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**Reinventing the Past in Kazuo Ishiguro's
*A Pale View of Hills***

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Abstract

A Pale View of Hills is Kazuo Ishiguro's literary attempt to reconstruct his memories of postwar Japan. This paper examines the forms and meanings of these memories. Through the reminiscences of Etsuko, a Japanese widow now residing in the English countryside, we glimpse the social-psychological conditions of postwar Japan. Most of the characters of the novel seem reluctant to discuss the past, and this explains why there are gaps and omissions in Etsuko's recollections. However, through her recollections, Etsuko somehow is reconciled with her past. This paper also deploys Walter Benjamin's concept of history to look into the significance of this novel for Ishiguro, as it obviously represents the author's effort to conjure up fading memories of his homeland.

Keywords: memory, history, nostalgia, Walter Benjamin, Nagasaki

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. . . it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image.

—Benjamin, 2003: 391

1.

Kazuo Ishiguro's first major literary work, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), is a narrative that is both retrospective and, at the same time, analytic.¹ The novel, which won him the 1983 Winfred Holtby Prize from the Royal Society of Literature, is retrospective insofar as the narrative involves an aging widow's journey into her past in postwar Nagasaki. However, it is also analytic because this journey into the past is, in fact, a self-reflexive project through which the widow attempts to make sense of her present. This interplay and interaction between past and present is underscored by Ishiguro's skillful and effective deployment of the narrative form. It is there, in the interweaving of episodes both past and present, in the free movement of the narrative voice between these two points in time, and in the shifting of locations between postwar Nagasaki and the more recent England of perhaps the late nineteen-seventies or early eighties, that Ishiguro deftly melds now and then, here and there, into one narrative tapestry.

There are two stories in *A Pale View of Hills*, both of which are told by Etsuko, a modest Japanese widow who now lives a life seemingly of her own choice in the English countryside. The first story centres on Etsuko's acquaintance with Sachiko, a war widow of about the same age, from a well-to-do family now experiencing financial difficulties. This narrative takes place in the summer months, sometime in the Nagasaki of the late forties or early fifties when "there was fighting in Korea" and "American soldiers were as numerous as ever" (Ishiguro, 1990: 11). Etsuko, who lives with her husband Jiro in the eastern part of the city, is in her third or fourth month of pregnancy with their daughter Keiko. It is here that she meets Sachiko, who struggles to raise her daughter Mariko, a child who, unlike other children, does not go to school. Sachiko befriends an American called Frank, a Pinkerton-like figure

¹ Ishiguro wrote a number of short stories and TV scripts before the publication of *A Pale View of Hills*.

who fails her more than once in his promise to take her and Mariko to the United States—obviously Ishiguro's parody of Puccini's orientalist tale of *Madame Butterfly* (see Shaffer, 1998: 21; Lewis, 2000: 22-23).

The second story takes place in England, where Etsuko, herself now a widow, ponders the tragic suicide of her eldest daughter Keiko, who just one year earlier took her own life by hanging herself in her room in Manchester. Loss seems to be shadowing Etsuko, whose British husband Mr. Sheringham passed away before her daughter's untimely death. Etsuko's reminiscences coincide with the visit of Niki, her younger daughter by her English husband. This second story ends with Niki's departure for London.

Both narratives involve the life of Etsuko, with her memories serving as the sole conduit to her past. Although Etsuko begins her narration by expressing her "selfish desire not to be reminded of the past" (Ishiguro, 1990: 9), she turns out to be an active narrator, though by no means a reliable one. Episodes of her memory, for example, are carefully and strategically chosen to colour our understanding of her present; gaps and omissions in her memories, probably tabooed and embarrassing moments of her past, however, are found in her recollections. So it is that the Sachiko-Mariko episode comes to an abrupt conclusion without any sense of completion. We are not told of the destiny of the widowed mother and her elf-like daughter, or whether they eventually succeed in migrating to the United States. Even Etsuko's own life is pregnant with untold mysteries. We are not told the reason for Jiro's absence, whether he has divorced or died, or how Etsuko has ended up in England with a British husband. A plethora of other unsolved questions continue to invite critical speculation.

At one point during her recollection, Etsuko blames the passage of time for these gaps and omissions: "It is possible that my memory of these events will have grown hazy with time, that things did not happen in quite the way they come back to me today" (Ishiguro, 1990: 41). At another moment she points to the circumstances of recollection to explain away the involute and fallible feature of memory: "Memory, I realize, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers, and no doubt this applies to certain of the recollections I have gathered here" (Ishiguro, 1990: 156). Etsuko's reflection on the haziness and limitations of memory is true, but what is equally true, perhaps, is her reluctance to return to certain parts of her past, those unmentionable details which are irrelevant to

the present. When she does come upon matters concerning Jiro and Keiko, she quickly brushes them away, thinking that “such things are long in the past now and I have no wish to ponder them yet again. . . . There is nothing to be gained in going over such matters again” (Ishiguro, 1990: 91). Brian W. Shaffer is right to regard this phenomenon as “Etsuko’s suppression of memory” (Shaffer, 1998: 17). If we allude to the title of the novel, probably the paleness has less to do with the hills than with the *view*. The past is always there, but Etsuko’s conscious desire to avoid recalling certain events actually inhibits her ability to construct a clearer, more accurate picture of her life.

A number of critics have been able to identify the relationship between the Sachiko-Mariko episode and Etsuko’s own story. Cynthia F. Wong, for example, in her reading of *A Pale View of Hills* in terms of Blanchot’s notion of self-dispossession, points out that:

in working through the meaning of her dead daughter’s life, Etsuko situates her tale in Nagasaki and focuses on a strange and enigmatic friendship with another woman named Sachiko, whose own daughter’s actions seem to foretell the suicide of Etsuko’s daughter years later (Wong, 1995: 129).

She further sees in Sachiko’s desire to leave Nagasaki for the United States “Etsuko’s efforts to reconstruct a tale which would come years later” (Wong, 1995: 138). For Shaffer, the Sachiko-Mariko episode is reconstructed as a projection of Etsuko’s “past difficulties with Keiko” (Shaffer, 1998: 25). Even Ishiguro himself, in an interview conducted by Gregory Mason, makes this point absolutely clear when asked whether Etsuko and Sachiko “were not one and the same person”:

What I intended was this: because it’s really Etsuko talking about herself, and possibly that somebody else, Sachiko, existed or did not exist, the meanings that Etsuko imputes to the life of Sachiko are obviously the meanings that are relevant to her (Etsuko’s) own life. Whatever the facts were about what happened to Sachiko and her daughter, they are of interest to Etsuko now because she can use them to talk about herself. (Mason, 1989: 337)

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I begin this paper with an epigraph from Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History." Composed in the spring of 1940, at a time when Europe was under the shadow of fascism and Nazis military power seemed invincible, "On the Concept of History" remains Benjamin's last major work, though he had no intention of publishing it for fear of creating enthusiastic misunderstanding. The epigraph is taken from the fifth thesis of the essay, in which the past is compared to what Benjamin would regard as a dialectical image, "that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability" (Benjamin, 2003: 390). At this moment of recognizability, sure enough, we also glimpse the present, which is the perspective from which we capture the past. Benjamin continues his exploration of the nature of the past in the next thesis: "Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was.' It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (391). The key word here is "appropriating," which implies some degree of active and conscious selection. Benjamin's project in "On the Concept of History" represents his total rejection of historicism which, as he puts it in Thesis XVI, "'offers' the eternal image of the past." He is in favour of historical materialism that "supplies a unique experience with the past" (396), and this unique experience is that which links the past to the present.

However, if we go beyond the macro-politics of Benjamin's historical-philosophical theses and consider them in general terms, we may formulate his attitude towards the functionality of the past in one sentence: the past is to be retrieved and manipulated to serve the present. To be sure, Ishiguro is not in any sense a historical materialist, and the context in which he is writing is completely different from that of Benjamin; however, his perception of the function of history, to a certain extent, is surprisingly Benjaminian. In 1989, Ishiguro made his first return to Japan, thirty years after he, as a boy of five, left the country with his parents for England. In a conversation with Oe Kenzaburo, who would become Nobel laureate in literature in 1994, Ishiguro explains how history is a tool: "I would look for moments in history that would best serve my purposes, or what I wanted to write about. I was conscious that I wasn't so interested in the history per se, that I was using British history or Japanese history to illustrate something that was preoccupying me" (Ishiguro and Kenzaburo, 1991: 115). This is another way of saying that there is a hidden agenda in his historical representation or that the recuperation of the past is very often prompted by his own needs in the present.

In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko's recollection of her brief encounter with Sachiko and Mariko one summer in postwar Nagasaki is triggered not only by the occasion of Niki's visit, but also by her anxiety to explain away the suicide of Keiko. She plunges into the secret corner of her past not so much with nostalgia, but more with remorse: in a way, the Sachiko-Mariko episode serves well as a parallel of her own life and helps her construct a better picture of her role in shaping the fate of Keiko. She is a reluctant narrator of her past, repeatedly claiming that "there is nothing to be gained in going over such matters again" (Ishiguro, 1990: 91, 94), and her reminiscences are very much "prompted by an intense and personal emotion in the present moment of narration" (Wong, 1995: 131). The return to her past less resembles idle reminiscence and more a psychological journey to quell her guilt and sorrow over the death of Keiko. Ishiguro made this explicitly clear when he was interviewed by Gregory Mason. *A Pale View of Hills*, he said, "is largely based around her (Etsuko's) guilt" (Mason, 1989: 338). Etsuko, too, trying to come to terms with her grief and guilt, comforts herself with the following remarks: "My motives for leaving Japan were justifiable, and I know I always kept Keiko's interests very much at heart" (Ishiguro, 91). Her psychological journey into the past, somewhat O'Neilian in a sense, finally reaches a moment of great relief and reconciliation when Niki reminds her, "You did everything you could for her. You're the last person anyone could blame" (Ishiguro, 176).

2.

On one level, *A Pale View of Hills* can be read as Ishiguro's attempt to come to terms with his nostalgic memories of his childhood in Nagasaki. In his conversation with Brian W. Shaffer, he discourses extensively on the concept of nostalgia and finds it "quite a valuable thing." He believes that nostalgia, as he tries to get at in some of his works, "could actually be a positive thing in that it's a kind of emotional equivalent to idealism. It's a remembering of a time in your childhood before you realized that the world was as dark as it was. It's a kind of Eden-like memory of a time when you were in that childhood 'bubble,' when adults and parents led you to believe that the world was a better, a nicer place" (Shaffer, 2001: 7). Ishiguro is perhaps defending his recurrent visits to the Japan of his childhood in his early literary production, especially in such novels as *A Pale View of Hills* and *An*

Artist of the Floating World. These early works are overtly expressive of his nostalgia for a Japan caught in historical transition and social-political changes taking place after the war; a Japan that has, in his memory, begun to fade: "This very important place called Japan which was a mixture of memory, speculation, and imagination was fading with every year that went by. I think there was a very urgent need for me to get it down on paper before it disappeared altogether" (Kridler, 1998: 150).

The main story of *A Pale View of Hills* is set against the backdrop of postwar Nagasaki a few years before Ishiguro was born. This is a period of great reconstruction, although the ruins and remnants of destruction following the atomic bomb are still a visible presence in various parts of the city. Destruction in Nagasaki, both physical and psychological, is beyond words, and the survivors find the horrific experience ineffable and want to obliterate their memories of the bombing. "We were all shocked, those of us who were left," says Etsuko's father-in-law, Ogata-San, who has come to visit his son and daughter-in-law that particular summer. It is Ogata-San who urges Etsuko to "forget these things" (Ishiguro, 58). Even Mrs. Fujiwara, who lost her husband and several children during the bombing, reminds Etsuko that the tragedy is "all in the past now" (Ishiguro, 76). People react to the horror with a seeming oblivion and overwhelming silence. Loss, especially of husbands and sons, was a common fate for many women who survived. As Fumio Yoshioka observes in his reading of the novel, "real fathers are rarely seen or in most cases replaced by fatherly figures or step-fathers. This constitutes the situational matrix of tragedy which affects most of the women, both mothers and daughters, in the story" (Yoshioka, 1988: 83).

The mosquito-infested wasteground outside of Jiro and Etsuko's apartment serves powerfully as "a metaphorical space" (Lewis, 2000: 38) to reflect the general state of mind of war-torn Nagasaki:

As the summer grew hotter, the stretch of wasteground outside our apartment block became increasingly unpleasant. Much of the earth lay dried and cracked, while water which had accumulated during the rainy season remained in the deeper ditches and craters. The ground bred all manner of insects, and mosquitoes in particular seemed everywhere. In the apartments there was the usual complaining, but over the years the anger over the wasteground had

become resigned and cynical. (Ishiguro, 1990: 99)²

The wasteground is a place of loss, of desolation, and of uncertainty, signifying the ruinous state of things in the aftermath of the war, giving testimony and serving as a tangible reminder of the catastrophic course of human history. In Thesis IX from “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin famously interprets Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* (1920) as a depiction of the angel of history. The painting “shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet” (Benjamin, 2003: 392). Benjamin’s angel remains speechless at human folly, a wordless being who “has nothing more to communicate to mankind” (Tiedemann, 1989: 178) in the face of the inhumanity of history. The wasteground, so vividly associated with Etsuko’s memories of postwar Nagasaki, is Ishiguro’s dialectical image of historical process, his vehement critique of human naivety, so to speak.

However, the Nagasaki that has been brought back to life in Etsuko’s reminiscences is also a city of hope. When Mrs. Fujiwara, who has suffered unspeakable loss, urges Etsuko to “put all things behind us” (Ishiguro, 1990: 76), she is representative of a forward-looking spirit concomitantly found amidst the despair and forlornness of postwar Nagasaki. Etsuko echoes the spirit of reconstruction in her recollection of an outing with Sachiko and Mariko to Inasa “in the hilly area of Nagasaki overlooking the harbour” (Ishiguro, 1990: 103):

Noises from the harbour followed us across the water—the clang of hammers, the whine of machinery, the occasional deep sound from a ship’s horn—but in those days, in Nagasaki, such sounds were not unpleasing; they were the sound of recovery and they were still capable then of bringing a certain uplifting feeling to one’s spirits. (Ishiguro, 1990: 103)

² Lewis refers to the wasteground as “redolent of decay as T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* or F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Valley of the Ashes*” (2000: 38).

This cacophony of noise, the clang of reconstruction, remains surprisingly clear and harmonious in Etsuko's memory, and possibly is reminiscent of Ishiguro's fading impression of his childhood city. It should also be remembered that taking place amidst the noises of trade and industry are social and political debates about the future of the nation, which culminate in the novel with a confrontation between Ogata-San, a staunch supporter of Japanese militarism and social feudalism, and Shigeo Matsuda, his former student who has written an article criticising his teachers for the fascist thinking that has brought the country "into the most evil disaster in her entire history" (Ishiguro, 1990: 147).

The bombing has, of course, made Nagasaki a living memorial. To commemorate those killed by the atomic bomb, a statue was constructed in the city's Peace Park, and Ishiguro's critique of human naivety and the absurdity of war is obvious in the novel's depiction of the memorial. As Etsuko recalls, "The statue resembled some muscular Greek god, seated with both arms outstretched. With his right hand, he pointed to the sky from where the bomb had fallen; with his other arm—stretched out to his left—the figure was supposedly holding back the forces of evil. His eyes were closed in prayer." The statue impresses Etsuko as having "a rather cumbersome appearance," and she "was never able to associate it with what had occurred that day the bomb had fallen, and those terrible days which followed." What is more, seen from a distance, "the figure looked almost comical, resembling a policeman conducting traffic" (Ishiguro, 1990: 138-39). The poignant but almost farcical tone with which Etsuko describes the statue can hardly be associated with the tragedy of Nagasaki in history. The statue fails, in this sense, to produce what Raymond Williams refers to as the "conditions of a practice" (Williams, 1980: 48),³ being unable to "mediate both the experience and the representation of memory" (Sherman, 1994: 186-87). This may explain why Etsuko, in a confessional mode, closes her memory of Peace Park by saying: "And today, should I by chance recall that large white statue in Nagasaki, I find myself reminded primarily of my visit to Peace Park with Ogata-San that morning" (Ishiguro, 1990: 138).

³ In cultural materialist terms, Williams suggests that when we look at a particular work, or group of work, we should attend first to "the reality of their practice and the conditions of the practice as it was then executed" (Williams, 1980: 48).

3.

The memorial presence of the past in *A Pale View of Hills* takes many forms. The past not only comes alive in Etsuko's reminiscences, but it also exists in a material form. During her five-day visit to her mother, Niki, for instance, spends time reading through "her father's newspaper articles, and . . . going through all the drawers and bookshelves in the house" (Ishiguro, 1990: 91). She is apparently making a great effort to reconstruct the time and space of her mother's memories—the Japan of the postwar era as observed and represented by her father. This is her attempt to bridge her present existence to the Japanese past, no matter how inaccurate this past may be, as Etsuko rightly comments: "she has little idea of what actually occurred during those last days in Nagasaki. One supposes she has built up some sort of picture from what her father has told her. Such a picture, inevitably, would have its inaccuracies, or, in truth, despite all the impressive articles he wrote about Japan, my husband never understood the ways of our culture . . ." (Ishiguro, 1990: 90). Niki's act of reading her father's articles about postwar Japan also signifies her efforts to understand her mother and her mother's past.

A Pale View of Hills ends with Niki's decision to leave her mother for London again. Before she bids farewell to Etsuko, she asks for a postcard of Nagasaki that she will pass on to a friend who has written a poem about Etsuko. Instead of a postcard, Etsuko gives her an old calendar which originally offered "a photograph for each month, but all but the last had been torn away" (Ishiguro, 1990: 179). It is a picture of the harbour of Nagasaki, the photo reminding her of a day-trip she took with Keiko to the harbour. "Those hills over the harbour are very beautiful." Most important about that trip, however, is that "Keiko was happy that day" (Ishiguro, 1990: 182). Throughout her recollection no reference has been made to this particular day-trip. There was indeed a visit to the harbour that summer, but on that trip Etsuko was in fact accompanied by Sachiko and Mariko, not Keiko. Barry Lewis sees in this confusion of identity in Etsuko's act of remembering "a displacement," one that "cannot be easily recuperated to make the text stable" (Lewis, 2000: 36).

More importantly, the photograph of the old calendar is excavated in order to conjure up the past. Like the articles of Niki's father, the photograph crystallises certain moments in the history of Nagasaki. Etsuko cannot explain why she has

kept it (Ishiguro, 1990: 179), but, subconsciously, the old photograph of Nagasaki symbolises her buried past, one that is particularly associated with the Sachiko-Mariko episode. The subject of the photograph, the harbour, serves well to remind us of the period of reconstruction in postwar Nagasaki. The history and imagery of Japan thus immediately comes alive in this photographic representation.

In early 1932, Benjamin set down his recollections of his childhood and adolescent years in Berlin in a long essay called “A Berlin Chronicle.” In an aphoristic tone he compares the act of recollection to digging:

“He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This determines the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences. They must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is merely a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination of what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector’s gallery—in the sober rooms of our later insights” (Benjamin, 1999: 611).

In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko—and Ishiguro, for that matter—comes close to such a Benjaminian digger, turning her buried past over “as one turns over soil.” Etsuko’s return to her past is a therapeutic venture, and “the images” she discovers on her home-bound trip, those “precious fragments and torsos,” significantly enough, stand well to inspire her “later insights.” Indeed, we can assume that the process of excavation will help she find peace with her former self—and the once repressed memories of her past.

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重建過去：論石黑一雄的《群山淡景》

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摘 要

日裔英國小說家石黑一雄 (Kazuo Ishiguro) 嘗試在其小說《群山淡景》(*A Pale View of Hills*) 中重建其對戰後日本的記憶。本文旨在探討這些記憶的形式與意義。定居英國鄉間的日本寡婦悦子回憶她在長崎最後一段時日的生活與遭遇，我們透過她的回憶看到戰後日本的社會心理與精神狀態。小說中的人物似乎都盡量避談過去，因此悦子的回憶留下了許多的空白，但她也藉由回憶與過去取得妥協。除了分析悦子個人的記憶之外，本文同時援引班雅明 (Walter Benjamin) 有關歷史記憶的理論析論這本小說對作者石黑一雄的意義。石黑一雄顯然有意藉這本小說重新召喚他對故國日本日漸消逝的記憶。

關鍵詞：記憶、歷史、鄉愁、班雅明、長崎

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