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THESIS of the PhD DISSERTATION

GAPS AND SILENCES IN RE-INTERPRETING THE PAST

THE DEVELOPMENT OF KAZUO ISHIGURO'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN HIS EARLY
NOVELS

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I. ACADEMIC CONTEXTS, TOPIC AND OBJECTIVES

My research concerns the contemporary fiction of Kazuo Ishiguro, the Japanese-born British writer. Using primary sources, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), I create a method employing various aspects of re-construction of the stories in the presentation of first-person singular narrators. Their being provocative nature invites different interpretations. On the one hand, it is a deliberate call indicating that the individual is begging for attention. On the other hand, in considering the stories narrated by Ishiguro's main characters; their deflective storytelling, their glossing over the truth, the omissions and gaps in narration, readers can be provoked and wary about what they are told. This dissertation examines the place that "gaps" and "silences" occupy in Ishiguro's novels. Focusing on first-person narrators, Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills*, Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World*, and Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* this dissertation brings to the fore some of the main points by which gaps and silences act as defensive tools for hiding, deflecting and distorting stories recounted. In the following dissertation the floating nature of gaps and silences will be explored by means of post-structuralist narrative discourse and psychoanalytic literary criticism.

In Freudian terms omissions, gaps and silences are related to memory-gaps preventing painful and therefore repressed material from becoming conscious. I will argue, that Ishiguro via his first person narrators' gaps and silences reveals more than the reader would anticipate at first. In addition to this the writer invites critical readers to contribute to the ongoing process of revealing and concealing. Basic to my analysis, this thesis interprets narration as a perception of the "self." In other words, I will examine how narrators not only perceive but interpret their character by positioning themselves in front of an imagined audience, i.e. the reader. Via constructing a topical gap between their personae, their stories offer various vantage points from where reinterpretation can be structured. Also I claim that through stereotypical biography tropes first person narrators of Ishiguro are continuously reworking their narrative by the objectification of the self, i.e. talking about the "what" (breakdowns, misconceptions, failed missions of professions and families) rather than the "who."

Throughout this study, post-structuralist narrative and psychoanalytic literary theories are applied in order to decipher the heavy silences of Ishiguro's narrators; the former being an offshoot of structuralism which "sought from its inception in the 1960s to explain narrative

competence by determining a system of units and rules that underlies all narratives.” The latter approach is what Elizabeth Wright explains as investigation of the text “for the workings of a rhetoric seen as analogous to the mechanisms of the psyche.” The frame of this discussion will be provided by theorists elaborating the concepts of “gaps” and “silences” in narration. The method will be these central themes to be interpreted from a post-structuralist and psychological point of view (Patricia Oudek Laurence and Dorrit Cohn).

For interpreting Ishiguro’s “silenced” texts, Oudek Laurence’s model will be employed in order to be able to locate and categorize the psychoanalytically interpreted “silences”. I will examine the novels chapter by chapter as I posit that each narrative chapter represents a gap i.e. a beat. Using Patricia Oudek Laurence’s description of psychoanalytical models¹ on *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, I will also explore the narrative methods in first-person texts I subscribe to Dorrit Cohn’s *Transparent Minds. Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness*²

¹ Patricia Oudek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993)

² Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds. Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1978), 143–268.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My method regarding “silences” will be to examine the narratives in order to detach pauses integrated into self-quoted, self-narrated monologues and self-narrated dialogues or silences surrounding them in order to determine the qualitative measure of these silences and their substance. Ondek Laurence’s approach will be applied in exploring different “modalities” of silence in order to distinguish between “keeping silence about something,” “refusal to enact a subordinate position,” and “signalling exclusion” with special focus on reading silence as “ritual of truth” and “self-resistance.” My inquiry will also pay attention to ellipses, pauses and silences and to the role of the inarticulate or taciturn. Analysing the novels in order to explore and demonstrate how readers are required to participate in the ongoing process of revealing and concealing, the study of the sequential order of narrative chapters will demonstrate the development of the narrative technique within each text. In other words we will explore what type of new story is formed after reconstructing and bridging the “gaps” in the narration.

Given that there is such a stress on the revealed and concealed information by first person narrators, one may be inquisitive as to the aspect of the text that allows free interpretation. Subsequently, there was a need to introduce a model for reading not only “silences” but for interpreting “gaps”. Defining the research methodology further, the concepts of “gaps” and “silences” here are not treated synonymously although in literary theory, as it is demonstrated in Chapters One and Two, they are commonly discussed together. In Ishiguro’s case the concept that readers can write in the strata is what Iser refers to as “blanks” or “gaps” in the text. These instances in the text arise when something crucial to understanding the text is “missing” and must be “deciphered” such as the notion of absences. Taking an example from *The Remains of the Day*, an entire chapter, Day Five is missing from the narrative structure, a gap to be deciphered, involving the reader in the act of reading and interpreting. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves. Hence the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text.” Gaps within the text serve as an opportunity for critical readers to join the different segments of the texts in a way that produces a meaning that is in accordance with their own interpretation of the text thus far. Iser goes on to suggest

that gaps or blanks are crucial in what he calls “the game of imagination.” By reading the novels of Ishiguro, I claim, one volunteer plays a jigsaw-activity filling in the informative gaps and deciphering auditory or spatial silences. His or her enjoyment of the game depends on the equilibrium between the gaps and what is explicitly stated in the text.

Therefore the research questions that are posed in the thesis are the following: to what extent silence is provocative by deflecting injurious details of the past and how does Ishiguro’s artistic craft construct the layers of his protagonists’ distorted narration? In other words, how does silence assist injurious details by becoming oblivious? The main line of inquiry is to examine how protagonists are trapped by their first-person narration. I will also elaborate on the question of how first person narration provokes the idea in psychoanalytical terms, that the protagonists use their self-reflective narration as a “talking cure.” It will be clarified how first person narrators build up their private myth by the application of narrative gaps and silences and what the function of reticence is in distorting their public or private past. Following a research design, the thesis includes this introductory section and definition of research methodology with an overview of the psychoanalytical interpretation of gaps and silences. This will be followed by a detailed study of the novelist’s first three novels, an evaluation of the narrative techniques, a summary of the findings, suggestions for further research and a bibliography. Ishiguro’s narrative technique is described as having “exquisitely fashioned miniatures, miracles of workmanship and tact that suggest everything through absence and retreat” with “ink-wash elusiveness, an ellipticism almost violent in its reticence.” This elusiveness, which escapes cognitive analysis, makes Ishiguro’s work of art mysterious, metaphysical and yet breathtakingly quintessential. Along with professional failures, other themes that Ishiguro explores with great concern in his fiction are miscommunications manifested in “silences” and deepened by “gaps” between parents and children, between husband and wife. As it is known from everyday life, communication dysfunctions are usually caused by silence or cognitive gaps, by physical absence or latent presence. In this thesis I further propose: absences are also manifested in textual gaps. Stevens never mentions his mother, Etsuko, under no circumstances, gives record of her deceased family, Ono mentions his wife, Michiko only once in the narration.

In Ishiguro’s art, protagonists’ pondering, evading, and deflecting reality, their silence about facts, their under or over-explanation reveal the uneasiness of narrators. The characters of Stevens of *The Remains of the Day* and Ono of *An Artist of the Floating World* are experts in circumlocutions (AFW 25) and exaggerations (RD 54 and AFW 96) while the first person

narration of Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills* is mastering her narrative with confusing plots, characters and chronology, and yet evades talking about war traumas (PVH 11 and 13). Digressions (UC 287–288, 475 and WWO 74–75) in later Ishiguro novels such as *The Unconsoled* and *When We Were Orphans* are also markers of dysfunctional communication between characters, families, and friends. In the structural complexities of the narratives, (especially in the case of *The Unconsoled* and *When We Were Orphans*) the verbal repetitions of Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, the musical dynamism of Etsuko and the brightly clear narration of Kathy H in Ishiguro's latest published³ novel, *Never Let Me Go* all serve the purpose of finding some explanation (exclamation) for the disconnected space and time and for dysfunctional human relations. Ishiguro's texts repeat, modify, transform, rework and invest ideas to achieve a self-modifying creation of "a new home" where protagonists find consolation.

Evaluating a premise stated earlier, namely that first person narrators in the examined Ishiguro novels are "displaced" being either absent or only virtually present, maybe it is not far-fetched to say that these physical and psychological absences are carefully explained by the first person narrators' *over-talking* (in the case of Stevens) or by circumvention (Etsuko's and Ono's narration is full of digressions) I will explore in the narratives.

Investigating the rhetoric of narrative gaps and silences in Ishiguro's first three novels, perhaps it is not far-fetched to say that their narrators successfully deflect information. In *The Remains of the Day*, the first person narrator Stevens via his hypophoras, i.e. answering his own rhetorical questions (e.g. on "greatness" and "dignity"), with his euphemisms and circumlocutions provokes the idea that there is much more concealed than revealed. In my interpretation Stevens' linguistic eloquences provide for the narrator's desperate need for confession. Stevens' silence is syntactically elevated, structured. At the same time Etsuko's silence is rich in symbols and dreams. The narrator of *A Pale View of Hills* is continuously reworking her narrative while attempting to verbalize the impossible (her responsibility in Keiko's suicide). Similar to the narration of Stevens, Ono's pompous style in *An Artist of the Floating World* masks the character's irresistible urge to deflect the truth. Ishiguro tellingly explains in a 1990 interview this heart-rending failed attempt of humans – I would exaggerate – in order to come to terms with their sins, failures, mistakes and lost opportunities:

³ The latest Ishiguro novel is to be published under the title *The Buried Giant* in March 2015 at Knopf Publishing House and at Faber.

[w]riting is a kind of consolation or therapy... The best writing comes out of a situation where I think the artist or writer has to some extent come to terms with the fact that it is too late. The wound has come, and it hasn't healed, but it's not going to get any worse; yet, the wound is there.⁴

In my interpretation not one of the first person narrators of Ishiguro's first three novels finds consolation in listening to the sounds of silence in their empty future. Yet telling their stories may bring momentary ease to their troubled consciences and their wounds might be healed by a "talking cure."

⁴ A. Vorda and K. Herzinger, "Stuck on the Margins, An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro," In *Face to Face, Interviews with Contemporary Novelists*, ed. Allan Vorda and Daniel Stern, (Houston, Rice University Press, 1993), 34.

III. ACHIEVEMENTS

Basic to my analysis of Ishiguro's examined novels was the assumption that first person narration can be interpreted as a perception of the self. In all the examined narratives I found Barry Lewis' idea justified in that there is a marked gap between the self-space and life-space⁵ of narrators. I observed how narrators have not only perceived but interpreted themselves. This re-interpretation was completed via constructing a topical gap between their personae, their stories told and between the reader, giving various vantage points from where reinterpretation can be structured from the perspective of narrator, reader and writer.

My implications were the following. First person narrators of Ishiguro by stereotypical biography tropes (e.g. and especially in the narration of Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* when he laments on his failures (RD 256)) continuously reworks their narrative by the objectification of the self, i.e. talking about the "what" (breakdowns, misconceptions, failed missions of professions and families) rather than the "who." As Cynthia F. Wong rightly observed⁶ Stevens perceives himself rather as a "what," as he laments on the notion of his profession, the narrator asks "*what* is a great butler" (RD 256) rather than poses "who" is a great butler. Gaps were interpreted as drastic denials, whereas silences as deflections and absences as means of distortion were discussed.

Informative and textual gaps along with metaphorical ones constructed the matrix of the narratives. The cat-drowning episode in *A Pale View of Hills* is a good example for a metaphorical gap as drowning is a gap in effective breathing. Further I claimed that while artistic manifestation in *A Pale View of Hills* was the torn Nagasaki calendar-pages, possibly marking a bomb-hole, destroyed her whole life, Ono's narrative can be seen as an empty canvas the painter is trying to colour and construct from his vague memories. The empty pages of Stevens' narrative are filled up during his motoring trip following Mrs Seymour's long outdated and old-fashioned travelogue. Rhetoric forms of gaps were categorized by "the bravura of ventriloquism,"⁷ ellipses and periphrasis. I subscribe to Cynthia F. Wong's argument that gaps can be sometimes genuine, but from my perspective they are more related to repression and therefore can be seen as lying strategies. My proposition was that in her estranged narrative Etsuko denies all her responsibility in her failed motherhood. While

⁵ Barry Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000), 84.

⁶ Cynthia F. Wong, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Tavistock, Northcote, 2000), 80.

⁷ Barry Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, 93.

Stevens convinces himself with “falsified sincerity,”⁸ Ono attempts to convince the reader that in artistic terms he has risen above the mediocre. Analyzing the evolving sense of self, it seems Etsuko does not comprehend fully who she really is and what mistakes she made in the past, yet I claim she knows but is unable to confess it. Whereas Ono in my understanding has an evolving sense of self but does not do anything with it. Stevens does face and perceive how and where he went wrong in the final pages of the novel, but avoids taking risky decisions, he remains a servile “professional.”

Summarizing the strata “silences” occupy in the narratives, deflecting injurious details of the past was marked by “silences” configured by Ondek Laurence on lexicon, punctuation, metaphor and space, while absences were regarded as being manifested in textual gaps. My method was to scrutinize one text in order to isolate gaps incorporated into narrated monologues and dialogues or silences surrounding them to determine the qualitative and quantitative nature of these silences and their content. I also focused on ellipses, narrative gaps facilitated by flashbacks and proleptic hoops, as well as on the role of the inarticulate and taciturn.

The main argument in this thesis was that gaps and silences were related to the Freudian concepts of repression and defence. In the textual analysis of *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World* and in *The Remains of the Day*, the narrative and the psychological notion of gaps and silences were explored. I venture that among the first-person narrators of the novels discussed, as stated above, Etsuko and Stevens use the defensive tool of silence differently. Stevens is trying to conceal his memories by *talking too much*, while Etsuko is struggling to say *as little as possible*.

Etsuko’s conflict within her conscience (as we will see how Ono’s and Stevens’ conflict between their private/public conscience will create a growing tension throughout *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*), her incomprehension, which is also a very marked characteristic for other Ishiguro protagonists, her self-deception, omissions in the narration and the reluctance of admittance lead her into a mental state in which she splits the characters of her life into two, allowing herself some sort of distance from what she had done. As for audio effects, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) revolves around “silence.” *The Remains of the Day* concerns itself with no audio effects but “smell” (AFW 114) if we think about Stevens’ prose. On the contrary, *An Artist of the Floating World* apart from images is more engaged with “sounds.”

⁸ Cynthia F. Wong, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, 39.

If we concern ourselves with the characteristic of the narrator, we can assume that what Ono as well as the main protagonist and narrator of *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens cannot face is the fact that they are only mediocre. Probably it is not farfetched to say that all his life Ono wanted to rise above the average. In spite of Ono's pompous style I reckon that like Stevens, Ono does not lack compassionate observations. I venture in this respect that the "bridge" itself plays an important symbolic role in the Ishiguro text. It represents the link between present and past. From here the narrator has a good vantage point on his life, i.e. from one direction he can look back on the pleasure district as a symbolic part of his past and on the other hand he can spot the construction work of the new "apartment blocks for future employees" (AFW 99). This vantage point in *The Remains of the Day* is not static as we are introduced to the past of Stevens via accompanying him on a motoring trip.

Plot-wise I was particularly interested in Ono's involvement in Kuroda's betrayal. The only proof in the text that Ono and Kuroda have exchanged letters is known from the narrator and the self-narrated dialogue between Enchi and Ono is also only reported from the narrator's perspective. I considered the analysis of the process of self-narrated dialogues and narrated monologues of first person narrators vitally important as they provide psychological implications of their word-play, i.e. ambiguities and associations as well as their sentence structure.

Being unable to concur with Wai-chew Sim that "the lack of clarity about who said what as well as Ono's manner of being simultaneously blameworthy (but less so) might be said to reference these about-faces and disavowals,"⁹ I argue that Stevens is unable to remember as it is too painful for him. His regret and pain are overwhelming; he is blocked by trauma and cannot verbalize or express his emotions in other ways. I interpret his shifts in narration as avoidances, as Margaret Scanlan¹⁰ reviews, and therefore I advance the idea that those chapters (or rather parts of the narration with hope and prospect) are narrated in "actual narrative present", whereas the chapters giving the frame and events are in "pseudo narrative present" and those elements with the most painful memories are told in retrospect following the logic of latent memories making their way to the surface. Meeting Miss Kenton on Day Five is entirely missing from the narration. It is recorded later, in retrospect, as it brought a disastrous end to both of Miss Kenton's and Stevens' private lives.

⁹ Wai-chew Sim, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (New York, Routledge, 2010), 43.

¹⁰ Margaret Scanlan, "Mistaken Identities: First-Person Narration in Kazuo Ishiguro," *Journal of Narrative and Life History*. 2-3 (1993): 139-154.

The research questions that were posed in the thesis were the following: to what extent is “silence” provocative by deflecting injurious details of the past and how does Ishiguro’s artistic craft construct the layers of his protagonists’ distorted narration? “Silence” is provocative, as I stated in the *Introduction*, on the one hand, it is a deliberate call which shows that the individual is begging for attention. Looking at the above premise from another angle, if we consider the stories narrated by Ishiguro’s main characters, their deflective storytelling, their glossing over the truth, readers can be provoked and also wary about what they are told. In other words how does silence assist injurious details by becoming oblivious? Regarding the layers of distortions, with the dissociation of perspectives narrators have a different understanding of reality. What the narrators confess and what side characters reveal from the self-narrated dialogues are marked discrepancies in their storytelling. The main lines of inquiry were also to examine, how protagonists are trapped by their first-person narration.

The notion of in-between-ness related to the stories revealed, concealed and perceived acts both as trap and gap for narrators. I also elaborated on the question of how first person narration, provokes the idea in psychoanalytical terms, that the protagonists use their self-reflective narration as a “talking cure.” Both secular and sacral confessional literature texts, autobiographies and diaries are good examples for easing, as Bo G. Ekelund writes about *The Remains of the Day*’s complicitous genre, the “theme of guilt that looms large”¹¹ in the fiction of Kazuo Ishiguro. The last question presented was how first person narrators build up their private myths by the application of narrative gaps and silences, and what is the function of reticence in distorting their public or private past?

My findings proposed that by trivialization (Etsuko), and by exaggeration (Ono and Stevens), narrators are distanced from their texts by “linguistic betrayals”¹² (Stevens many times reiterates that he should explain certain things), by blurred facts (Ono’s involvement in Kuroda’s betrayal), and condensations (shifting of the pronouns from first person singular to first person [PVH 13 and 177] plural). objectification of the self, i.e. talking about the “what” rather than the “who.”

Analysing Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels, I posit that in Ishiguro’s oeuvre “silence” is not a figure but rather a symbol. Symbol for a stumbling block in the protagonists’ minds, symbol for the ultimate trauma buried in a troubled psyche. It is not rhetoric but rather a discourse by

¹¹ Bo. G. Ekelund, “Misrecognizing History: Complicitous Genres in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*,” *The International Fiction Review*, 32 (1–2), 70–90.

<http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/view/7801/8858> (accessed 15 October 2014)

¹² Kathleen Wall, “*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration.” *Journal of Narrative Technique* 24.1 (1994): 18–42.

which first person narrators reconstruct their public and private lives. I contend that it also functions as a strategy to keep troubled memories latent and, via narrative gaps, the dynamism of absences and presences reveal missing information of narrated stories. Furthermore “silence” is not a physical space but rather a psychological one. Ondek Laurence claims what Virginia Woolf does is to narrate and confront “silences between islands of speech, inviting the reader, us, to enter into the obscurity and to consult our own minds.”¹³ It is consonant with my view that the process of revealing and concealing and to have perseverance in asking repeated questions about the information narrated.

¹³ Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, 1.

IV. RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

Szederkényi, Éva. “Absence and Presence: Conditions of Parenthood in Kazuo Ishiguro’s Novels.” In Kinga Földvály et al., eds., *HUSSE10-LitCult. Proceedings of the HUSSE 10 Conference*. 151–59. Debrecen: Hungarian Society for the Study of English, 2011. Web.

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