

## “The Giant, Once Well Buried, Now Stirs”:

### Ishiguro’s Narrative Techniques to Write *The Buried Giant* as a “Double-Cross Metaphor”<sup>1</sup>

「かつて地中に葬られ、忘れられていた巨人が動き出す」：  
『忘れられた巨人』を「ダブルクロス・メタファー」とし  
て書くイシグロの語りの技法

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#### Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* (2015) has been considered a radical departure from his previous six novels in two respects: first, the use of fantastical or legendary motifs drawn from Arthurian literature or fantasy novels, and second, the use of a third-person narrator. However, previous studies have only focused on the first aspect and ignored the second one, or Ishiguro’s narrative techniques. This study explores the two experiments in *The Buried Giant* in order to demonstrate how they are employed by Ishiguro to address the novel’s themes, such as memories, forgetting, and traumas of an individual and a community, as well as to write the novel as a “double-cross metaphor,” which is a means to pretend “it [is] a metaphor for something else when it [is] actually the thing it actually was.” While the novel focuses on a historical fact, namely strained relations between the Britons and Saxons, Ishiguro dilutes the historical concreteness of medieval Britain with supernatural elements, which allows the novel to be read metaphorically as a fable about strife between ethnic, religious, or national communities in the contemporary world. It can also be interpreted literally as part of Britain’s long history, even though it is an alternative history of a fantastical Britain peopled by dragons. This alternative British history echoes the actual history of cross-ethnic and cross-cultural encounters in the country, which encourages Ishiguro’s readers, especially his British readers, to realize the fallacy of believing that their country had been a homogeneous entity before it was flooded by immigrants.

Keywords/キーワード Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*, memory, forgetting, double-cross metaphors,  
カズオ・イシグロ、『忘れられた巨人』、記憶、忘却、ダブルクロス・メタファー

## 1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's seventh novel, *The Buried Giant* (2015), has been considered "a stark departure" from his previous novels in two respects (Alter, 2015, p. C25). First, his earlier novels are partially or completely set in the post-World War II period, whereas in *The Buried Giant*, he abandons modern settings, describing medieval Britain during the period between the Roman withdrawal around 410 and the rise of Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy around the sixth century. Furthermore, he does not depict it as it actually was. Instead, he presents a fantastical or legendary version of it by describing dragons and alluding to King Arthur. Accordingly, many critics claimed that Ishiguro ventures into new territory, inspired by Arthurian literature, such as Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958), or by fantasy novels of J. R. R. Tolkien (Holland, 2015; Sacks, 2015; Sexton, 2015). Second, in *The Buried Giant*, he refrains from writing his narrative from an autobiographical narrator's subjective perspective and memory, which is a hallmark of his earlier novels. Instead, he employs two character-narrators, Sir Gawain and a Charon-like boatman, as well as a third-person, detached narrator who recounts most of the novel from the perspectives of Axl and Edwin, an elderly Briton man and a Saxon boy (Lichtig, 2015). Throughout the novel, Ishiguro constantly switches perspective from one character to another to describe conflicts between the Britons and Saxons without displaying his support for either side.

Strangely, however, Axl and Edwin suffer from mysterious amnesia. On a literal level, their forgetfulness is no longer responsible for the inevitably ambiguous and sometimes repressive nature of memory, which Ishiguro has explored in his previous novels. In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro attributes the cause of their memory loss to a she-dragon named Querig whose amnesic breath is under a spell. In order to describe collective amnesia, he relies on these supernatural elements. In this respect, his two new endeavors are associated with each other.

Among the generic and formal experiments in *The Buried Giant*, several studies have addressed the former, or the novel's fantastical setting, by analyzing how Ishiguro exploits and violates conventions of Arthurian literature or fantasy novels (Bukowska, 2017; Vernon & Miller, 2018; Michael, 2020).<sup>2</sup> However, most studies bypass both by restricting their attention to the themes of the novel, such as individual recollection, traumas, social memories, and forced amnesia (Charlwood, 2018a; Lorek-Jezińska, 2016; Valančiūnas, 2018).

This study explores Ishiguro's two experiments in *The Buried Giant*—fantastical motifs and a third-person narrator—in order to demonstrate how they are employed as means to address the novel's themes, such as memories, forgetting, and traumas of an individual and a community, as well as to write the novel as "a double-cross metaphor," which is a means to pretend "it [is] a metaphor for something else when it [is] actually the thing it actually was" (Ishiguro, 2015). While the novel describes the strained relations between the Britons and Saxons, Ishiguro dilutes the historical concreteness of medieval Britain with the supernatural elements. Consequently, it can be read metaphorically as a fable about strife between ethnic, religious, or national

communities in the contemporary world. At the same time, the novel can be interpreted literally as part of Britain's long history, even though it is an alternative history of a fantastical Britain peopled by dragons, reflecting the actual history of the country, which “has always been a multi-ethnic, multicultural place” (Tonkin, 2015, p. 29).

## 2. Postwar Britain in the Dark Ages

Although many critics claimed that *The Buried Giant* represents “a stark departure” from Ishiguro's previous novels, a careful reading of the novel would make them realize that it retains Ishigurean features. However, previous studies have only focused on thematic continuity between *The Buried Giant* and his earlier novels (Charlwood, 2018b; Hopârtean, 2019). Prior to an examination of Ishiguro's new endeavors in *The Buried Giant*, this study addresses two Ishigurean features—a postwar setting and a motif of journey as a means for his protagonists to confront their repressed memories and emotions—that are related not only to the themes but also to the structures of his novels.

A. S. Byatt (2000/2001) once described Ishiguro as a novelist who persists in writing “profound and complex fables . . . about the confusions and reconstructions of the post-war world” (p. 4). Even in *The Buried Giant*, he depicts a “post-war world,” although it is not a post-World War II world unlike in his previous novels. Initially, the fictional world appears to be “long settled in peace” (Ishiguro, 2015/2016a, p. 124).<sup>3</sup> However, as the narrative unfolds, Ishiguro gradually reveals that this is also a postwar world, where traces of war are preserved. The diegetic present is set a few decades after Arthur, a king of the Britons, won the battle of “Mount Badon” against the invading Saxons around the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries (p. 123). In *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum (Ecclesiastical History of the English People)*, Bede (ca. 731/1990), an English monk, explains that during the battle, “the Britons made a considerable slaughter of the invaders” (p. 64). Before him, Gildas (ca. 540/1978), a British monk, reports in *De excidio Britanniae (The Ruin of Britain)* that after the battle, “[e]xternal wars” “stopped” (p. 28). Around the mid-sixth century, the Saxons resumed fighting, and the beaten Britons were driven to Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and the continent, so that by the seventh century, “[m]ost of Britain was . . . dominated by Anglo-Saxon culture” (Dougherty, 2016, p. 26). However, their “defeat was so overwhelming that Saxon incursions were halted for almost 50 years” (Dougherty, 2016, p. 26). Based on these accounts, Ishiguro uses the time of fragile peace as the historical backdrop of his novel.

However, both Gildas (ca. 540/1978) and Bede (ca. 731/1990) do not refer to Arthur. He is mentioned in *Historia Brittonum (British History)*, commonly attributed to Nennius (ca. 830/1980), a Welsh monk. However, in this work, he is already a legendary character. He is represented as a “leader in battle” who “fought against [the English],” “together with the kings of the British,” and destroyed “nine hundred and sixty men” “in one day” on the battle of “Badon Hill” (Nennius, ca. 830/1980, p. 35). As Ronan Coghlan (1991/1995) notes, “if Arthur indeed lived, he did so at a time when British history was hardly documented at all, a time of historical

shadow-lands of which all manner of tales and fables could be told without fear of contradiction” (p. 9).

Ishiguro takes advantage of this lack of information about Britain during the Dark Ages to add a sinister behind-the-scenes story to the victory of the Britons “without fear of contradiction” to Arthur’s image in pseudo-historical writings and fictions—a “great king who saved Britain from enemies at home and abroad, conquered much of the Continent,” “and established a court which became a magnet for the best and bravest knights in the world” (Putter & Archibald, 2009, p. 1). For Ishiguro, such an image is less a model than a fixed point to be destabilized. As Sir Gawain, Arthur’s nephew and surviving knight, finally admits, the king violated “[t]he Law of the Innocents,” a treaty to spare civilians from military attacks, commanding his soldiers to massacre innocent Saxons to finalize his conquest (p. 244): “we slaughtered plenty, I admit it, caring not who was strong and who weak” (p. 326). Moreover, to avoid future vengeance, Arthur ordered Merlin, a wizard, to cast a spell on Querig’s breath to make people forget the wartime atrocities. Now, the former antagonistic peoples live side by side in peace only because her enchanted breath, which fills the diegetic world in the form of “a mist of forgetfulness,” erases their memories of the past (p. 51). However, the origin of the mist is weakening as she “grows old” (p. 326). According to Gawain, Querig will last only “[a]nother season or two” (p. 327). Therefore, even if Wistan, a Saxon warrior, fails to slay her, the old rivalries between the two peoples due to their different ethnicities, languages, and religions would soon be reawakened. By using postwar worlds in his novels, Ishiguro continues to explore the catastrophic effects of war on personal lives, as well as how people and their societies confront or suppress negative memories to recover from wartime devastation and traumas.

### 3. Axl’s Personal Quest for Memories

Another significant feature of Ishiguro’s novels is the motif of journey. In *The Remains of the Day* (1989), for instance, Stevens, a butler who works at an English country house, travels to Cornwall to see a former housekeeper, Miss Kenton. Inspired by his six-day motor trip, he embarks on a psychological journey, during which he re-examines his past through a filter of memory. Paralleling Stevens’ “circuitous” trip with his roundabout internal quest for his memories, Ishiguro (1989/1993) describes how his state of mind and recognition of past events are changing as the former develops (p. 67). In the early stages of his trip, Stevens proudly recalls his faithful service to Lord Darlington, known as a Nazi sympathizer. However, the chain of events that happen while he travels to the West Country inspires him to reconsider his past deeds more carefully. Through his recurring acts of remembrance, he gradually realizes the folly of his blind loyalty to Darlington. As Joseph Coates (1989) notes, “little or nothing happens on the surface” during Stevens’ trip, but “a great deal happens” in his “interior” space (p. 5), or during his inward journey into his memories of the past.

As in *The Remains of the Day*, in *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro employs the motif of journey as a narrative frame to describe a psychological quest for memory. The novel begins when Axl, an elderly Briton man, “[makes] up his mind” to embark on a journey with his wife, Beatrice, to find their son after this decision

“[has] been put off far too long” (pp. 14, 6). However, they cannot clearly remember their child because of Querig’s breath. Therefore, their three-day journey inevitably comprises restoring lost memories of their conjugal lives. In Chapter 2, Ishiguro indicates the significant relationship between their physical and psychological journeys: “Our memories aren’t gone for ever, just mislaid somewhere on account of this wretched mist. We’ll find them again, one by one if we have to. Isn’t that why we’re on this journey? Once our son’s standing before us, many things are sure to start coming back” (p. 52). As Axl says here, their “journey” is intended not only to locate their son but also to revive their “mislaid” memories. Throughout the novel, Ishiguro continuously alludes to their child, who never appears and remains the absent center, as a symbol of their forgotten memories.

On his way to his son’s village, Axl slowly recalls his past. For instance, on the second day of his journey, as he hears Wistan and Gawain talk about Arthur, “a fragment of memory,” especially “his anger,” “[comes] to him” (p. 126). As is finally revealed, he was once called “Axelum or Axelus” and served Arthur as a “Knight of Peace” to disseminate the peace treaty to Saxon villages (pp. 244, 242). However, he left the king as he was furious at his act of breaching it. On the third day when Axl and Beatrice climb mountains to Querig’s lair, “her shoulders hunched against the wind, [cause] a fragment of recollection to stir on the edges of Axl’s mind” (p. 308). Then, he feels “distinct shadows of anger and bitterness” (p. 308). His negative feelings derive from “a small moment she was unfaithful to [him]” (p. 356). To describe the scenes where Axl restores painful memories about his past life, both public and personal, Ishiguro never places him as the subject of the sentences. By doing so, he emphasizes the influence of Axl’s journey on his interior quest to indicate that he recalls them spontaneously, rather than consciously, inspired by people and events that he encounters on the way to the east.

By employing the journey motif, Ishiguro can describe how Axl changes his understanding of the amnesic mist as he recaptures these poignant memories and recognizes his past life in the course of his journey. Initially, he thinks that “it’s cruel when [he and Beatrice] can’t remember a precious thing” like their son (p. 34). Without memories, without “the means by which we remember who we are,” they cannot unify the past, present, and future of their experiences and establish “the very core of identity” (Sturken, 1997, p. 1). Accordingly, Beatrice wonders “if without [their] memories, there’s nothing for it but for [their] love to fade and die” (p. 51). However, when they learn from Jonus, a wise monk, that Querig’s breath “robs [them] of memories” (p. 176), Axl feels caught not only in “a curiosity” but also “a kind of terror” (p. 178). In contrast to Beatrice, who does not “fear” bad memories at this point, he realizes the possibility that such memories may affect their current relationship (p. 180). Similar to Ishiguro’s other protagonists, Axl is torn “between a need to advance one’s self-knowledge and a protective impulse to suppress unwelcome realisations” (Drag, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, he makes Beatrice “[p]romise to keep what [she feels] for [him] this moment always in [her] heart, no matter what [she sees] once the mist’s gone” (p. 294). After recalling the past, including the fact that his son died of the plague, he appreciates the affirmative side of the mist that “allowed old wounds to heal” (p. 361).

Hence, he asks Beatrice, “Could it be our love would never have grown so strong down the years had the mist not robbed us the way it did?” (p. 361). Carmen-Veronica Borbely (2016) claims that “such forgetfulness” “is unlikely to foster overcoming past trauma” (p. 27). However, Ishiguro describes Axl’s temporal forgetting as something more positive than a mere failure of memory or forced oblivion to suggest that the act of forgiveness sometimes requires the forgiver to forget, or temporarily disregard, the original act of the forgiven person.

When Axl eventually regains his lost memories, it becomes evident that he has desired to forget, or suppress, his traumatic past. For instance, when Gawain reminds Axl of the time when he served Arthur, he says, “Remind me no more” and “I’m not sorry if the mist robs me further of it” (p. 313). His past public self, which he calls “a skin,” is “[o]ne [he] hoped had long crumbled on a forgotten path” (p. 336). As for Beatrice’s adultery, he admits that before losing his memories, he “kept locked through long years some small chamber in [his] heart that yearned for vengeance” (p. 357). It is he who wanted to temporarily disregard their marital quarrel until his wound could heal. Then, one morning when he realizes that “the last of the darkness [has] left [him],” he decides to embark on a journey to visit his son’s grave (p. 357). On his way there, the closer he gets to Querig, the more he recalls the past. Although this may seem paradoxical, Ishiguro intentionally presents people’s amnesia as “strangely selective” (Chang, 2015), describing Gawain and Wistan as having better recall of the past than Axl. In this way, he indicates that Merlin’s magic does not work equally on everyone and that people’s desire to repress the murky past lurks behind Querig’s breath. Although some critics charge that Ishiguro “[fudges] limited but conveniently lucid recollections” (Wood, 2015, p. 94), claiming that “the internal narrative logic is not . . . taut” (Rich, 2015, p. 46), Axl recalls the past despite being under the spell because he is psychologically ready to face his past.

#### 4. Gawain’s and Wistan’s Political Quests for Collective Memories

With Axl’s personal quest for memories, Ishiguro interweaves politically motivated quests for collective memories. In this respect, *The Buried Giant* differs from his earlier novels. In the latter, he addresses first-person narrators’ memories, hinting at the gap between their micronarratives of private memory and macronarratives of public history. In the former, he parallels Axl’s individual memory loss with social amnesia, turning his attention to collective or societal memories of a community or country, which are defined as widely shared recollections of a past social event that are conserved, commemorated, and transmitted across generations through interpersonal and institutional communications.

According to Ishiguro, this new theme was inspired by “what happened in the ’90s as Yugoslavia disintegrated” (Ahearn, 2015). The collapse of the Cold War structure did not lead to an optimistic era. Instead, it “brought out the bloodstained maps of older battlefields” in the former Yugoslavia (Assmann, 1999/2011, p. 54), where there were “concentration camps, death camps,” and “massacres like Srebrenica” (Clark, 2015, p. 4). Aleida Assmann (1999/2011) claims that “the release and political manipulation of [societal] memories”

were behind this “return of obsolete borders and new enemy stereotypes” (p. 54). For instance, when Slobodan Milošević, the then president of Serbia, gave a speech in Kosovo in 1989, he tried to revive collective memories of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, a bloodshed in the distant past:

(1) The televised spectacle of Slobodan Milošević descending by helicopter onto the spot where Prince Lazar was slain in battle . . . not only cast Milošević in the role of heir to the hero of Serb history, but also, in the minds of many viewers, linked fourteenth-century Christian Serb resistance to the Muslim Ottoman empire with the contemporary conflict between Christian Serbs and Muslim Kosovar Albanians. Revived memories of wartime atrocities evoked a mistrust of neighbouring communities, and encouraged people to respond more violently than they might otherwise have done to emerging political tensions, for fear of the violence which they anticipated from their old enemies. (Morris-Suzuki, 2005, p. 231)

The conflict in the former Yugoslavia highlights crucial features of collective memory. First, while “individual recollections spontaneously fade and die with their former owners,” communal memories are “reconstructed within a transgenerational framework, and on an institutional level, within a deliberate policy of remembering or forgetting” (Assmann, 1999/2011, p. 6). Second, collective memories are crucial to the formation of a collective identity of a country or community, just as personal memories are central to an individual identity. This may remind people of Ernest Renan’s thesis that “the essence of a nation is, that all its individual members should have many things in common” and “that all of them should hold many things in oblivion” (1882/1896, p. 67).

To explore the theme of collective memory in *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro describes Gawain’s and Wistan’s politically motivated quests for societal memories. Wistan travels “from the fenlands in the east” “on [his] king’s errand” to slay Querig (p. 121), while Gawain continues his long “journeys,” whose secret purpose is to protect her from such attacks (p. 300). Behind their missions to guard or kill Querig, there are their kings’ desires to manipulate social memories of the previous war between the Britons and Saxons.

Gawain initially pretends that slaying Querig is “[a] mission entrusted to [him] by Arthur” (p. 136).<sup>4</sup> However, he ultimately confesses that he has been “[h]er protector” (p. 319). While helping to conceal Arthur’s genocide of the Saxons, he propagates the distorted account of the war—the king “commanded [his men] to rescue and give sanctuary when [they] could to all women, children and elderly, be they Briton or Saxon” (p. 127). To highlight the possibility that collective memories are suppressed or altered for political purposes to legitimize the past conquest and the present ruling, Ishiguro indicates that Querig’s lair was made by human hands: “Axl could see . . . how [rocks] were arranged in a rough semi-circle around the top of a mound to the side of their path. He could see too how a row of smaller stones rose in a kind of stairway up the side of the mound” (p. 324). Indeed, Gawain admits that he “brought . . . and lowered her into her lair” near the mountaintop and that Christian “monks kept her fed for years” (pp. 328, 319). Although Borbely (2016) claims that Querig, “an outsider to the human polity,” “takes over the moral function of delegitimizing politically

sanctioned abuses of memory” and “abuses of oblivion” (p. 30), Ishiguro hints at Arthur’s involvement in the emergence of social amnesia. By continuously alluding to the Briton king as an embodiment of political or ideological forces that deliberately suppress and modify unfavorable facts of the past to legitimize order and power, Ishiguro suggests that social memories are not autonomous, but likely to be controlled and abused by the apparatus of power.

The disappearance of the amnesiac mist is also motivated by political intentions that seek to manipulate communal memories. On the orders of his king, Wistan destroys Gawain and Querig. According to him, his Saxon king wishes to revive social memories of the previous war, especially Arthur’s genocide, because he intends not only “to build a monument to kin slain long ago,” but also “to make ready the way for the coming conquest” (p. 339). On hearing Wistan’s words, Axl fears that when “old hatreds” begin to “loosen across the land,” “quick-tongued men make ancient grievances rhyme with fresh desire for land and conquest” (p. 340). In the novel, political or ideological forces are personified as the Saxon king, which deliberately make a political issue out of past tragic social events in order to justify an aggressive war against old foes. Ishiguro implies that buried collective memories of these events can be reawakened and attached to new political meanings, even if they occurred long ago. By doing so, he warns readers that “[w]hen the past is evoked,” “we need to be vigilant about the ways in which the newly recovered knowledge is encouraged to re-emerge within yet another regime of truth and the ways in which it is once again subjugated” (Yoneyama, 1999, p. 32).

To encourage readers to question the idea that “collective memory” is “always a good thing” (Kirsch, 2016, p. 88), Ishiguro rebels against the tradition of dragon-slaying narratives. For instance, “[u]nlike in the medieval stories of chivalric adventure,” the fulfillment of Wistan’s quest to slay Querig “does not restore order and harmony,” but “reopens old wounds and revives bitter divisions” (Bukowska, 2017, pp. 31–32). After Wistan finishes his “errand,” a shudder runs through him as he predicts that as soon as the Saxons recall the wartime atrocities that were committed against them and their ancestors, they will seek revenge against the Britons, “burn their neighbours’ houses,” and “[h]ang children from trees” (p. 340). Although Ishiguro never describes such violent scenes, the novel’s ending would disturb his readers since Britain’s actual history confirms Wistan’s prediction: “country by country, this will become a new land, a Saxon land, with no more trace of [the Britons’] time here than a flock or two of sheep wandering the hills untended” (p. 340). Alluding to the outcome of Querig’s death, namely another war between the Britons and Saxons, Ishiguro suggests that if the Saxon king reawakens buried social memories of the tragic past to seek “vengeance” for his ancestors, it is as undesirable as Gawain’s belief that past brutal deeds should be suppressed for “an eternal peace” (pp. 339, 327).

Moreover, Ishiguro’s use of the dragon-slaying motif differs from those in fantasy novels. As Fredric Jameson (2005/2007) observes, in the contemporary genre, capitalizing on medieval materials, “the ethical binary of good and evil” is structurally significant (p. 58). For instance, in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit: Or There and Back Again* (1937), Smaug is described as “a most specially greedy, strong and wicked worm” that steals



“gold and jewels . . . from men and elves and dwarves” and “[carries] away people, especially maidens, to eat” (1997, pp. 28–29). This dragon, “probably based ultimately on the biblical dragon of the Apocalypse,” “the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil’ (Rev. 20:2)” (Evans, 2007, p. 130), is eventually destroyed by Bard known for his “courage” (Tolkien, 1937/1997, p. 211). Initially, Ishiguro seems to follow this literary convention. In Chapter 3, he portrays Wistan, who saves Edwin, a twelve-year-old Saxon boy, from monstrous fiends, as a man of “courage, generosity and skill” (p. 81), whereas he refers to Querig as “a dragon of great fierceness,” which is believed to be the source of “all manner of evil” (p. 72). However, Ishiguro later reveals that Querig has long served as a protector of peace. Moreover, when the dragon finally appears in Chapter 15, she is “emaciated” and easily destroyed by Wistan while sleeping (p. 325). Joshua Redlich (2015), who expected *The Buried Giant* to follow the tradition of fantasy novels, criticizes this scene for its lack of action. However, Ishiguro consciously describes it as anticlimactic, violating readers’ expectations deriving from the genre. In this manner, he unsettles the traditional dichotomy between a dragon and its slayer, between social evil and a hero to indicate that “in the context of the collective, a degree of forgetting” is not evil, but “as important as remembering for allowing the community to function in the aftermath of social and historical catastrophes” (Whitehead, 2009, p. 14).

## 5. The Past Buried under the Ground

Inspired by contemporary history, Ishiguro explores in *The Buried Giant* how a society remembers and forgets its traumatic past in order for people to coexist peacefully. However, he does not choose modern settings. Instead, he depicts medieval Britain, which is distant enough not to evoke intense antagonistic passions or nostalgic feelings from contemporary British readers.

Moreover, Ishiguro refuses to portray primitive Britain as it actually was. In the opening paragraph, which serves as “a threshold, separating the real world we inhabit from the world” he “has imagined” (Lodge, 1991–1992/1992, p. 5), an unnamed, third-person narrator, using the past tense, mentions “ogres” as if their existence were a lesser-known but indisputable fact. This is in contrast to the reference to Roman roads. Although Ishiguro’s description of these roads may strike readers as more historically plausible, he foregrounds the uncertainty of the past with the conditional perfect: “Most of the roads left by the Romans would by then have become broken or overgrown, often fading into wilderness. Icy fogs hung over rivers and marshes, serving all too well the ogres that were then still native to this land” (p. 3). According to Ishiguro, his use of “ogres” was inspired by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a Middle English alliterative romance written in the late fourteenth century (Clark, 2015, p. 2), the time when “description . . . is constrained by no realism” and “its truth is unimportant (or even its verisimilitude)” (Barthes, 1968/1989, p. 144). For his contemporary readers, this motif, which is frequently found in Arthurian literature or fantasy novels, serves as a marker signaling that *The Buried Giant* is not “a detailed picture of historical and social circumstances” of medieval Britain (Lukács, 1937/1989, p. 118), but rather a more fantastical novel partially based on its

supposed history. By diluting the historical details of the setting with this motif, Ishiguro emphasizes metaphorical meanings without regard for historical facts and accuracy to encourage the readers to depart from the diegetic Britain and to search for the relevance between it and certain historical moments of their own communities and countries.

Among such fantastical motifs to which Ishiguro assigns non-literal meanings, the most significant example is a giant, which is clearly associated with the title of the novel, and consequently, its themes. The giant is first mentioned in Chapter 2. According to Beatrice, in the Great Plain, there is a hummocky mound “where the giant is buried” (p. 34). On their first reading, readers would assume that in the fictional world where ogres exist in reality, “the giant” literally signifies “[o]ne of the supposed beings in human form but of superhuman stature, who occur frequently in mythic or pseudo-historical traditions and in romantic fiction” (Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 496). For instance, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain fights with “giants from the high fells” (ca. 1370/1998, p. 27). In *Historia regum Britanniae (The History of the Kings of Britain)*, a “pseudo-historical” account written by Geoffrey of Monmouth (ca. 1136/1966), a Welsh cleric, “giants” are called native inhabitants at the time when Brutus, an imaginary descendant of Aeneas of Troy, lands on Britain (p. 72). Accordingly, it is natural for Ishiguro’s readers to initially think that “the giant” buried beneath the Great Plain is a British native and descended from giants in traditional British literature.

However, Ishiguro describes his giant in a quite different manner from the Gawain poet (ca. 1370/1998) and Geoffrey of Monmouth (ca. 1136/1966). Moreover, his portrait of this motif differs from those of other supposed creatures in his novel, such as ogres and pixies. While the latter appears before characters’ eyes, the former is only referred to as the dead and buried. In Chapter 13, when “the giant’s cairn” is mentioned, the creature appears to have died and been buried, as is the case with “the giant” buried beneath the Great Plain (p. 290). However, in Chapter 15, Ishiguro indicates that the word “giant” does not signify a gigantic human:

(2) [I]t is always possible the giant’s cairn was erected to mark the site of some such tragedy long ago when young innocents were slaughtered in war. This aside, it is not easy to think of reasons for its standing. One can see why on lower ground our ancestors might have wished to commemorate a victory or a king. But why stack heavy stones to above a man’s height in so high and remote a place as this?

It was a question, I am sure, equally to baffle Axl as he came wearily up the mountain slope. When the young girl had first mentioned the giant’s cairn, he had pictured something atop a large mound. Yet this cairn had simply appeared before them on the incline, no feature around it to explain its presence. (p. 305)

Until this scene, most readers would realize that “the giant’s cairn” is not the burial mound of a giant, but a giant grave of numerous victims who died during the previous war. In the earlier chapters, Ishiguro scatters clues about the dark history of “Querig country,” a country ruled previously by Arthur and now by Lord Brennus (p. 72).<sup>5</sup> In Chapter 6, Wistan accuses Christian monks of helping to conceal “crimes once committed

in this country and long unpunished” (p. 173). In Chapter 9, titled “Gawain’s First Reverie” (p. 231), Ishiguro reveals that the “crimes” refer to the wartime atrocities—Saxon “women, children and elderly,” who were “left unprotected” in their villages after the “solemn agreement not to harm them,” were “all slaughtered” by Briton soldiers (p. 242). In Chapter 7, when Axl, Beatrice, Edwin, and Gawain traverse through an underground tunnel in a monastery, which “was once a hillfort built by” the Saxons to shelter their “[w]omen, children, wounded, old, [and] sick” (pp. 222, 161), they discover “a vast layer of bones” “in some sort of mausoleum” (pp. 194–195). In short, there is a possibility that some of the bones buried below the monastery may belong to the victims of Arthur’s genocide. To hide this fact, Arthur rendered “the giant’s cairn” featureless and ordered the monks to feed Querig there to keep people away. Owing to her enchanted breath, people call this place “the giant’s cairn” and believe that it is unrelated to them. However, once Wistan slays her, repressed, buried collective memories of the war and its victims would be unearthed, as he warns, “The giant, once well buried, now stirs” (p. 340).

Using an image of the underground along with that of “the buried giant,” Ishiguro literalizes and materializes an idiomatic expression, a buried memory. By doing so, he expresses the relationship between people and their buried, or repressed memories, literally and metaphorically. When Beatrice and Axl walk through the underground tunnel of the monastery, she believes that she found “a small child long dead,” whereas he claims that it is “a bat” and lies “on a bed of bones” and “a skull or two that could only have belonged to men” (pp. 191–192). Deimantas Valančiūnas (2018) points out that what they think they saw underground indicates their personal traumas, Beatrice’s “loss of her son,” and Axl’s “trauma of war” (pp. 216–217). Underground, they get a glimpse of their repressed, buried memories. In this scene, Ishiguro suggests that people stand on past sediments even when they cannot see them from their present points of view.

Ishiguro describes people’s repressed memories as something buried underground, not only in terms of personal memory but also in terms of collective memory. In the underground tunnel, when Axl says that he saw “a bed of bones,” Gawain denies this, claiming, “I saw no bed of bones, I don’t know what you suggest, Master Axl. Were you there, sir? Did you stand beside the great Arthur? . . . Your suggestions are unwarranted, sir! An insult to all who ever stood alongside the great Arthur!” (p. 193). His hysterical reaction seems to confirm the fact that this place is related to Arthur’s slaughter of innocent Saxons. Then, when they find the underground “mausoleum,” Gawain says: “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. . . . Beneath our soil lie the remains of old slaughter” (p. 195). “[T]he daisies and buttercups” that bloom on the ground represent the current peace between the Britons and Saxons, while “a vast layer of bones” buried under the soil symbolizes inexpungible testimonies to the wartime slaughter. Gawain’s words may remind readers of Walter Benjamin’s thesis that “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (1942/1968, p. 256). Paul Ricoeur

(2000/2006) also notes that “there is no historical community that has not arisen out of what can be termed an original relation to war” (p. 82). As “the bones” of the war victims “lie sheltered beneath a pleasant green carpet” (p. 327), attestations of acts of “barbarism” in the past are preserved and cannot be eradicated despite being suppressed. Hence, it is possible that social memories, which have been buried in oblivion, are suddenly reawakened as Wistan says “white bones” await in the soil “for men to uncover” (p. 327).

## 6. What Lurks behind Querig’s Amnestic Breath

Like “the buried giant,” Querig is a significant motif to which Ishiguro assigns metaphorical meanings. He describes that Gawain and Wistan serve the Briton and Saxon kings, respectively, who plot to tame or kill her, suggesting that social memories would be manipulated by the apparatus of power. However, it is not enough for readers to realize the political control of collective memory and oblivion. As Ricoeur (2000/2006) warns, behind “the handling of authorized, imposed, celebrated, commemorated history—of official history,” which is similar to what Gawain propagates, “[a] devious form of forgetting is at work,” for it strips “the social actors of their original power to recount their actions themselves” (p. 448). In short, Gawain’s distorted account of the previous war is “not without a secret complicity, which makes forgetting a semi-passive, semi-active behavior” (Ricoeur, 2000/2006, p. 448). Placing the supernatural monster at the center of the novel, Ishiguro indicates that as in the case of Axl’s memory loss, in the case of collective amnesia, Merlin’s magic works on people’s desire to suppress the murky past, or their “obscure will not to inform oneself, not to investigate the harm done by the citizen’s environment” (Ricoeur, 2000/2006, p. 449). For instance, there is a strange lack of interest in the past among people in Axl and Beatrice’s Briton village: “in this community the past was rarely discussed. I do not mean that it was taboo. I mean that it had somehow faded into a mist as dense as that which hung over the marshes. It simply did not occur to these villagers to think about the past” (pp. 7–8). Moreover, Jonus says that most monks of the monastery do not wish to “uncover what’s been hidden and face the past,” continuing to feed Querig (p. 174). In this way, Ishiguro describes “strangely selective” amnesia as people’s, especially the Britons’ “passive” acceptance of memory “abuses,” implying that their “wanting-not-to-know” enables Gawain to suppress and alter the historical fact (Ricoeur, 2000/2006, pp. 448–449).

Social amnesia in the world of *The Buried Giant* results not only from the Britons’ “obscure will” to remain oblivious to Arthur’s genocide, but also from the Saxons’ “urgent need to forget” the traumatic social event “in order to live in the present” (Whitehead, 2009, p. 121). To describe the latter, Ishiguro introduces another focal character, Edwin, along with Axl. In Chapter 4, he recalls Old Steffa’s story that one day, three wolves entered his village and “took all they wished”: “They slaughtered the hens. Feasted on the goats. And all the while, the village hid. Some in their houses. Most in the threshing barn” (p. 99). Superficially, this event is unrelated to the previous war. However, in Chapter 12, Ishiguro reveals that they were three Briton men, who were ex-soldiers and abducted Edwin’s mother, indicating that the previous war has cast its shadow even on the peaceful time. Although the child Edwin “was watching” this, these men are replaced by the wolves in

his and Steffa's memories (p. 275). Their memories of the children's-tale-like animals are what Sigmund Freud (1899/2003) calls "a screen memory," which serves to cover up a traumatic event by substituting, displacing, and falsifying it (p. 19). After repressing his memory of not being able to help his mother "to live in the present," Edwin finally acknowledges the past fact, as he sees a likelihood of rescuing her with Wistan's help. By revealing that Merlin's spell works on people's desires to forget the negative or traumatic past, Ishiguro shows that collective memories eventually "[come] down to what ordinary people actually have in their heads about what happened in their country" (Clark, 2015, p. 4). In short, "we define ourselves through that which collectively we remember and forget" (Assmann, 1999/2011, pp. 53–54).

### 7. *The Buried Giant* as a "Double-Cross Metaphor"

While Ishiguro places fantastical elements at the center of *The Buried Giant*, he never constructs a completely imaginary world like Tolkien's Middle-earth, capitalizing on the historical and geographical particularity of medieval Britain and referring to Arthur, who has functioned as a British "national icon" (Hutton, 2009, p. 31). His emphasis on Britishness is also indicated by his use of a third-person narrator who recounts most of the novel from Axl's and Edwin's points of view. Although for the most part, the narrator recedes into the background, s/he sometimes steps forward as a personalized figure and calls post-Arthurian Britain "our country at that time" and people "our ancestors" (pp. 5, 305). Moreover, s/he mentions what are now considered British national symbols. In Chapter 2, to explain the difficulty of traveling across "open country" in medieval times, s/he mentions the lack of "hedgerows": "navigation in open country was something much more difficult in those days, and not just because of the lack of reliable compasses and maps. We did not yet have the hedgerows that so pleasantly divide the countryside today into field, lane and meadow" (p. 31). In Chapter 3, when Axl and Wistan enjoy the surrounding scenery from a lookout's platform of a Saxon rampart, the narrator presumes that "[t]he view before them that morning may not have differed so greatly from one to be had from the high windows of an English country house today" (p. 91). In *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro (1989/1993) consciously refers to "hedgerows," "meadows," and an English country house called Darlington Hall as British national icons to remind readers of England's green and pleasant land (pp. 161, 68). In *The Buried Giant*, the third-person narrator's focus on the continuity and differences between Britain then and now suggests that s/he recounts the narrative as part of the country's long history. In exploring the theme of collective memory, Ishiguro introduces another narrative layer to indicate that the narrator's act of storytelling is also an attempt to recount collective memories of Britain, even though it is an alternative Britain inhabited by pixies and dragons.

Since the publication of *The Buried Giant*, the identity of the third-person narrator has continued to baffle many critics and scholars. Eileen Battersby (2015) claims that the narrator is a Charon-like boatman who ferries people to an island of the dead. He first appears in Chapter 2 when Axl and Beatrice take shelter from the rain in a ruined masonry villa: "The oddly frozen stances of" the boatman and an old woman "seemed to

cast a spell on Axl and Beatrice, for now they too remained as still and silent. It was almost as if, coming across a picture and stepping inside it, they had been compelled to become painted figures in their turn” (p. 39). Then in Chapter 17, the last chapter, he is employed as an intradiegetic narrator: “They [Axl and Beatrice] came riding through the rainstorm as I sheltered under the pines. . . . Yet the horse stands with patience under the downpour as the old man lifts her down. Could they perform the task more slowly were they painted figures in a picture?” (p. 345). Phoenix Scholz (2015) points out that the second time the boatman appears, “Ishiguro again compares the scene to a painting.” By doing so, he signals that the boatman is the mysterious narrator who recounts the earlier chapters of the novel (except two which are Gawain’s first-person reveries). Although the narrator’s references to “an English country house” and “hedgerows,” which did not exist in medieval Britain, suggest that he is an extradiegetic person, he is actually both extradiegetic and intradiegetic.

Ishiguro describes the Charon-like boatman as a supernatural being to explain his awareness of the existence of “an English country house,” even though he is living in medieval Britain. First, he is “unusually tall” (p. 38). Moreover, although he is “probably still young” (p. 38), he claims that he spent his childhood in the ruined villa, which “must have been splendid” more than a century before “in Roman days” (p. 37), but is now beyond recognition because of the “days of war” (p. 47). In short, the boatman, who can move between the worlds of the living and the dead, is immortal.

According to Ishiguro, when he wrote *The Buried Giant*, he imagined that the narrator is addressing an audience of the ghosts of all innocent children who lost their lives in every war in the past (David, 2015). In fact, the narrator addresses himself to various generations of British people, including the dead. Sometimes, his imagined narratees seem similar to Ishiguro’s readers who know “the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated” (p. 3). However, in Chapter 3, when he describes houses in Edwin’s village, he compares them with “roundhouses” “in which some of you, or perhaps your parents, were brought up” (p. 53). Since the roundhouse is a “circular building typical of north-western Europe (esp. the British Isles) during the Bronze and Iron Ages” (Oxford University Press, 2011), listeners who “were brought up” in such houses cannot be the same as the ones who know the “winding lane or tranquil meadow,” but must be dead. In Chapter 15, Ishiguro describes in a more straightforward way that the collective “you” to whom the narrator addresses himself include victims of war atrocities: “Some of you will have fine monuments by which the living may remember the evil done to you. Some of you will have only crude wooden crosses or painted rocks, while yet others of you must remain hidden in the shadows of history” (p. 305). Here, Ishiguro suggests that it is not only innocent Saxons massacred by Briton soldiers but also many others who have remained buried in oblivion during the long sweep of British history.

By employing the Charon-like boatman as a narrator who assumes British people, including the dead, as his narratees and constantly alludes to the continuity and differences between Britain then and now, Ishiguro writes *The Buried Giant* as part of the long history of his country, although it is an alternative history of an alternative Britain peopled by ogres and dragons. Consequently, the novel functions as “a double-cross

metaphor.” To explain this concept, Ishiguro (2015) cites the example of Ralph Nelson’s Western film, *Soldier Blue* (1970), which depicts the 1864 massacre of American Indians by the U.S. Army. When the film was released, most viewers considered it “a thinly disguised allegory about the My Lai massacre,” a horrific event that occurred in 1968 when U.S. soldiers massacred unarmed South Vietnamese villagers during the Vietnam War (Ishiguro, 2015). However, Ishiguro (2015) claims that although the film pretends to be a metaphor for the Vietnam War, it actually addresses “an even more uncomfortable thing,” “the genocide of the Native Americans.” The double-cross metaphor, which pretends “it [is] a metaphor for something else when it [is] actually the thing it actually was,” is used as a means to confront a very difficult subject. As is the case with *Soldier Blue*, *The Buried Giant* can be read literally as well as metaphorically. By diluting the historical details of the setting with fantastical elements borrowed from Arthurian literature or fantasy novels, Ishiguro foregrounds the allegorical aspects of the narrative. Accordingly, the novel, which explores how a community or country recovers from past atrocities by forgetting, can be read as a reflection of the modern world, such as “post-World War II France,” “Japan,” and “contemporary Bosnia” (Alter, 2015, p. C25). For Ishiguro’s international readers, the novel functions as a “screen memory” in the Freudian sense, which conceals a traumatic social event from the past that cannot be approached directly. At the same time, although the novel purports to describe a fantastical Britain that is filled with supernatural creatures, it depicts the conflict between the Britons and Saxons as part of the long history of cross-ethnic and cross-cultural encounters in the country, thereby showing Ishiguro’s readers, especially his British readers, that their country “has always been a multi-ethnic, multicultural place.”

The use of the “double-cross metaphor” by Ishiguro is a means for him to write *The Buried Giant* as an international writer as well as a British novelist. Previously, he emphasized his role as an international novelist (Hunnewell, 2008, p. 44). Some critics also consider him “alien” to “the most English of subjects,” such as “the class system” and “the foundation myths and legends of ancient Britain” (Riemer, 2015, p. 27), although he has lived in the country for most of his life after he left Japan at the age of five. However, when Britain decided to leave the European Union after the Brexit referendum of 2016, Ishiguro contributed an article on the subject, expressing his worries about the future of his country as a British citizen. It is unusual for him to write about topics other than fictions and literature. In this article, Ishiguro (2016b) points out that there were Leave voters who are “racists” and used words such as “taking the country back” and “sovereignty” as “euphemisms for ‘kick out the migrants.’” Although *The Buried Giant* was published a year before the Brexit referendum, in the face of resurgent nationalism in Britain, Ishiguro penned the narrative of the confrontation between the Britons and Saxons to address another issue—the ongoing tensions between British natives and migrants. In doing so, he tries to dispel a persistent illusion that Britain had been “both culturally and ethnically homogeneous” before it was flooded by immigrants (Phillips, 1997/1999, p. xiii).

## 8. Conclusion

The two strategies employed by Ishiguro in *The Buried Giant*—the uses of the fantastical motifs and third-person narrator—are intended to present the novel as “a double-cross metaphor” while exploring his new theme of collective memories of a community or country, as well as his abiding interest in personal memories and traumas. When the novel was published, Ishiguro, as an international writer, emphasized the allegorical and universal aspects of the narrative of the conflict between the Britons and Saxons. In order to encourage his international readers to understand the relevance between the fictional world and certain historical moments of their own communities and countries, he dilutes the historical concreteness of medieval Britain with the fantastical elements drawn from Arthurian literature or fantasy novels. Accordingly, the novel can serve as a displaced allegory of strife between ethnic, religious, or national communities in the contemporary world as well as in every period of human history. At the same time, it can be interpreted literally as an account of how Britain was rebuilt by migrants. By using the Charon-like boatman as a narrator who addresses himself to various generations of British people, including the dead, and alludes to national symbols, Ishiguro presents the novel as part of the long history of multicultural Britain in the form of an alternative Britain peopled by dragons. This alternative history of how the fictional Britain became multi-ethnic and multicultural as a consequence of immigration encourages Ishiguro’s readers, especially his British readers, to realize the historical fact that their country “has always been a multi-ethnic, multicultural place.” Through writing the narrative of the uneasy peace between the two peoples, Ishiguro, as a British novelist, attempts to deal with a more imminent issue in the age of resurgent nationalism, the strife between British natives and migrants.

## Notes

1. This is a revised and extended version of my paper, entitled “Kioku to Bōkyaku no Hazama de: Wasurerareta Kyojin ni okeru Syūdanteki-Kiokusōshitsu to Meryū Kuerigu” (2018).
2. For researches that discuss *The Buried Giant* in the context of Arthurian literature, especially medieval romance, see Bukowska (2017); Vernon & Miller (2018). For a study that interprets the novel in relation to the fantasy genre, see Michael (2020).
3. Hereafter in the present paper, as for citations from *The Buried Giant*, only page numbers will be given in parentheses.
4. For a research that focuses on Ishiguro’s description of Gawain, see Okamoto (2019).
5. It is important to note that in the diegetic Britain, there are several countries, and “Querig country” is different from ones which embrace Axl and Beatrice’s Briton community and Edwin’s Saxon village.

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