



## Now and Then: Ishiguro's Medievalism in *The Buried Giant*

Nancy Ciccone  
University of Colorado, Denver

“...for people made their memory suit their current experience.”<sup>1</sup>

Ishiguro's most recent novel, *The Buried Giant*, relies on Arthurian Romances and Chronicles to interrogate the foundational legends pertaining to the place of Britain. The timeframe for his setting is likely the sixth century, if we accept Gildas's suspect date of 516 for the Battle of Mount Badon, a battle associated with the legendary Arthur and touting a Briton victory.<sup>2</sup> The exact date, however, is inconsequential to the novel's overall atmosphere. For from the first sentence of *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro requests “you” view ‘then’ in terms of ‘now’: “You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated.”<sup>3</sup> Such authorial interruptions recur throughout the narrative. Seemingly straightforward, they remind us of differences and of similarities. A longhouse, for example, is not “so different from the sort of rustic canteen many of you will have experienced in one institution or another” (p. 73). Whereas the first quotation reminds us of cultivated landscapes as a point of comparison, the second one familiarizes us with a Medieval architectural structure, not found in modern urban landscapes but familiar as an artifact and cousin to cafeterias. Each of these “dear reader” moments gently disrupts our engagement in the narrative. Each focuses on the material environment. We are dislocated, both there and not there. At the outset and throughout, the narrative evokes modern places as the point of departure for receiving a Medieval past. *The Buried Giant* begs the question: How do we understand where we come from, so that we may act in the present?

Although the novel avoids confirming either the narrative period, the Middle Ages, or its moment of composition, the contemporary era, Ishiguro ensures that readers experience the fragmentation associated with post-modernism. The effect of displacement is not accidental. The novel's

---

<sup>1</sup> *Thucydides on Justice, Power and Human Nature*, trans. Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993): b. ii. 47-54, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> “Excerpt from Gildas's *Concerning the Ruin of Britain*,” trans. J. A. Giles in *Six Old English Chronicles* (London: Henry Bohn, 1848): Part I, chapt. 26. Also available <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/gildas-concerning-the-ruin-of-britain>.

<sup>3</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant* (NY: Knopf, 2015), 1.

“presentism,” representing the past according to values and anxieties in the present,<sup>4</sup> preserves alterity in order to recreate social and political similarities through imaginative invention. In an interview, Ishiguro claimed to consider recent political events for the novel’s time frame: “I was tempted to look at the actual contemporary events: The disintegration of Yugoslavia, the Rwanda genocide, France in the years after the Second World War ... But I didn't really, in the end, want to set it down in any of those particular settings. I didn't want to write a book that looked like a piece of reportage.”<sup>5</sup> Unlike recent political eras, the Medieval effectively allows for imaginative projections due to its relative historical obscurity. At the same time, the Medieval offers a slew of recognizable images: knights and peasants, dragons, giants, and ogres systemically constitute the popular icons of that period. These Medieval staples foster a commentary not only on a Medieval, historical moment revealing current anxieties, but also on the reception of the Medieval in contemporary culture. Familiar concerns such as the dangers of forgetting, the instability of social and political infrastructures, the lack of common ground for assessing leaders, and the effects of the powerful on the powerless narrow the gap between ‘now’ and ‘then.’ The Medieval icons, in their turn, distance these concerns to an identifiable but murky past, to a familiar but fictionalized fantasy.

The historical, political reality Ishiguro turns to as his particular setting is the Anglo-Saxon incursion into what was then called Britain. The titular *Buried Giant* metaphorically represents resentments stemming from battles between the invaders and the inhabitants in the as yet incomplete Anglo-Saxon colonialization, which bequeaths English to us, the language in which the novel is written. A captured dragon drives Ishiguro’s narrative. It emits a strange mist of forgetfulness over the landscape. At stake is control of the land under which this disruptive giant is buried, and over which people of different ethnicities lay claim. At the same time, the fictional amnesia reminds us of the impossibility of any historical accuracy and of the utility of misremembering. The mist effectively grants an edgy peace among settlements due to repressed memories. But it also curtails factual history. In *The Buried Giant*, the dragon slaying revives memory so as to ignite revenge and war, instead of bringing peace as it would in Medieval romance. The slaying successfully moves factual history along. As with the dragon-slaying, Ishiguro’s contemporary fiction permits a re-conception of other twelfth-century romance themes such as the *aventure* of the knight-errant, the challenges of the quest, the conventions of courtliness. To capture the historical moment, the narrative juxtaposes these romance themes with those of warrior prowess, kin loyalty, and unresolvable feuds such as occur in heroic legends, like *Beowulf*. In other words, the novel relies on the foundational transformation from Britain to England in addition to legends foundational to the English literary tradition to convey current social and political concerns.

Physical threats for sixth-century Britons and Saxons translate easily to contemporary events. Ogres, for example, kidnap people and steal food, just as armed militants endanger locales today. Pixies invasively claim the living, as would a virus such as influenza, acute to the sufferer, but unseen to an

---

<sup>4</sup> See for example Louise D’Arcens, “Presentism” in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, eds. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Suffolk, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2014): 354-68.

<sup>5</sup> Ishiguro, Kazuo, “The Persistence—and Impermanence—of Memory in *The Buried Giant*,” National Public Radio, Weekend Edition Saturday, Host: Scott Simon, 2/18/2015.

onlooker. The lack of access to competent health care remains an issue common to many countries today. *The Buried Giant* represents similar situations. A mid-wife, for example, refers a patient to a monastic specialist. Not only can the monk not cure the patient, but many of the monks are also embroiled in politics that direct their institutional mission. Tribal ambitions, based on deprivation and on legends, thrive as they do in many corners of the world and some prominent nations. Although the details shift, parallels with current issues and threats permeate the narrative and easily translate across time and geography. The rusticity of the sixth century highlights them, not to resolve them but to spotlight ordinary people trying to get on with their lives as their “microstory” interweaves with those with power aiming to shape a “macro-story,” a master narrative, centered on the governmental control of Britain.<sup>6</sup>

One side of the political spectrum hinges on the recently dead King Arthur. Ishiguro re-frames Arthur’s legend through his surviving knights: Axl and Gawain. Each is elderly when the narrative begins. Not only do they disagree about the kind of king Arthur was, but filtered by their broken memories, he comes to us in bit and pieces. On one hand, Gawain presents a chivalrous and courteous Arthur. On the other hand, Axl’s Arthur breaks promises and promulgates senseless murder. As Arthur’s nephew, Gawain remains loyal to the king. Disenfranchised by Arthur’s actions, Axl leaves Arthur’s service. They are each on an *aventure* with ostensibly different goals but enabling them to encounter each other at intervals as knights would in Medieval romances.

Gawain upholds his duty to the king by doddering around the hills with a public version of the plan to find the dragon emitting the mist of forgetfulness in order to kill her. Yet he actually wanders the hills to protect the dragon, to maintain Arthur’s legacy of peace through amnesia. Gawain remains the knight-errant bent on a quest, but his *aventure* is duplicitous. His rusted armor repels thistles, not weapons; his courtly language and aged horse verge on the ridiculous. Gawain essentially rides out of a twelfth-century romance no longer possible even within his own narrative. He with the Round Table teeter on the brink of being outdated. Yet Arthur continues to determine Gawain’s story about himself. Unlike Axl and most of the other inhabitants in the novel, Gawain remembers the past because his is stuck in it. His reveries are reverential as much as they are referential. However much his representation leans toward irony, Gawain raises serious questions about national heroes, about the clash between legend and history, about making political commitments. Factual history is passing him by in the threat of one young Saxon warrior. The framework of a Medieval historical moment highlights the renowned Gawain to suggest that political commitments have a shelf life dependent on control of the land.

Whereas Gawain considers Arthur “a great king” (p. 275), the disenfranchised knight, Axl thinks Arthur betrayed his principles when he broke a diplomatically maintained peace. Axl previously “befriended” “in Arthur’s name” the very villages being destroyed (pp. 211-12). He had advocated

---

<sup>6</sup> Referring to *Remains of the Day*, Furst notes Ishiguro’s fusing the “microstoria with the macrostoria, the stories of ordinary, private figures with events of public record” (p.551) in Lilian R. Furst, “Memory’s Fragile Power in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day* and W. G. Sebald’s *Max Ferber*,” *Contemporary Literature* 48.4 (Winter 2007): 530-53.

diplomacy, by which Saxon and Briton lived alongside each other. He claims “It was I won their trust where first there was only fear and hatred. Today our deeds make me a liar and a butcher, and I take no joy in Arthur’s victory” (213). Axl’s Arthur fails to keep his word and acts duplicitously. The battle seems pointless to Axl who presciently claims “there are yet many more [Saxons] across the land. They come from the east, they land by ships on our coasts, they build new villages by the day” (214). Meeting as senior citizens, Gawain challenges Axl about his behavior in the long-ago battle defeating the Saxons, but Axl claims to recall nothing, partially due to the dragon’s breath curtailing his memory. More significantly, however, Axl’s response indicates he has given up on his nation. His experiences isolate him from his own past. Arthur’s actions have disabled Axl from engaging in the political dialogue. The narrative eventually embroils him in national events simply due to place and to timing, as if complicity depends on temporal and geographical markers rather than on individual choice.

Although each served Arthur, the knights’ differing viewpoints challenge popular legends regarding the Round Table. Their opposing opinions thwart any dialogue through which they might work together for a common good. Whereas the issue of recollection generally reverberates with efforts to comprehend the Medieval, the narrative ostensibly limits the knights’ perceptions. Rather than an empty signifier, Arthur’s image denotes competing political claims that are finally irreconcilable and perhaps even irrelevant. In short, as a popular icon of the Middle Ages, Ishiguro’s Arthur paradoxically stands for the absence of common ground.

Just as Gawain fulfills a defensive position for control of Britain, the warrior Wistan embodies the other side of the political spectrum in his duty to his Saxon king. In that Gawain derives from chivalric romance, Wistan derives from heroic literature. But Ishiguro also compromises this dragon-slayer. Wistan’s early years during the diplomatic peace and his subsequent orphan hood resulting from Arthur’s war position him for training by the Britons. His experiences with both ethnicities drive his commitments and his resentments. While his prowess actualizes him in the same way it might a current action-movie hero, Ishiguro complicates Wistan’s image as he does with that of Gawain. Wistan’s victory depends on defeating an old and unfit Sir Gawain. He kills an already dying and constrained dragon. The deplorable conditions of Wistan’s opponents undermine his heroism.

Thus, as Wistan and Gawain confront each other, they destabilize the duality of “good fighting evil” in many representations of the Middle Ages. In so doing, they highlight a historical complexity comparable to the present. The novel undermines popular depictions of the Middle Ages as either a dark foreign country where the universally unclean population struggles for daylight or as a sunlit rustic landscape, where the economically diverse population enjoys jousts in appropriate costumes. The cinema offers the most familiar examples of these stereotypes. Exemplifying the former, the film *In the Name of the Rose* begins in the foggy dawn on a bleak, mountainy landscape.<sup>7</sup> *The Knight’s Tale* represents the latter; it begins at a tournament with the rock group Queen singing “We will rock you.”<sup>8</sup> *The Buried Giant* refuses these binaries in order to put the Medieval in dialogue with current conditions,

---

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Jacques Annaud, director; Umberto Eco, novel; Andrew Birkin, et al., screenplay, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Helgeland, director and screenplay, 2001.

never losing sight of 'then' as 'now.' Without clear-cut dualism, the narrative complicates our understanding of the past in order to mirror the present; we are left with the difficult question of how to navigate our place in the world.

Illustrating this dilemma, the narrative offers another thread focusing on an ordinary couple just trying to live out their lives during this historical moment. Representing those with neither political power nor national agenda are the disenfranchised knight, Axl and his wife, Beatrice. Theirs is the "micro-story," not because it is of lesser value than the master narrative but because it weaves among events of national significance. The interlaced narratives of micro- and macro- story foster self-actualization similar to those of questing knights, but in *The Buried Giant*, the strategy ostensibly demonstrates the ways decisions taken in the political sphere affect individuals who have nothing to do with these decisions and may even object to them. Along with Axl and Beatrice, the villagers in *The Buried Giant*, for example, worry about "How to get food out of the hard ground; how not to run out of firewood; how to stop the sickness that could kill a dozen pigs in a single day" (p. 3). The narrative narrows the gap between then and now in representing subjectivities comparable to ours, however divorced from some Western material comforts. Neighbors get along in the same, uncomfortable way the ethnicities on the British island get along. When shepherds arrive in their Great Chamber, the villagers eagerly listen to their story of a circling wren-eagle. "Then steadily a skepticism began to spread among the listeners"; the villagers end up in a "heated" "quarrel" in part because some think they heard the story before and so consider it 'fake news' (p. 10). Despite the mist of forgetfulness, each villager believes in the accuracy of his/her own memory. They have nothing else by which to validate their present.

While becoming enmeshed in the events shaping the nation, Axl and Beatrice try to articulate their concerns. As a former knight, Axl speaks with a courtliness similar to that of Gawain. He addresses Beatrice as "princess" and frequently solicits her well-being. In one episode, the villagers disallow the couple from having a candle for light. Since Beatrice claims, "our hands [are] as steady as any of them," the reason seems to be their age. Protecting Beatrice from the villagers' anger, Axl tries to comfort her. He claims they mean no "insult"; "It's just the way things have always been done and that's all there is to it" (p. 9). Axl relies on a conventional phrase. Given his damaged memory, he actually has no idea as to how "things have always been done." In effect, their relationship reflects the remnants of *fin'amors* without the context of a court. Filtered through marriage and time, their expression of love is available to any impoverished couple in the present. It is neither lustily passionate nor doomed in the same way as that of Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Isolde. Axl and Beatrice fumble through their daily lives and do so with conventional endearments that, nevertheless, bind them together.

While Wistan and Gawain engage in quests affecting the national future, Axl and Beatrice decide to search for their son whom they vaguely remember. Although their motive is personal, it also results from their social milieu: they need someone to assist them in their old age. More than material comfort, they also search for their legacy, something to remain after they die, a hope for the future that becomes their Holy Grail. To some degree, it is the nature of memory to be fragile and fragmented, to change its colors based on subsequent experiences. But the couple perceives gaps in

their lives, shadows of previous events and anxieties about future ones. They each lack a personal history due to the dragon's mist. In one exchange, Beatrice fears their love will wither, and Axl responds:

“What are you saying, princess? How can our love wither? Isn't it stronger now than when we were foolish young lovers?”

She responds:

“But Axl, we can't even remember those days. Or any of the years between. We don't remember our fierce quarrels or the small moments we enjoyed and treasured. We don't remember our son or why he's away from us.” (p. 43)

Beatrice's pragmatic response summarizes their challenge. National peace at any price is apparently not peace for them.

At stake is not only the quest for their son but also their fear of permanent separation from each other. Death haunts the novel. The ferryman to the afterlife narrates the final chapter. Death is represented as the crossing over to an island reminiscent of Avalon, Arthur's resting place. According to childhood stories, Beatrice believes “wedded man and wife” are permitted to “dwell together” there; “many...roam those same forests and quiet beaches arm in arm” (p. 40). The ferryman, however, corrects her. The couple may pass together only if they each separately recall their most “cherished memories” and those memories are the same (p. 43). Given the chaos of experience and the fragmentation of memory, Beatrice and Axl cannot do so. By premising this price for dying together, the narrative prioritizes stories based on personal and shared experience. On one level, experiential memory constitutes love between people and redresses some interpretations of Medieval *fin'amors*. On another level, Ishiguro relies on this ordinary couple in a Medieval setting to suggest that we choose carefully the making of memories for they are all we have at death, even if they are unreliable.

With the dragon slaying and the return of memory, the couple realizes their son left after an argument. They prevented his return. Remembering challenges the stability of their relationship, only to have their separate deaths conclude it. Likewise, the dragon slaying undermines the stability of the nation as war ensues, and the people take sides against each other. Ishiguro's representation of a sixth-century couple distances current threats of personal loss, while at the same time exacerbating them by reminding us of our vulnerability and mortality. Although the “micro-story” spotlights Axl and Beatrice, women and children inform narrative digressions as marginal to the major plots as they are to their culture. Widows wander from village to village where they are greeted with xenophobia, labeled witches, driven out of town. Young girls drift away from families, join up with marauding young men; young boys search for missing mothers. For Ishiguro, the Medieval period forms an apt canvas to depict the collapses of current social infrastructures and to question the place of individuals in the unfolding of history. Inherited stories, which regionally compete against each other, determine individual future paths as they do national ones. In one of the episodes, Axl and Beatrice push through

an underground tunnel to escape a monastery. They begin to realize that they are in a mausoleum. Bones crunch under foot. The episode reminds us we all walk over the bones of a past we recognize, even without understanding it. In aligning 'then' with 'now,' *The Buried Giant* demonstrates that both the Medieval and the present are subject to cognitive dissonance upon which we act anyway. The narrative concludes without conjuring solutions to current social and political conflicts. But with its setting in the so-called 'dark ages,' Ishiguro's Medievalism authenticates our 'now' with all its complexities. The pixies, ogres and dragons dress the narrative in a fantastic landscape but no more threatening than drones, fundamentalism, and Ebola.