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Living Life as Inquiry



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SELF-REFLECTION AND LIFE NARRATIVE IN THE WORK OF KAZUO ISHIGURO



In this chapter I explore some of the works of Kazuo Ishiguro for the nuanced explorations of memory, self-reflection and constructing life narratives they offer. I have chosen Ishiguro as one author from a range of possibilities, because his writing and quest to explore issues with artistic integrity especially intrigue and delight me. When I tell other people about my interest in novels which explore these issues, they offer their own favourites. *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes (2012), for example, appears frequently on people's lists. I readily agree. I hope you have your own examples of novels that express ways of being and acting you recognise and that work creatively with the challenges of accounting for these. I suggest that such 'fiction' can enrich our understandings in ways that academic accounts seldom achieve. Issues relating to the qualities of writing and how nuanced accounts can be generated are carried forward in **Writing as inquiry and as representation** in Part IV. Before reviewing Ishiguro's novels, I will outline some issues in working critically with life narrative.

Exploring lives through narrative

Working with notions of living life as inquiry, I am interested in how fragments of life stories come to be told and how they undergo change and reformulation. I see life narratives as provisional constructions of truth which are created through multi-faceted, active processes of interpretation and self-presentation with individual, interpersonal, social and cultural dimensions. In my experiences of working with such material as research data I have found that people's accounts are often multiple, shifting, contradictory and incomplete, and have sought to respect this in how I then portray them.

I am also interested in what reference points people use to generate their narratives, how they deploy personal and social values of what is good or acceptable. In a fascinating collection called *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-understanding*

(Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992), the contributors explore these issues. The editors suggest that people construct their senses of viable lives by drawing on available, and permitted, social and cultural themes.

We assume that all stories are told and that all self-understanding is realized within the narrative frames each culture provides its members. These frames of intelligibility determine and limit the power of personal narrative. (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992: 2)

Social influence shapes not only public action but also private self-understanding. To the degree that this is true, social control takes on a more ominous aspect. For now it appears that the alternatives one recognizes as possible or moral are constrained in the marrow of individual self-representation. (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992: 5)

What stories can be told, and what 'truths' lived, are therefore potentially curtailed, unless people can find ways to live from alternative values:

Those who would free themselves of their own culture's restrictions must find alternative conceptions of social engagement through which to develop their identities. This too makes liberation difficult. (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992: 15)

When we articulate and hear life stories it seems likely that social values, dominant discourses and potential control and self-control are always implicated. They may be tacit or prominent. As researchers we can be alert to these potential intersections of personal and political.

Learning from Kazuo Ishiguro

In this chapter I consider how Kazuo Ishiguro's first three novels resonate with, and potentially complicate, notions of first person inquiry. His later works are also fascinating in this regard, but I will contain my enthusiasm here. Ishiguro has been generous in talking about his work. I have therefore drawn on his voice through published interviews (Shaffer and Wong, 2008) alongside some literary criticism.

Kazuo Ishiguro's first three novels are *A Pale View of Hills* (Ishiguro, 1982 – PVH), *An Artist of the Floating World* (Ishiguro, 1986 – AFW) and *The Remains of the Day* (Ishiguro, 1989 – RTD). They are each concerned with the inherent fallibilities of self-reflection, memory, and the creation of life narratives. Ishiguro puzzles about what happens when people try retrospectively to account for their lives. How do they go about it? What factors might influence, enable and inhibit the stories they can tell and thus the lives they enact? These are issues we encounter in living and speaking from life as inquiry.

None of Ishiguro's novels are what they appear on the surface. With this proviso, I will next briefly outline the ostensible plotlines of these three as a base for considering how they explore self-reflection.

Novel outlines

In all three novels, Ishiguro uses the device of a first person narrator looking back over and seeking to reflect on their life. They take dual roles, both speaking from their experience and taking a reflective position reviewing this. To some extent, they consider alternative perspectives on what they have done and on the notions of integrity that have guided their behaviour. And to the reader it seems these are constrained, with some potentially self-protective limits on where their search for insight might take them. All three narrators also explicitly question their memories and interpretations, and as readers we are soon alerted to potential fallibilities in them accounting for their lives.

A Pale View of Hills (Ishiguro, 1982)

Etsuko is a middle-aged Japanese woman who now lives in England. She looks back to her life in Nagasaki just after the Second World War. She reflects on her brief friendship with a woman called Sachiko in the turmoil and unsettlement of that time. Sachiko was hoping to flee Japan with an American soldier, taking her daughter Mariko with her. At that time Etsuko was married, the couple living with her father-in-law. In the present tense of the novel, she is in England, living alone after the death of her second, English, husband. She is being visited by her second daughter Niki and is haunted by images of the death by suicide of her first daughter, Keiko, who had hanged herself several years before. Etsuko says:

although we never dwelt long on the subject of Keiko's death, it was never far away, hovering over us whenever we talked. (Ishiguro, 1982: 10)

As the novel proceeds there seem many parallels between Etsuko's life and her memories of Sachiko's, to such an extent that it becomes unclear at times whether Sachiko 'really' existed, and whether Etsuko is talking about Mariko or her own daughter Keiko. In one scene which stands out as ambiguous and is well noted by commentators (for example, Lewis, 2000; Wong, 2000), the elision of characters becomes especially apparent. Etsuko reports how in the later 1940s she followed the child Mariko out along a river-side, concerned for her safety. The child is distressed and Etsuko assures her about leaving Japan:

'In any case,' I went on, 'if you don't like it over there, we can always come back.'

This time she looked up at me questioningly.

'Yes, I promise,' I said. 'If you don't like it over there, we'll come straight back. But we have to try it and see if we like it there. I'm sure we will.' (Ishiguro, 1982: 173)

As commentators repeatedly emphasise, Ishiguro's novels are distinctive for what they do not say, for their style of what is sometimes called understatement.

A Pale View of Hills is full of silences, omissions and apertures ... What is left out is as important as what is kept in. (Lewis, 2000: 36)

So whilst Etsuko thinks back to her life in Nagasaki in the late 1940s, the effects of the atomic bomb on that city and Japan are mentioned only twice (Lewis, 2000: 37). There are interesting issues, for me, in critics' analyses of this particular silence. In what ways might a character like Etsuko experience a dramatic, landscape- and society-devastating event like an atomic explosion as her life continues? The context for all she remembers carries it. Does she need to mention it separately to create it as figural, when it is inescapable 'background'? As first person inquirers how do we pay appropriate attention to background? See PART II: **Notions of inquiry**: Initiating inquiry: *Scoping the territory of inquiry*.

***An Artist of the Floating World* (Ishiguro, 1986)**

Ono, an ageing artist, is reviewing his career and life. He does this through four diary entries dated between October 1948 and June 1950 and we see subtle shifts as his interpretations develop (Wong, 2000).

Ishiguro says an advantage of using a:

diary narrative is that each entry can be written from a different emotional position. What [Ono] writes in October 1948 is actually written out of a different set of assumptions than the pieces that are written later on ... so we can actually watch his progress, and... the language itself changes slightly. (Mason, 1989: 334 in Wong, 2000: 38)

Ono has been an acclaimed and successful artist. But he was aligned with the Japanese nationalism of the 1940s, which by the time period of the novel has been publically questioned. Has he aligned his life and creativity with a disreputable cause? Was he indeed creative or overtaken by social forces that he then found himself expressing? How can he now respect himself and his life work? In a parallel story, his position in the family and sense of respect from his children is also opened to question.

***The Remains of the Day* (Ishiguro 1989)**

Stevens is a butler who has especially built his integrity around the notion of dignity and a sense of service (James, 2009; Lewis, 2000). He suggests that serving a great person is an important contribution that someone can make to the world. He looks back from the changing society of 1956 (in which he is serving a new American owner of his stately home) to the time he considered his hey-day, serving Lord Darlington in the 1920s and 1930s. The story is potentially

blighted, however, by the post-war disparagement of Lord Darlington as a Nazi sympathiser and potentially anti-Semitic (Wong, 2000: 61). Stevens' review extends to his 'personal' life, although separately having a personal life is apparently a somewhat alien concept in his worldview.

In the 1930s Stevens had enjoyed the company of Miss Kenton, a housekeeper at the hall. In 1956 he sets out to visit her (she is now Mrs Benn) on an unaccustomed holiday, borrowing his employer's car, and wondering what clothes are suitable to such an activity. A theme in the novel is whether Stevens denied himself a possible love relationship with Miss Kenton. The priority Stevens has given his career is also shown by the distance he maintained from his father (Wong, 2000), who he identifies as also an exemplary butler, who came to work at Darlington Hall in the 1930s and died there.

As in the other two books, Stevens repeatedly tells the reader that he is unsure of his account of past times, that he realises it may not be reliable. As he reflects, and turns over past memories to consider their meaning, as readers we are aware of how precarious his attempts to identify a viable truth are. Often he seems to be taking certain meanings from events when other interpretations might seem more likely. For example, from reported conversations, his faithfulness to Lord Darlington seems not as reciprocated as Stevens might like to think.

Thematic explorations as inquiry

Ishiguro writes by identifying themes he wants to explore and then finding fertile settings in which he can do this. Whilst ostensible plotlines might suggest that his books are set in post-war Japan (PVH and AFW) or 1930s England (RTD), this is not his intention. He is trying to escape historical specificity, seeing the issues he considers as generic.

Ishiguro sees his first three books as connected novels.

KI [Kazuo Ishiguro]: In the first three novels, I was rewriting the same thing. I was on the same piece of territory, and each time I was refining what I wanted to say ... my second novel was an expansion of the sub-plot of my first novel, but it's about how somebody wasted his life in terms of his career. It's about well-meaning but misguided efforts to lead a good life, but it seems to happen only in the realm of one's career. It seemed to me at the end of writing that book, that if you're talking about wasted lives, you can't just talk about career, you have to talk about the personal arena as well. And so, *The Remains of the Day* is a re-write of *An Artist of the Floating World*, except it's about a man who wasted his life in his career and his personal arena. Each time, I'd think, It's not quite there yet. I've got to do it again but with another dimension. (Wong and Crummett, 2006, in Shaffer and Wong, 2008: 208)

This intention to work with generic, intriguing themes and find fitting settings in which to explore them has been well expressed in relation to Ishiguro's 2015 novel *The Buried Giant* (Kite, 2015). Wanting to explore processes of remembering and forgetting, at both an individual and societal level, he set the book in a somewhat mythical time of 4th century Britain. At that time it seems that, perhaps, a temporary reconciliation had been achieved between people of different faiths and creeds that was about to be lost to such an extent that previous neighbours could consider brutally murdering each other. Ishiguro's puzzles about how this could come about in contemporary society could not, he thought, be explored in specific current or recent locations, lest they be viewed as relevant only to those times and places, subject to scrutiny about factual portrayal. The wider significance of the exploration could be lost. Finding settings for Ishiguro is about potential richness and imaginatively fitting landscapes.

In *The Remains of the Day*, the life of a butler was a fitting device but not the subject Ishiguro was seeking to explore. The Britain he depicts is 'a mythical landscape which is supposed to work at a metaphorical level. *The Remains of the Day* is a kind of parable' (Vorda and Herzinger, 1990, in Shaffer and Wong, 2008: 75). Ishiguro was interested in how we give up our lives to causes and organisations that we might or might not in retrospect consider valuable or deluded. He goes on to suggest that in these terms, 'Most of us are like butlers because we have these small, little tasks that we learn to do, but most of us don't attempt to run the world' (Vorda and Herzinger, 1990, in Shaffer and Wong, 2008: 87). Despite this, 'we just get on with our small lives and hope for the best' (Swaim, 1990, in Shaffer and Wong, 2008: 101). As Wong (2000: 23–4) notes in relation to Ishiguro's first four books (i.e. including *The Unconsoled*, see below):

Each of his novels supports Ishiguro's contention that, though his characters fail at something essential in their lives, they eventually find the momentum and energy to keep moving forward. The futility of his characters' plights, coupled with their ability to keep forward-looking, adds a poignant dimension to the author's view of the world.

Ishiguro says of the first three novels:

In those days, I was interested in how people lie to themselves just to make things palatable, to make a sense of yourself bearable. We all dignify our failures a little bit, and make the best of our successes. I was interested in how someone settles on a picture of himself and his life. (Jaggi, 1995, in Shaffer and Wong, 2008: 117)

Associations with first person action research

Drawing clear implications from Ishiguro for first person inquiry is contrary to my intent, and to what I admire in his work. In this section I therefore offer a few associations. I resonate with Ishiguro's puzzles about what happens when people seek retrospectively to account for their lives. His explorations suggest that we tell stories with purposes, and that these purposes and associated assumptions may be fleeting and shift with changing social conditions. We then act with these purposes and associated stories in mind.

In all three cases we might call these depictions of 'unreliable narrators'. But they are also beautifully crafted explorations which cast doubt on notions of 'reliability' as we live with inquiry. Following through the specific twists and turns, complexities and ambiguities (as analyses of these works do admirably – see for example, Lewis, 2000; Wong, 2000) we encounter the paradoxes of authenticity and narrative voices. Potential meanings shift as the stories unfold. Impressions Ishiguro intends are built up, accrued through detailed textual practices.

Considering parallels between *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro says that in the former:

part of my subject matter really was how parochial people's moral visions tended to be. And this is about an artist who never really saw beyond his small world: he is stuck in this city. The sadness of his fate has all to do with this. He wants very much to give his heart to big causes, but because he is somebody of very limited vision, he can't really see beyond his own circle, he ends up unquestioningly giving his painting, his talent to propaganda purposes in the 1930s as Japanese militarism builds up, and that's the story. (Galliz, 1999, in Shaffer and Wong, 2008: 150)

Ishiguro then gives clues about his craft as writer and how he seeks to show this narrowness of vision. He depicts Ono very much within his own city, assuming in Ono's phrasing that the reader knows the local landmarks he is referring to. 'I wanted to create the effect that the reader ... was actually eavesdropping on this rather enclosed narrator talking to somebody ... who lives in his neighbourhood' (Galliz, 1999, in Shaffer and Wong, 2008: 150).

Ishiguro has similar intents in relation to Stevens, the butler, who he describes as 'Someone who has such a limited world that he cannot really see the full implications of what he's doing. So Stevens assumes that his "you" is another servant' (Galliz, 1999, in Shaffer and Wong, 2008: 150–1). Ishiguro says he thus 'tried to write the whole book in a kind of "butler-speak"'. He wanted to create the effect of the main character keeping control of his emotions. 'And so, the language itself is of someone who is afraid of the human in him. He always uses

these words that keep his opinions and emotions at a distance' (Swaim, 1999, in Shaffer and Wong, 2008: 103).

Having explored people retrospectively ordering their lives in his first three novels, for his next book Ishiguro wanted to write 'from the viewpoint of someone ... in the midst of chaos, being pulled in different directions at once, and not realizing why'. In *The Unconsoled* (1995), my favourite Ishiguro novel if I single one out, he certainly achieves this. But that is another story.

In my passion for Ishiguro's work I am not saying I wholly agree with his analysis of life and its enactment. Rather my delight is in how he takes themes related to conditionality with which I resonate, and depicts them in fluid, pliable, questioning ways, using his crafts as writer. His work is an eloquent reminder to treat issues of self-reflection, memory and life narrative with due caution.