 'objective' position of the implied author that we attempt to locate.

The third fantastical moment in the first chapter disrupts our understanding of how location and distance function in *TU*. These spatial inconsistencies are where the story-world of *TU* becomes unmistakably anti-mimetic, forcing the reader to account for occurrences that cannot be readily naturalised. When Ryder is finally alone in his hotel room, the following occurs:

I was just starting to doze off when something suddenly made me open my eyes again and stare up at the ceiling. [...] This room I was now in, I realised, was the very room that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents and I had lived at my aunt's house on the borders of England and Wales. [...] It had been recently re-plastered and re-painted, its dimensions had been enlarged, the cornices had been removed, the decorations around the light fitting had been entirely altered.

But it was unmistakably the same. (16)

Our instinct is to dismiss the literal quality of Ryder's words, presuming that he is emphasising the strength of his feeling, that he is speaking from nostalgia, or even that he is deluded. We could also assume that Ishiguro is thematising Ryder's feelings of isolation and displacement. These readings appear adequate for the first chapter in isolation, but our attempts to naturalise this moment are shaken at later points in the novel, when two necessarily distinct spaces become impossibly united. Ryder is woken at the beginning of chapter 10 by the hotel's proprietor, Mr Hoffman. They have a conversation spanning several pages as they drive very clearly away from the hotel, "out of the city" (120), and eventually "through some tall iron gates into the courtyard of a substantial residence" (123). At the end of the chaotic dinner held therein, Mr Hoffman's son, Stephen, offers to "walk back" with Ryder to their rooms, which confuses Ryder at first, until "it suddenly dawned on [him] that [they] were in the atrium of the hotel," which he simply "had not recognised" (148). There is a corridor to the more recognisable section of the hotel, and Ryder is suddenly back in the centre of the city. A little over a hundred pages later, after driving through the country with Boris and Sophie, Ryder drives "under a stone arch into the courtyard" (note: not iron gates) to his next social event (266). This concludes chapter 18, and the following chapter opens with a "stout housemaid" greeting Ryder with: "'It's nice to see you again, sir'" (267). Ryder then realises that "it was the same [house]

Hoffman had brought [him] to the previous evening.” Later, when trying to leave the event, Ryder recalls that “the house adjoined the hotel” (277) (note: it is not the hotel), but he struggles to locate the door through to the hotel proper. Ryder chooses the door that seems “the most imposing” (278), but finds himself in a broom closet. He soon finds the correct corridor, but the door is presumably not marked for its purpose.

The possible explanation that Ryder takes circuitous routes, due to the opaque reasoning of his various hosts, becomes infeasible to readers by this point in the novel. We have become sufficiently immersed in Ryder’s discordant world that such a reading now feels reductive and empty, especially when Ryder himself treats such instances as natural. We could still read this distortion of space as part of Ryder’s nightmare-narrative. However, being able to recognise the impossible arrangement of the city as fantastical rather than a psychological projection is far more compelling. In addition, in order for the story-world to be external to Ryder, then effectively instantaneous transportation across the city must be either a distortion of time (which we have already seen), or an actual distortion of space. The spatial distortions of the story-world once again complicate our ability to determine the text’s norms. Ryder’s experience of the city involves the constant superimposition of one space upon another, meaning that many rooms and buildings significant within the narrative are described with contradictory facts. Ryder arrives both times to the same house through changed gates, and leaves through changed doors, suggesting that the house in the country does not itself possess a fixed layout, even before we account for this house also being the hotel and being adjacent to but distinct from the hotel. We cannot simply attribute these inconsistencies to inaccurate narration, because multiple experiences of Ryder-as-character are so physically embedded in these spaces. We cannot know at any point where exactly Ryder might be in relation to places encountered previously in the novel. Therefore, we at once lack enough information to reconstruct a consistent mental map of the story-world, and are required to negotiate too many contradictory details for the story-world to be a useful point of reference for determining Ryder’s unreliability or the implied author’s position.

We can see parallels to each of these three fantastical alterations to the laws and norms of reality in *TBG*, and specifically located in the boatman himself. The boatman’s fantastical nature is intertwined with his atemporality, and his complex relationship with the narrative present makes it difficult to determine when the narrating instance occurs. In addition, just as Ryder’s unusual relationship with time guides Fonioková to see Ryder as an ‘unnatural’ narrator, possessing functions of homo- and heterodiegetic narrators, so

too does the boatman's atemporality guide us to initially assume that the narrator of the first section of *TBG* is heterodiegetic. The unusual access that Ryder has to other characters' thoughts is mirrored in the knowledge that the boatman possesses of not only Axl and Beatrice's thoughts, but Sir Gawain, Master Wistan, and Edwin, who we do not see gifting their story to the boatman. Even in Beatrice's case, however, the boatman exhibits knowledge of details that cannot have been shared in the few minutes that he speaks with Beatrice. Finally, the conflation of discrete spaces does not occur in *TBG*, but we are given mutually exclusive details about events in the story-world, all of which we are asked to see as factually correct. For example, the boatman is simultaneously a consequence and cause of death. The various mourning widows, who lost their husbands to war, famine, and plague, buried their husbands' bodies in physical graves; the boatman merely carried their souls away. However, the widows blame the boatman for separating them from their husbands. In Axl and Beatrice's case, we know that Beatrice dies of her wound. At the same time, the boatman takes her to the island while she is still dying, leaving Axl behind. She possesses a literal, fatal wound, but her final passing is attributed to the boatman.

The difference between the two novels is that *TBG* flags its fantastical elements to the reader, but *TU* does not. What *TBG* offers readers of Ishiguro's other novels is the ability to locate the fantastical where it is not flagged. The clear generic positioning of *TBG* means that its fantastical elements are accompanied with more explicit explanations, such as the boatman's direct access to Beatrice's story, whereas we do not see how Ryder learns Gustav's thoughts. In addition, even when explanations are not provided in *TBG*, our knowledge that it is fantasy allows us to accept many impossible elements as a given. For example, we accept death's dual nature as both physical and spiritual because we are familiar with this concept from mythology, which we know is the origin of the boatman's character. Indeed, though there are direct parallels between the two novels that can elucidate aspects of *TU*, the fact that Ishiguro has brought explicit fantasy into his oeuvre at all is just as significant. Just as *ROTD* sets a precedent for approaching unreliability in Ishiguro's writing, *TBG* provides readers with a precedent for seeing the fantastical in works that we would more quickly place within other genres.

## Conclusions

The primary result of Ishiguro's use of fantasy in *The Unconsoled* is that Ryder's memories and preoccupations are made physical and present. This is what all of Ishiguro's narrators attempt to conjure through the act of narrating, and is also exactly what they can never achieve. However, my reading demonstrates that the condensing of Ryder's life into the present through the novel's fantastical mechanics (rather than somnambulant delusions or unnatural power vested in Ryder himself) does not provide Ryder with agency over his actual past or his memory of it. The novel's genre allows Ishiguro to confront Ryder with his fears, desires, shames, and misconceptions in a literal, tangible way, but Ryder is also stripped of his agency to a greater extent than Ishiguro's other narrators. When the fantastical story-world takes Ryder's internal life and externalises it, he loses control of his past and memories both in his own mind and in his narrative. In *ROTD*, Stevens is ultimately in control of the story he tells, and any cracks that we see are caused by his shattering image of himself. By comparison, Ryder is plagued by past mistakes in a more aggressive manner than Stevens, because the assault is external rather than self-inflicted. The increasing tangibility of Ryder's past is inversely proportionate to his control over the story that he tells. If we choose to read certain other characters as past or future versions of Ryder, he does not simply represent Brodsky, Gustav, Stephen, and Boris in his narrative as images of himself; rather, they are physically, mentally, and emotionally autonomous individuals from Ryder, even if they are intended by the text to represent 'parts' of the same person. Ryder has no more control over his actual or remembered past than he does over characters such as Sophie, who is an entirely separate individual placed in opposition to Ryder. Though Ryder experiences the past-made-present that Stevens longs for, the fantasy keeps agency outside of Ryder's reach, and Ryder remains just as unconsoled as Stevens. Ryder-as-character is consequently unmoored in the text, and Ryder-as-narrator lacks the memories necessary to represent himself as a complete person. Hints of his past and future are revealed by other characters, sometimes as direct information, and sometimes when we infer that certain other characters are mirroring Ryder. Unlike our experience with *TBG*, however, the individual without memory tells their own story, and it is Ryder, who is both protagonist and narrator, with whom we engage on human terms.

It is not only Ryder who closes the novel without consolation; so too does the reader. Ryder's lack of consolation, though grounded in and facilitated by the fantastical

story-world, is still the consequence of his dissatisfaction with his own life. The novel's genre simply allows this to become external and literal. The reader's lack of consolation is the direct product of Ishiguro's use of fantasy. The approach to *TU* enabled by my reading of *TBG* reveals that, by obscuring the position of the implied author through the use of fantasy, the text resists the typical interpretive strategies that we use to evaluate character in fiction. When Ryder enters the unnamed European town, he finds himself without a schedule, forcing him to navigate both events and relationships without a familiar framework; so too are we left without a sufficient guide, navigating a novel that seems familiar but functions along indeterminate principles. When Ryder interacts with characters who he should know, he is occasionally granted impossible access to their interiority, but is otherwise deprived of the memory necessary to meaningfully participate in interpersonal relationships; so too are we unable to define our relationship with Ryder in familiar terms, such as unreliability, redundant telling, or the principle of minimal departure. In one sense, therefore, the novel's fantasy creates distance between the reader and narrator. However, we are simultaneously aware that Ryder's own experience is one of disassociation with the familiar, and we share Ryder's confusion, which is made more palpable and emotionally affective by our reading experience.

We must first identify the generic conventions and structures of fantasy at work to obtain this reading experience in its entirety. Without this framework, we cannot fully recognise dislocation and confusion as the intended rather than incidental effect of the novel, and the text's mechanism for generating empathy otherwise generates confusion in a way that is divorced from Ryder's experience. The reading that I have presented of *The Buried Giant* does not provide sudden clarity about *The Unconsold*, revealing a simple meaning to take away or position to adopt. *The Unconsold* remains chaotic and mostly opaque. However, we can locate coherent structures embedded in the narrative, which create unexpected but consistent laws and norms for the story-world, which we otherwise read as radical unreliability, errors in either discourse or narration, or following an intentional but opaque illogic.

Each time Ishiguro publishes a novel, he 'completes' his overall experiment a little more. This does not mean that his novels are homogenous; each piece of the experiment is unique, and can speak in new ways to the other pieces. *The Remains of the Day*, along with the two Japanese novels, provide us with the impulse to look for a narrator's psychic pain, manifest in unreliability; understanding the boatman in *The Buried Giant* relies upon our understanding of this concern in Ishiguro's earlier novels. *The Buried Giant*, in turn,

furtheres our ability to account for the non- or anti-mimetic qualities that appear to different extents throughout Ishiguro's writing. Just as *The Unconsoled* benefits from the approach enabled by yet another novel dissimilar to the rest, so too does Ishiguro's entire oeuvre, which seems at first to be internally chaotic, become open for re-examination with the addition of *The Buried Giant*, precisely because it is divergent, rather than conformant. On the one hand, our expectation of verisimilitude in Ishiguro's works is rejected by Ishiguro's foray into fantasy, which resists the understanding of Ishiguro's writing that readers and critics alike have built over his career. However, my reading of *The Buried Giant* emphasises the importance of identifying the narrator's psychic pain, and the complication of existing frameworks creates an opportunity for readers and critics to obtain a more nuanced understanding of all of Ishiguro's novels.



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