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10.15290/cr.2016.15.4.04

Testimonies of absence: Trauma and forgetting in *The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro

Abstract. In their *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Felman and Laub associate the trauma narrative with a gap or omission: “The victim’s narrative – the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma – does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence” (Felman and Laub, 57). The event in which the traumatic experience is located cannot be accessed directly, but, as Caruth argues, “only in and through its inherent forgetting” (Caruth, 8). *The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro begins with a hiatus expressed in the main character’s (Axl’s) realisation of the missing past that has disappeared from people’s memory. Embarking on a journey that proceeds across geographical and historical space, the narrative delves into private mental topographies and the post-apocalyptic debris. By trying to make sense of the landscape troubled by “inherent forgetting” and simultaneously testifying to “massive trauma”, the narrative of Ishiguro’s novel reveals the double process of coming to terms with loss and (the perpetrator/victim’s) traumatic experience. My objective is to examine the story of *The Buried Giant* as an instance of trauma narrative starting with an absence and a melancholic text revealing the complexity of the mourning process. In my study I primarily draw upon the narrative theories of trauma and its latency (Felman and Laub, Caruth), as well as the psychoanalytic concepts of incorporation and introjection (Abraham and Torok) to investigate the narrative and conceptual structures of loss in the novel.

Keywords: trauma, memory, forgetting, post-apocalypse, Kazuo Ishiguro.

Introduction

In his influential book *The Empty Space* (1968), Peter Brook described an experiment conducted by him to examine the significance of the audience’s attention in theatre. Brook explored the different ways of reacting to death and how they were affected by memory and historical knowledge. The director juxtaposed the intensity of the response to a fragment of a play about death in Auschwitz – *The Investigation* (1965) by Peter Weiss – with the lack of interest in a passage listing the names of the French and English dead from *Henry V* by William Shakespeare. Trying to understand why the audience felt so differently about the deaths in Auschwitz and at Agincourt, Peter Brook asked them about how long it takes for an event to become the past, or when a corpse turns into “a historical corpse”. Finally, the theatre director requested the audience to listen to the frag-

ment from *Henry V* again, this time trying to look at Shakespeare's text in the way they reacted to Weiss's – making connections between memory and history in the long pauses made by the actor. Spectators were encouraged to react “as vividly as if the butchery had occurred in living memory” (Brook, 29). By following Brook's suggestions, the audience was supposed to discover that each pause was pregnant with tension and emotion, making them aware of “how many layers silence can contain” (Brook, 29). Brook's experiment exposes two important aspects: the relation between the living memory and forgetting, as well as the significance of silence or ellipsis as a means of expressing the horror of war and “butchery”. Time can change the living memory of the dead into history, which can be exhumed to become meaningful by making connections to present atrocities. Silence evokes those connections between the past and the present: it becomes a testimony and points to a meaningful absence.

Although referring to a different historical and artistic context, Peter Brook's commentary on the living memory provides a significant background to the discussion of the novel published in 2015 by Kazuo Ishiguro – *The Buried Giant*. Ishiguro's novel investigates the complexity of forgetting and remembering processes, referring to the early medieval history of the post-Roman period in Britain. By investigating the memory of previous wars and traumatic events and amnesia, the novel comments on how each of them might be simultaneously destructive towards and constitutive of one's personal and collective identity. Ishiguro's novel begins with silence, which is gradually discovered to veil the buried past, whose traces disturb the peacefulness of amnesia. When aided by memory, the silent ground reverberates with the unbearable noise of battlegrounds, slaughter and suffering.

These aspects of memory and silence are also highlighted by the author in interviews. In an interview recorded for *The Agenda*, Kazuo Ishiguro explained why he decided to write a story set in 5th or early 6th century Britain. The time between the end of the Roman and the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon invasion was to him – and many historians – a blank period in history. This historical gap, as Ishiguro mentions, invites a number of speculations about the possible “ethnic cleansing or genocide” that occurred then. However, this blank space in history could in fact be a time of relative peace, leaving no trace in historical or legendary archives, which tend to prioritize historical conflicts over uneventful stability. The other aspect of memory and forgetting refers to the questions of what forces and violence are involved in creating peace and to what extent they can be kept under control. In the interview mentioned above, Ishiguro explains how universal the problem is, enumerating historical moments and political contexts of collective memories and their consequences, including North American slavery, Nazi collaborators, or Britain's colonial past, among many others. Ishiguro concludes the list with the statement that “There are buried giants in every society and these giants are going to wake up” (interview with Piya Chattopadhyay, *The Agenda*).

Thus the questions asked in the novel are essentially questions posed by post-apocalyptic literature about the trauma of survival and traumatic memory that persists beyond an end. *The Buried Giant* investigates the significance of traumatic memory on two levels – the collective one – affecting the integrity of the group and the peaceful co-existence of former adversary na-

tions or communities, and the individual level – having an influence on the integrity of one’s self and one’s relation to other human beings. The novel exposes the complexity and painfulness of remembering and forgetting processes and the ethical contradictions involved in them.

My objective is to examine the story of *The Buried Giant* as an instance of trauma narrative, starting with an absence and a post-apocalyptic text that positions the characters and the reader in the context of catastrophic survival and traumatic loss of memory. In my analysis I will primarily draw upon the narrative theories of trauma and its latency (Felman and Laub, Caruth), as well as the psychoanalytic concepts of incorporation (Abraham and Torok) to investigate the narrative and conceptual structures of loss in the novel. *The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro begins with a hiatus expressed in the main character’s (Axl’s) realisation of the past that has disappeared from people’s memory. Embarking on a journey that proceeds across geographical and historical space, the narrative delves into private mental topographies and post-apocalyptic debris. By trying to make sense of the landscape troubled by “inherent forgetting” and simultaneously testifying to “massive trauma”, the narrative of Ishiguro’s novel reveals the double process of coming to terms with loss and (the perpetrator/victim’s) traumatic experience.

Trauma and memory

In their *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Felman and Laub associate the trauma narrative with a gap or omission: “The victim’s narrative – the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma – does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence” (Felman and Laub, 57). In *The Buried Giant*, Axl, the main character, living in a Brittonic village, realises that the life of his community and his own is incomplete, that there used to be something more to it before, yet he cannot remember what it was. Firstly, it is just a subconscious intuition, but gradually Axl witnesses the moments of collective misremembrance or forgetting and can link these events to other occasions in the past of similar amnesia. Although the collective amnesia is attributed in the novel to the magic influence of the dragon Querig (the spell cast by Merlin at King Arthur’s request), as a literary device it primarily represents the mechanisms of the trauma narrative. The novel starts with the disconnected memories and incidents that seem to have no coherent meaning, because the main characters cannot create a coherent picture of their lives, missing large parts of their past and thus unable to make sense of the present. Because of the inability to remember trauma, the events and places appear in the characters’ experience as if happening for the first time. It is only after some time, when the influence of the spell decreases, that the characters discover the meaning of places and their own identities. What is significant is that the process is gradual and slow, starting from the details that can be safely accommodated within one’s psyche. Commenting on the Freudian concept of belatedness, Christina Wald emphasises that “the traumatic event as such has never taken place: the past is belatedly created through its ostensive repetition in the future” (Wald, 96). In Ishiguro’s novel we are confronted with a landscape that testifies to the atrocities and butchery of war, while the main characters are unable to read what it

signifies because of their inability to remember the past, or their avoidance strategies. We follow the characters in their prospective journey to extract the past from it. Each new place evokes stories told by encountered characters which later on turn out to be memories:

'For this house has witnessed days of war, when many others like it were burnt to the ground and are no more now than a mound or two beneath grass and heather.' ... 'What is it, Axl?' she asked, her voice lowered. 'You're troubled, I can see it.' 'It's nothing, princess. It's just this ruin here. For a moment it was as if I were the one remembering things here.' (Ishiguro, 47)

It seems that the very act of forgetting is the condition through which the past can be recovered without directly raising resistance to its horrors. An incomplete memory can be suspended in its innocuous form, as in the case of Wistan, a Saxon warrior dedicated to revenge, who experiences joy on revisiting the land which he believes to be visiting for the first time:

'We raced across fields, past lake and river and my spirit soared. A strange thing, as if I were returning to scenes from an early life, though to my knowledge I've never before visited this country... The trees and moorland here, the sky itself seem to tug at some lost memory.' (Ishiguro, 91)

As Caruth suggests, "[t]he historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (Caruth, 8). The event in which the traumatic experience is located cannot be reached directly, but, as Peter Buse argues in his study of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, traumatic experience can only be accessed in "its circuitous returns" (Buse, 177). The narrative of *The Buried Giant* leads both the characters and the reader through the process of recovering memory that follows a circuitous path. The path is first delineated by sudden glimpses of remembered scenes and utterances that cannot be verified. It is only on the second or third occasion that memory of the event appears. At the early stage of the novel Wistan compares his awakened memories to "some restless sparrow [he] know[s] will flee any moment into the breeze" (Ishiguro, 123). When travelling in what should be a strange land to him, he realises that "at each turn it's as if another distant memory stirs" (Ishiguro, 121). On the collective level the novel juxtaposes those who, under the influence of the spell-induced amnesia, are ready to live in relative peace with their former enemies and those who manage to remember the past atrocities and treasure them so as to take revenge again. On the personal level, the conflict is between the belief in the importance of memories in human relations and the possibility of their destructive influence. In both cases the main characters' strategy is that of avoiding and bypassing the metaphorical burial ground.

The Buried Giant

The image of the eponymous *Buried Giant* activates a number of different reflections on the nature of memory and forgetting. In the meaning employed by Ishiguro in an interview, the giant signifies

the past violence and guilt that have been buried by force or consensus, sometimes to avoid further bloodshed. Historical amnesia seems to be the main condition on which the status quo can be preserved with all the benefits of social and political stability. At the early stage of the novel Wistan is wondering: "By what strange skill did your great king heal the scars of war in these lands that a traveller can see barely a mark or shadow left of them today? ... [I]sn't it a strange thing when a man calls another brother who only yesterday slaughtered his children?" (Ishiguro, 127). Towards the end of the novel Wistan cannot accept the peace "built on slaughter and a magician's trickery" or believe in the healing of wounds "while maggots linger so richly" (Ishiguro, 327). The buried giant, Wistan believes, has to be excavated to reveal the atrocities committed and deceptions practised by those in power to sustain peace. This is revealed in the flashback scene presenting the confrontation between Axl and Gawain after the battle. Axl accuses King Arthur and his knights of the unjustified and cruel murders of the weakest, and warns them against the hatred it causes in the enemy:

'News of their women, children and elderly, left unprotected after our solemn agreement not to harm them, now all slaughtered by our hands, even the smallest babes. If this were lately done to us, would our hatred exhaust itself? Would we not also fight to the last as they do...?' (Ishiguro, 242)

Gawain justifies the murder of the "civilians" by the necessity to eliminate the generation that is capable of remembering the battle and their fathers killed in war:

'Those small Saxon boys you lament would soon have become warriors burning to avenge their fathers fallen today. The small girls soon bearing more in their wombs, and this circle of slaughter would never be broken... We may once and for all sever this evil circle.' (Ishiguro, 243)

The burial of the past depends on the violent elimination of one or two generations so that no one will be left to remember what had happened.

The novel further complicates the collective meaning of the buried giant metaphor by adding a further individual layer to it. The paradox of amnesia is that some of the characters selectively remember only the negative aspects of the past, its violence and butchery, having forgotten sometimes the trivial reasons for hating other people or the affection they felt for those whom they now come to hate only. Brennus wastes his time by trying to defend himself against a childhood enemy, in a conflict which throughout the years has risen to enormous proportions because of having forgotten the original reason. Wistan discovers that beside hatred he also feels affection towards individual Britons when the spell no longer works on him.

The concept of the buried giant is also one of the central elements of the individual trauma discussed in Ishiguro's novel. It symbolically defines the nature of the relationship between the two main characters, the married couple Axl and Beatrice. The first occasion on which the buried giant is mentioned in the novel refers to the early stage of Axl's and Beatrice's journey. When crossing the Great Plain, the couple are careful not to tread upon the hill where the giant is buried, tak-

ing the longer route to bypass the dangerous area. In their private trauma of having lost their son, the buried giant might be seen as the externalization of the intrapsychic tomb that they built inside themselves devoted to their dead son. The concept of the intrapsychic tomb was developed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok to describe the dependence of the bereaved on the lost object. The tomb or crypt stands for “the words that cannot be uttered, the scenes that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed – everything will be swallowed along with the trauma that led to the loss. Swallowed and preserved” (Abraham and Torok, 130). The lost object of love in fantasy gains almost an ordinary living existence inside the subject’s psyche. According to Abraham and Torok,

[i]nexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject. Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects, the objectal correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography... A whole world of unconscious fantasy is created, one that leads its separate and concealed existence. (130)

Neither Axl nor Beatrice can remember what happened to their son, nor can they verify properly the memories or fantasies they seem to have. A story of a voyage to their son’s village seems to be the only permitted way of addressing the trauma of loss and survival. It persists till the very end of the novel as a hope that is never fulfilled, based on their – and also partly the reader’s – repetitive re-invention of their son’s corporeal existence. Whenever another relatively young character appears in the story the reader expects him to either be their son or that he will lead the couple to him. The journey postpones the moment of completion, allowing the characters to avoid the confrontation with the past and the memory of death. Bypassing the burial ground makes it possible for them to sustain the illusion.

However, the memory of the son and the erasure of his death are closely linked with the way Axl and Beatrice remember their relationship. Finally, it seems that it is the fear of losing each other that drives Axl and his wife to support Wistan in his mission to put an end to the she-dragon Querig and her magic breath. Beatrice seems to suffer from abandonment anxiety, asking repeatedly whether Axl is still with her, seemingly reliving the original trauma of having been abandoned by Axl. However, as the mist of amnesia gradually lifts, it turns out that it was she and not Axl that left. The journey to the son’s village/grave is a fulfillment of Beatrice’s wish to visit her son’s tomb from which she was prevented by Axl as an act of revenge for her being unfaithful to him. Thus, the trauma of loss encapsulated in the couple’s search for their son functions as a displacement of the couple’s fear of and experience of losing each other. On the personal level the retreat of the mist reveals the suffering of both the perpetrators and the victims, and the changing roles that the characters occupy in their relationship.

The post-apocalyptic mode

Although post-apocalyptic fiction usually explores the future consequences of catastrophic events, the past presented in *The Buried Giant* bears many traces of the post-apocalyptic genre. Approach-

ing *The Buried Giant* as a post-apocalyptic narrative poses important questions of the past, one of them being whether the characters should attempt to decipher the meaning of the ruins which are left after the catastrophe. According to James Berger, “Post-apocalyptic discourses try to say what cannot be said ... and what must not be said...” (14). Heffernan describes Berger’s approach as one that demands identifying the absent event that led to the life after the end: “The post-apocalyptic narrative is a symptom that demands to be read in terms of its underlying traumatic history and the historical specificity of the event must be restored to interrupt readings of trauma as bloodless universal trope” (Heffernan, 6). According to Heffernan, Berger argues that “[t]he absent referent that haunts these narratives of rupture and ruin ... must be identified in order for us not to be trapped by them” (6). In other words, as Heffernan suggests Berger proposes reading “the remainder, the ruins of the world that persist after the unspeakable trauma, after its end” (Heffernan, 6). The post-apocalyptic landscape thus contains the traces of the story, and the obligation of the post-apocalyptic subject is to decode the elusive meaning that it contains, to trace the trauma and violence that has led to the catastrophe. Such an approach has much in common with Walter Benjamin’s understanding of history, in which the victor’s story is always based on violence and suppression: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256). In representing the victor’s story we construct history as a procession of victors walking over the bodies of their victims. The historical gap that stands for a peaceful period in history is seen as one that reveals its own barbarism. Heffernan approaches post-apocalyptic narratives differently – suggesting that loss coexists together with historical archive and cannot be as such identified – expressed in language. It exists as the element that keeps haunting the historical narrative but cannot lead to revelation (7).

The Buried Giant presents the tensions between reading the post-apocalyptic landscape for a specific historical description of the catastrophe that offers revelations about the past and the ambiguous, and contradictory space from which no single interpretation can emerge. The former is instantiated by Wistan’s attitude, whereas the latter approach is represented by Gawain. Wistan has the ability to read historical detail from seemingly unreadable features. He represents the belief in the possibility of extracting the original trauma and violence, of reading the post-apocalyptic landscape and debris to trace back the past events and preserve their significance as an element of one identity. Where others see a peaceful place, a monastery inhabited by pious monks, Wistan sees the “fascinating traces of the past” which are unreadable to others: “[t]he monks ... hardly know what they pass each day” (Ishiguro, 163). Wistan can hear and comprehend “what [the] walls whisper to [him] of days gone by” (Ishiguro, 160) and that is why he suspects that similar atrocities can still happen there. He tells a precise story of what happened in the fort, reading the traces left in the architecture:

‘Through this watergate would be let past, quite deliberately, a measured number of the enemy... Now those isolated between the two gates, in that space just there, ... would be slaughtered before the next

group let through. You see how it worked, sir. This is today a place of peace and prayer, yet you needn't gaze so deep to find blood and terror'

'You read it well, Master Wistan, and I shudder at what you show me.' (Ishiguro, 161)

Wistan then further interprets the story written in the architecture of the yard, now used by the monks as a gathering place. It was used to form a kind of auditorium in which children, women and old people gathered to watch their enemy die in agony – “to witness the invaders squeal like trapped mice between the two gates” (Ishiguro, 161). It is a pleasure they experience before they lose the battle, knowing that in the end they will be defeated:

'But they know that in the end they will face their own slaughter ... it's vengeance to be relished *in advance* by those not able to take it in its proper place. That's why I say, sir, my Saxon cousins would have stood here to cheer and clap, and the more cruel the death, the more merry they would have been.' (Ishiguro, 162)

Later on Wistan discovers another story of butchery inscribed in the awkward architecture of the old tower. Again this device is meant to cause as much damage and suffering as possible, inflicted by the losing party against their enemies. This time the enemies are trapped by fire in the high tower from which there is no escape. Wistan takes an opportunity to try out the way the tower operates when the soldiers searching for him arrive at the monastery, performing something similar to a historical reconstruction of the past catastrophe, reliving the trauma simultaneously as victim and perpetrator.

In contrast to Wistan, who tries to reconstruct a historical detail from the post-apocalyptic landscape, Gawain exposes the ability of the landscape to heal its wounds and conceal the burial grounds under a layer of greenery: “The bones lie sheltered beneath a pleasant green carpet” (Ishiguro, 327). The signs of past battles and atrocities are interpreted by him as a natural aspect of the cycle of life and death. The crimes committed recently are placed in the general historical framework of the past that is no longer available to them:

'Here are the skulls of men, I won't deny it. There an arm, there a leg, but just bones now. An old burial ground. And so it may be. I dare say, sir, our whole country is this way. A fine green valley. A pleasant copse in the springtime. Dig its soil, and not far beneath the daisies and buttercups come the dead. And I don't talk, sir, only of those who received Christian burial. Beneath our soil lie the remains of old slaughter.' (Ishiguro, 195)

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by referring once again to the problems raised by Peter Brook in his experiment. One of the questions that emerges after reading the above passage from the novel is “How long does it take for the bodies of the slaughtered to become just bones?” In one scene of *The*

Buried Giant the characters tread upon the bones and skeletons lying on the ground in the dark underground passage in order to escape from danger. The old burial ground evokes some degree of horror but no memories. Because of this the experience of walking on the old burial ground is manageable. The characters cannot relate to the bones; the stories they could present to the viewers are unreadable. The silence of the bones evokes no feelings or urgency of reaction.

The second question raised by Peter Brook in his experiment can refer to the consequences of Ishiguro's decision to set the story in post-Arthurian Britain. The corpses and testimonies of slaughter do not belong to the living memory of contemporary readers. They belong to historical or even legendary past. In such a distant setting the corpse certainly becomes something less and more than a historical corpse – a symbolic or mythical corpse. Setting the narrative in such a context seems to be a deliberate strategy to consider the processes of remembering and forgetting the past with a critical distance, exploring the consequences of trying to make sense of the catastrophe and trauma and the benefits and risks of amnesia, without taking the side of victims or perpetrators. One of the significant questions is whether and how the novel tries to establish a link between the distant times of the narrative and the living memory of its readers. It can be argued that such a link is established in the elliptical traumatic and open post-apocalyptic structure of its narrative, which involves the readers in the process of revealing the traumatic kernel to which it refers.

Finally, the manner in which *The Buried Giant* operates with silence and absence places its main themes among the concerns of what Clifton Spargo calls elegiac literature. As a melancholic text revealing the complexity of the mourning process, the novel employs silence also as a dissenting factor or critique (Spargo, 51) that makes progress impossible. Silence and absence testify to the mourning process that is not and cannot be completed.

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