

KRYSTYNA STAMIROWSKA  
Instytut Filologii Angielskiej  
Uniwersytet Jagielloński

## *AFTER SUCH KNOWLEDGE WHAT FORGIVENESS: CONFESSIONAL NARRATIVES BY KAZUO ISHIGURO*

Apart from psychological dimension and social and political contexts of trauma, studied by the human sciences, contemporary writers have been long preoccupied with the nature of traumatic experience and its place within contemporary reality. This renewed interest has been to a large extent generated by the events of the twentieth and the early twenty-first century when a gap between the progress of science with its concomitant technological development and human potential for savagery reached hitherto unknown dimensions.

Literary representations of trauma consider individual cases with no ambition to generalize, and focus on depth rather than range, confirming Aristotle's understanding of poetry as being more philosophical than history. The writers are ultimately concerned with what may happen rather than with what has actually happened; even though a starting point is usually an account of actual experience. These representations, drawing on experience or reported experience, transformed and supplemented by imagination, are more in the nature of research than explanation or solution, and they highlight uncertainties and benefit from indeterminacies and paradoxes, which is related to the major paradox of their undertaking: to express the inexpressible.

One of these paradoxes is neatly expressed in a form of a dichotomy opposing a desire to understand or to know and a simultaneous impulse to reject or deny the knowledge. The moral imperative to discover the truth is often undermined by an equally powerful reluctance to accept this truth and a desire to avoid the pain of unwelcome discovery. Thus the urge to know taken in conjunction with a need to deny highlights an opposition of the two attitudes and their uneasy coexistence. It indicates a dialectic nature of human cognitive impulse directed towards achievement of knowledge (in this case, self-knowledge) and kept in check by an instinct of self-protection. In this way, a natural desire to know and to understand coexists with an equally natural desire to avoid anxiety and pain; and, if the latter prevails,

the process of investigation (or self-investigation) degenerates into simulation or self-deception.

Although a paradoxical nature of those processes is a well known phenomenon, both on the level of practical life and on the level of ethical and epistemological analysis, it gains new urgency in a time of crisis, and enters more frequently the domain of literary representation. As Andrew Gibson puts it, "(...) the ethical power of great fiction is inseparable from ontology on the one hand and cognition on the other" (Gibson 1999: 56); a comment which echoes both F.R. Leavis's and T.S. Eliot's perception of the relation between a knowledge of the self and ethical behaviour.

A classical example of thematization of the relation between cognition and ethics is given in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the story which focuses on the acquisition of self-knowledge, considered as an ethical imperative and a supreme human achievement. Interestingly, and in contrast to many other approaches, self-knowledge in Conrad is an end in itself, and not a means to another end, like moral improvement. As Conrad famously puts it "the most one can hope from it [life] is some knowledge of yourself – that comes too late – a crop of inextinguishable regrets" (Conrad 1960: 85). As exemplified in the novella by Kurtz's final words on his death-bed, the anguish of self-revelation is futile, because it comes when no redemption is possible. In what Marlow calls a 'supreme moment of complete knowledge,' Kurtz assesses his life as 'horror,' yet there nothing he can do to change it. Self-defence mechanisms, generated partly by the pressures of practical life, Conrad seems to suggest, are too strong to admit a 'complete knowledge.'

The uneasy movement between a drive towards self-examination and a simultaneous impulse to put the past behind is complicated by a sense of guilt. In this area of human endeavour the cognitive drive is not disinterested, as it would be in a scientific investigation, but coloured by a subjective component, that is, by examination of conscience. To get to know the truth also means accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions, and an ability to overcome reluctance to bring to surface painful experience, even when one is merely a victim and not an agent. Much of contemporary writing on trauma comes as a response to a collective guilt or awareness of actual atrocities of the recent past: European imperial policies and the two world wars. The victims are given back their voice only now, through factual or imaginative recording of their experience. The two categories within which this type of literature is located are post-colonial writing and the Holocaust literature. The ethical component involved here is of double nature: it gives an impulse to such stories on the level of the creative process, and it is also enters into the work as a powerful thematic motif. The actual relation between recognition and denial is specific: the trauma and resulting pain is that of the protagonist, whose status may be either quasi-factual (fictionalized biography) or imaginary (amalgam of the elements of the real and the imagined). Depending on the area and the context within which the problem is thematized, the guilt may be absent, it may be displaced, or it may constitute a dimension of a self-examination process.

Among contemporary authors who explore the philosophical and psychological relations between the truth-seeking impulse and a desire for protection from the painful truth, Kazuo Ishiguro's name naturally comes to mind. Unlike many fictions, including post-colonial writing, dealing with trauma resulting from enforced change of environment and subsequent alienation, Ishiguro's works approach trauma from many different angles, and attempt to map individual anxieties as well as moral implications of new inventions and technologies. Traumatic experiences and their effects which lead to personality disorder and distortions, as well as the ways of coping with trauma constitute the focus of his novels and are contextualized and explored in relation to different circumstances and locations, ranging from the post-war Nagasaki to the unique never-land of *The Unconsoled* and *Never Let Me Go*.

All Ishiguro protagonists are first person narrators troubled by memories of traumatic experience and, additionally, by a sense of guilt and by sinful memories. The subjectivity of those accounts testifies both to the difficulty of distinguishing between fantasy and facts, which results, to borrow Eliot's famous phrase, in "mixing memory and desire;" as well as to the problematic status of memory itself. Apart from producing confusion, subjectivity vitiates the attempts to recognize the truth about oneself or to come to terms with this truth. The uncertainty of recollections and the difficulty of establishing what really happened, of distinguishing between authentic and false memories bring into sharp focus the problematic nature of the search for truth, seen as a painful, circular and non-conclusive process.

These thematic motifs, firmly established in Ishiguro's first novel underlie all his subsequent works. Like the eponymous 'pale view of the hills' which indicates the narrator's attempt to recollect the hills close to Nagasaki, the setting for a possible iniquity, other areas of recollected experience, connected with the upbringing and a (real or imagined) neglect of her little daughter, are equally blurred. Etsuko, the female protagonist, simultaneously makes an effort to remember and to forget, to expiate for and to obliterate her past, and these opposed drives are impossible to reconcile. She is skeptical about the reliability of memory on two counts: first, as she says, "it is possible that my memory has grown hazy with time, that things didn't quite happen in the way I remember" (Ishiguro 1991a: 41). She also admits that "memory can be an unreliable thing, coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers, and no doubt this applies to certain of the recollections I have gathered here" (Ishiguro 1991a: 156). At the same time, she repeatedly observes that "there is no use going back to the past." These statements, even if addressed to no one in particular (though on occasion, they do have an addressee) reveal the dominance of the need to deny over the urge to know. Playing down the meaning or relevance of the past events, emphasizing the deficiency and unreliability of recollections help to cover up the hidden wound, which however, still reemerges.

Ishiguro's treatment and representations of trauma are remarkable in that traumatic experience often runs through two generations: when they grow up, orphaned or unhappy children pass on their trauma to their offspring: Etsuko's trauma brings misery to her daughter, who is also made to suffer due to her mother's

decision to take her away from Japan, her father and her home. Etsuko's own loss of protective intimate environment of her childhood is subsequently transmitted to her child.

The condition of being an orphan is of special interest to Ishiguro: his characters are frequently orphaned either in the literal sense through a loss of parents, or – figuratively – when they are neglected. Banks cannot love anybody because he himself has not been loved properly; and also, because he lost both his parents under specially dramatic circumstances. In his mature life he adopts an orphaned girl, Jennifer, for whom he hires a governess and tries to provide comfortable home; yet he fails pathetically. Jennifer, having been twice abandoned, cannot take yet another disappointment and tries to commit suicide when her adolescent love is unrequited.

The trauma in Ishiguro is related to two different areas: to a painful experience which is difficult to delete and which destabilizes attempts at rebuilding one's life; and to a sense of guilt resulting from a serious omission of duty, which entails inflicting pain on others. In both cases the psychological mechanism, namely, the attempts to suppress disturbing memories is the same, although the nature of anxiety is different. Etsuko suffers from the trauma of the Nagasaki bombing, loss of home, mother and fiancée; and to this trauma, later on, when she seems to have rebuilt her existence, another burden is added. Unhappy in her marriage, she decides to leave Japan, takes her daughter with her and makes a new start in England. As it turns out, this essentially selfish move brings little happiness to her; and much misery to her daughter, who ultimately commits suicide. Etsuko, after the Nagasaki tragedy, suffers what evidently is a post-traumatic stress disorder, with all its characteristic symptoms: withdrawal, nightmares, loss of sleep, impairment of relations with other people. She hardly goes out, avoids her neighbours, maintains silence about her daughter's death, and, when asked, gives vague answers as to Keiko's whereabouts. Her occasional efforts to confront her own responsibility for Keiko's death are undermined by a contradictory urge to obliterate memories and to give up self-interrogation, which she can justify as a rational decision in view of the inaccuracy and unreliability of recollections. This convenient skepticism is shared by almost all other narrators in Ishiguro novels: a lack of confidence in the value and accuracy of a reconstruction of the past, combined with a sense of futility of such an undertaking recur as leitmotives of their confessions and vitiate their occasional approaches towards self-healing. Ono (*An Artist of the Floating World*), Stevens (*The Remains of the Day*), Ryder (*The Unconsoled*), Banks (*When We Were Orphans*) are all preoccupied with the present life, and, at the same time, suffer the pangs of conscience. Moral anxiety which necessitates a self-search and culminates in an acknowledgement of guilt and a confession presupposes both a recognition of autonomous good and evil and a respect for the voice of conscience. The protagonists reexamine their pasts in terms of their awareness of, and responses to, the needs of others, whether family members or friends. Although a (reluctant) self-examination results in producing a catalogue of omissions due to selfishness and moral blindness, these recollections are simultaneously obscured and undermined by a list of excuses. Stevens

the butler claims a loyalty to his master, Ono believes in what he considers his patriotic duty which takes precedence over the ties of friendship; and, years later, in an entirely changed political context is reminded of the shameful episode, as well as of his misplaced loyalties which made him support the official propaganda preceding World War II (a misapprehension he shares with the far more ignorant Stevens). This motif, incidentally, echoes a much quoted dictum by E.M. Forster: "if I were to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I would have the guts to betray my country" (Forster 1951: 78). Ryder, driven by vanity and fantasies of success, is the most self-deceiving, and makes his artistic vocation into an absolute priority, which helps him dismiss occasional remorse. Aware of neglecting his son, he easily finds self-justification, and always makes the same promise, not to be kept, "I'll be back very soon" (Ishiguro 1996: 455, 475). Banks, although a more complex personality, also has an inflated ego, yet is generally so ineffectual and incapable of clear thinking that he constantly fails to assess the nature of the problems which confront him, and, consequently, fails to come up with an adequate moral response. He blames himself for not protecting his mother from kidnappers, a feat quite impossible to achieve by a child, and yet feels untroubled by betraying his Japanese friend Akira during the Sino-Japanese war. The grotesque quality of many of his reactions does not diminish their tragic dimension, as exemplified by Akira's execution or the attempted suicide of his adopted daughter.

All these protagonists, originally traumatized by authoritarian parents (Stevens, Ryder, Ono), or by a loss of parents (Banks, Etsuko), re-experience, later on, a pain and trauma following a damaged relationship, or a *liaison manquée*, for which they vaguely blame themselves, and, consequently, examine their past in terms of possible responsibility for making others suffer; while, at the same time, they hope to be exonerated. Etsuko, Ono, Stevens, Ryder and Banks oscillate between a sense of guilt and a desire to suppress this feeling; in other words, between a desire to remember and assume responsibility and an impulse to forget. The dichotomy is reflected in and coordinated with an alternating focus on the past and on the present: the routine of everyday life is disrupted both by involuntary memories and by deliberate attempts to reconsider the events of the past.

The paradigm of (ineffective) self-questioning as a part of human predicament is present in Christian thought and functions within the broader context of sin and salvation. Sin is inherent in human nature, and the condition of redemption is self-examination, contrition and confession, accompanied by a serious pledge of self-improvement. This model, which reflects a fairly universal idea of justice and reconciliation, operates outside the Christian context as well, and it applies to Ishiguro's characters who are not religious, yet share a generally accepted view of what constitutes a fair basis for human interrelations, and are unable to ignore the inner voice, even if they happen to be eccentrically selfish.

There is an important feature to be noted about *The Unconsoled*, which accounts for its opacity, deliberate clumsiness and a seemingly irrelevant and disappointing conclusion. The mimetic dimension, strongly marked in all the remaining novels is constantly destabilized by incongruity of its details, by contradictory

visual images which distort representation and by the peculiarities of discourse which undermine the realistic level. In an early episode, Ryder going up in a hotel lift is being addressed by the porter, whose speech occupies five pages of small print, grotesquely out of proportion to the time a lift journey can take. The cognitive dimension of defective representation is equally defective, and the traumatic experiences reported by the characters who tell their stories of woe to Ryder, as well as Ryder's own trauma are deprived of authenticity and cannot be taken seriously. The tone of compassion underlying the treatment of most other characters is totally absent in *The Unconsoled*. Ryder as a character is so grotesquely self-centered that his predicament assumes a similarly grotesque nature. Not only is he unconsoled, but also, insensitive, unknowing and uninterested. His childhood trauma cannot be taken seriously, his insecurity and vanity preclude ethical attitudes or behaviour. His badly camouflaged 'wound' is duplicated and derided in the grotesque figure of the failed musician and conductor Brodsky, who, caressing his wound and using it as instrument of emotional blackmail, can be seen as a projection of Ryder's future.

While comparing individual introspections or confessions it is easy to notice that female characters cope better than men. The distribution of gender is intriguing: out of the six novels published to date, it is the first and the most recent one that are narrated by women (Etsuko and Kathy, respectively), and the trauma they suffer is of a completely different order when compared to the traumatic experience of the male narrators: Ono the painter, Stevens the butler, Ryder the pianist and Banks the detective. The four are concerned primarily about their ego and self image. Although their social standing and occupations are different, they share (real or imagined) perfectionism, commitment to work and high ambitions, and they put their careers first, at the expense of those who love them and depend on them. Even though their self-centredness produces self-sufficiency and emotional coldness, they still experience occasional remorse – ranging from the relatively sensitive and often troubled Banks to the complaisant, entirely detached Ryder. On the whole, they manage to get over regrets and doubts and carry on, fairly pleased with their achievement. Banks, as well as Ono, Stevens and Ryder exemplify our main weakness: that of the human kind who, to quote Eliot again, "cannot bear very much reality," and therefore use strategies of denial, camouflage and fantasy as means of self-protection facilitating survival. For them there is always a (false) hope of a second chance: they believe they may do better another time. The basic thematic correspondence between the novels consists in the use of the same motif: namely, the lasting impact of the early trauma which determines the course of adult life. The loss of parents and the absence of home cripples the protagonists for the rest of their lives. And although they differ as to the actual degree of their self-centredness (resulting from the received emotional injury), they are similar in that they are unable to form proper relationships and they fail in their respective roles: Ono – as master, role model and friend, Stevens as son and suitor, Banks – as suitor and foster parent, Ryder – as son, husband and father. They are capable only of playing a substitute, not a real role; they fail to provide sufficient support for those who need it most, and take comfort from

the illusion that they can manage better in the future; unlike those who have been emotionally damaged through their failure. Towards the end of their respective narratives, they emerge out of the traumas without substantial damage. Temporary discomfort caused by failing others; whether parents, children or the loved ones, is easily relegated to the past, and they appear as relatively content men, who have finally found their peace of mind. Rather than turn back, they try to look forward and believe that 'the remains of the day' still may offer another chance of a new start. Stevens accepts the comfort from a casual acquaintance who says: "You've got to enjoy yourself. The evening's the best part of the day (...). Now you can put your feet up and enjoy it" (Ishiguro 1989: 244). In the conclusion of his narrative, Ono describes his feelings as "a profound sense of happiness deriving from conviction that one's efforts have been justified; that the hard work undertaken, the doubts overcome have all been worthwhile; that one has achieved something of real value and distinction" (Ishiguro 1991b: 204). Ryder, who is for a moment upset (in fact, to the point of sobbing) after he loses sight of Sophie and Boris, all too readily accepts a good-natured advice from a fellow-passenger, who says: "Listen (...) everything always seems very bad at the time. But it all passes, nothing's ever as bad as it looks. Do cheer up" (Ishiguro 1996: 532). Within a few minutes Ryder forgets his tears, and, before he gets off the tram taking him to the airport, remarks complacently: "I would (...) disembark secure in the knowledge that I could look forward to Helsinki with pride and confidence" (Ishiguro 1996: 535). Banks, in fact, the least selfish one, whose main problem is lack of acumen and inability to attune to the needs of others, sums up the stage of life he has reached by saying: "I do not wish to appear smug; but drifting through my days in London, I believe I can indeed own up to a certain contentment. I enjoy my walks in the park, I visit the galleries, I take foolish pride in sifting through old newspaper reports of my cases (...)" (Ishiguro 2000: 313).

This facility in accepting comfort from strangers and in regaining an optimistic attitude testifies to the superficiality and temporary nature of occasional regrets or haunting recollections which never last long enough to force a connection with the original trauma sustained in childhood. Even if the protagonists do talk about their disappointment, they do not try to confront its real source and do their best – if unconsciously – to leave the wound of the childhood unrevealed. Both Banks and Ryder, as well as, in their different ways, Ono and Stevens find comfort in delusions about the importance of their work, and take satisfaction from their real or illusory achievements. Self-deception becomes almost a second nature, which, naturally reflected in, and reinforced by, their mode of speech, prevents any authentic self-examination. Consequently, incomplete and superficial accounts additionally marred by distortions do little to facilitate connecting the present with the past: recollected events are either displaced and surface under obscure guises; or are transferred to other characters. Banks never admits his alienation induced by a childhood trauma, but attributes it – years later – to a school friend to whom he refers as a 'strange bird,' a nickname by which he himself was known at school. Ryder recognizes frustration in an aspiring young pianist who feels he is letting down his ambitious parents; but fails to see it as a source of his own anxiety and

dissatisfaction. In contrast to often-employed narrative strategies, in Ishiguro's novels the telling of a trauma – with the exception of the most recent novel – has no therapeutic function. The characters do talk of their experience, yet their self-centred and essentially self-addressed discourse is both fragmented and circular, and therefore unlikely to clarify the nature of experience or help reach a conclusion. A talk or a quasi-confession, when addressed to a particular listener, has little communicative value, since it is vitiated by incoherence and obscurity to which the speaker's language significantly contributes. His enigmatic and essentially solipsistic speech, combined with artificial rhetoric, does more to conceal than express the truth of self, and constitutes a barrier to, rather than a means of, sharing or communicating experience.

A significant feature of discourse, which underscores a gap between an ostensible purpose to clarify or ascertain and a (hidden) need to deny is its deceptive and anti-communicative quality. The language destabilizes the representation which keeps breaking down. With a notable exception of the first and (in a different way) of the most recent novel, many characters, across the novels, speak in a language which is not their own; and employ curiously stilted phrases which sound like a parody of dialogue, or imitate the language they imagine to be appropriate in the milieu to which they aspire.

Banks admits that since his arrival as a child in England he tried to absorb “gestures, turns of phrase and exclamations popular among my peers” (Ishiguro 2000: 7). He often prepares for a social occasion by planning what he is going to say, a feature he shares with Ryder in *The Unconsoled*, another status-obsessed character. In preparation for an important evening, Banks rehearses what he would say if he were introduced to some of the people he particularly wants to meet. In a similar way, Ryder composes the speech he is supposed to give, calculating the tone and rhetoric which will project a desirable image of him as a modest and unassuming world-famous celebrity. Both characters consider the effects their utterances may have: Ryder, who is anxious to avoid intimidating his audience, says: “it seemed wise that I make my talk as light-hearted as was reasonable” (Ishiguro 1996: 136), while Banks keeps moving between different registers and idiolects, related to real, or imagined, roles and personas, none of which he can consistently claim as his own.

Their predecessor, Stevens, is the most obvious case in point, and his elaborate discourse which is an imitation of the upper class speech deprives him of any authenticity, and consequently, of communicative faculty. He has no language in which he could talk and make contact other than totally superficial. His reply to Miss Kenton, the only person who cares for him and tries to provoke him into engaging in a less formal and more human dialogue is a rude dismissal: “Miss Kenton, I do not understand you. Now if you would kindly allow me to pass” (Ishiguro 1989: 59). Brought up by an authoritarian father, who taught him to conceal his feelings, he is not even conscious of the extent of emotional damage he suffered. Since there are many cross references between characters belonging to different novels, as well as borrowings from one another's dialogues, it is not surprising that some speeches mirror each other and are almost interchangeable.



Stevens's dismissal of Miss Kenton is echoed by Banks's way of dismissing Sarah Hemmings, whom he secretly admires, yet fears to be perceived as a victim of her social ambitions: "Well, Miss Hemmings, it was very good to see you again. But now I must leave you and go up to this function (...). I wish you a pleasant evening, Miss Hemmings" (Ishiguro 2000: 38).

When Banks is talking about his parents' possible arrival, saying: "I trust all the arrangements for the Jessfield Park ceremony are progressing to your satisfaction" (Ishiguro 1996: 281), his words are a close echo of Ryder's similar fantasy, expressed in a very similar manner: "(...) as you know, my mother and father are both advanced in years. It will be necessary to have special facilities for them at the concert hall" (Ishiguro 2000: 255). Needless to say, both visits are totally imaginary, and equally unlikely to take place: a frustrated desire for parental love and approval surfaces in adult life in the form of fantasies of reunion which could only have happened in a different place and time.

*Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro's latest novel which, like his first, employs a female narrator, may be seen as an exception to the pattern in that it is not the protagonist-narrator, Kathy, who examines her past in terms of trauma and guilt, but secondary characters, namely, the school teachers who try to protect the children they care for by deceiving them. As regards Kathy (once a pupil of the school), she treasures her memories of the past, which give her strength to cope with her pretty unbearable present life and with an even worse prospect of the future. The framework of the narrative is unusual: the story concerns a situation which might happen in the real world if the already existing scientific potential for cloning human beings had been put to use. Ishiguro, however, is not interested in the technicalities of the process of cloning the humans for the purpose of organ transplantation, but in a dangerous hiatus between the rapidly developing technical civilization and a level of moral awareness and responsibility lagging far behind. The Hailsham school where the cloned children are being educated seems like any other school, except that the young charges have to be made gradually aware of what awaits them, while as much as possible of their happy childhood should be salvaged. This impossible task falls to the kind and sympathetic teachers who have to balance the ghastly message against the attempts of creating appearance of comfortable normal life. How much and at what stage should be revealed, implied or communicated is left to the teachers, although the general policy is that of understatement and deception. One of the teachers, Miss Lucy, breaks the agreement by stopping the children's talks about the future, giving an explicit message:

None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars (...). Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you are old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do (Ishiguro 2005: 73).

Miss Lucy is dismissed immediately, as her statement is seen as totally defeating the policy accepted by the other teachers, whose near-impossible mission is to create and secure, against all odds, a semblance of happy childhood. Who is morally right is left unresolved: are lies and deception concealing the macabre reality

justified, or should the teachers sacrifice compassion in the interests of the truth. The trauma they suffer in consequence, only touched upon, is yet another dimension of the story. In the final section the Head teacher defends the former stance: “You see, we were able to give you something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by *sheltering* you (...). You built your lives on what we gave you” (Ishiguro 2005: 245).

The story is told by a former pupil, now a carer preparing for her role as a donor. She is different not only from the male characters in this and in other novels, but also from Etsuko in that she has little to blame herself for; and the past, lived in the illusive security of Hailsham, is, for her, a source of moral strength and not of regret. Yet despite this crucial shift of focus (which marks an important change in Ishiguro’s perspective), there is another trait she shares with Etsuko, namely, stoicism and quiet acceptance of fate. In this respect they are radically different from, and morally superior to their male counterparts.

What Etsuko or Kathy refuse to do, in contrast to all other guilty and manipulative Ishiguro protagonists, is to deceive themselves by suppressing or restructuring the past. Their present suffering is very real; and they are both traumatized almost beyond endurance: Etsuko by losing her family in the Nagasaki atomic disaster, and Kathy by acknowledging the macabre truth about her and her friends’ destiny. Etsuko rebuilds her life from scratch and fails; and then tries again: it takes remarkable courage, especially for a Japanese wife and mother in the 1950’s to leave with an Englishman, taking her child, and to settle in his country; yet the price to be ultimately paid is her Japanese daughter’s suicide. Confronted with a fundamental loss, Etsuko and Kathy both struggle hard to overcome shock and, rather than submit to trauma, bear their respective fates with courage and dignity, and, as in Kathy’s case, with an amazing stance of self-denial. Completely un-self-pitying, they live what is left of their two lives with quiet stoicism. There is no false comfort to be found in the thought about the future, as there is no future for either of them. Etsuko will live out her days in near-complete loneliness; maintaining more contact with the ghosts of her past: her mother, husband, daughter and father-in-law than with her surviving daughter Niki.

Kathy, who, in preparation for her own inevitable donation, cares for other donors – like her, doomed to die shortly – is a truly heroic figure; although she never sees herself in that way. She is morally superior to Etsuko since she accepts her fate not with resignation but with full determination to make the best use of the time still left to her. Yet they are similar in that they both reject illusions or false comforts. Their discourse is an honest and brave attempt to face up to their trauma; and, in Kathy’s case, to give courage and support to others. Both speak in a language of their own, free from cant or affectation; and their reticent and controlled narratives are in sharp contrast to bizarre and often incongruous stories given by Banks, Stevens, Ono and Ryder.

Given Ishiguro’s humanistic paradigm within which, under traumatic circumstances which are a part of human condition, a degree of strength and consolation can only be found in the experience of regeneration which comes through acknowledging a continuity of life, it seems particularly pessimistic that Etsuko’s

surviving daughter should so violently reject this project. Etsuko's timidly expressed hope of Niki's possible marriage meets with cold disdain: "God, Mother, there's plenty of things I could do. I don't want just to get stuck away with a husband and a load of screaming kids. Why are you going on about it suddenly anyway?" (Ishiguro 1982: 180). This negativity is in sharp contrast with the doomed existence of the Hailsham school pupils who, apart from brevity of life and a macabre way of dying to which they condemned, are also deprived of a chance to have children; as well as with the unwelcome sterility of the 'unconsoled' protagonists. This perception of sterility – whether compulsory or resulting from choice – as a blight, which precludes a possibility to transcend the limits of individual existence, is a recurring motif in Ishiguro, and highlights the tragedy of a waste of life and its potential. Children are consistently seen as indication of hope and a blessing: those who are childless – like Banks or Stevens – suffer deprivation, even if they try to ignore this. Like Etsuko, Ono loses his son, both of them feel indirectly responsible; yet, unlike her, he is granted reprieve when his grandchildren are born. Ryder's position in this respect is ambiguous: despite his vagueness on this, as on most other points, the reader is led to believe that Boris is his son, even though this belief is undermined by numerous indications to the contrary. Still, by neglecting Boris, Ryder rejects a chance of consolation; and, more importantly, by transmitting the neglect he once suffered he also transmits the resulting trauma to his son. In the final scene, following his grandfather's death, Boris walks away with his newly orphaned mother, who says to the undecided Ryder: "Leave us. You were always on the outside of our love. Now look at you. On the outside of our grief too. Leave us. Go away" (Ishiguro 1996: 532). Unable to give or share, incapacitated by his recollections of parental neglect and by fantasies of reconciliation, Ryder will remain unconsoled, living on illusions, waiting for the day of his great success, which may never come.

In contrast to Stevens, whose choice to ignore Miss Kenton's devotion and to stay on in what he considers his perfect job enforces celibacy, Miss Kenton gives up her life in Darlington Hall and marries a man she does not love; yet in the end it is her, and not Stevens, who finds peace of heart and mind through sharing her own daughter's hopeful awaiting of the birth of a child. This denouement echoes Etsuko's final affirmation of life, tinged with sadness, yet firmly spelled out in response to her daughter's contempt for the raising of children: "But in the end, Niki, there isn't very much else."

## Bibliography

- Conrad, J. (1960 [1902]), *Heart of Darkness*, Bantam Classics, New York.  
 Gibson, A. (1999), *Postmodernity, ethics and the novel*, Routledge, London.  
 Forster, E.M. (1951), *What I Believe* [in:] *Two Cheers for Democracy*, Harcourt, Brace, New York.  
 Ishiguro, K. (1991a. [1982]), *A Pale View of the Hills*, Faber and Faber, London.  
 (1991b [1986]), *An Artist of the Floating World*, Faber and Faber, London.  
 (1989), *The Remains of the Day*, Faber and Faber, London.

- (1996 [1995]), *The Unconsoled*, Faber and Faber, London.  
(2000), *When We Were Orphans*, Faber and Faber, London.  
(2005), *Never Let Me Go*, Faber and Faber, London.

## Streszczenie

### *Po takiej wiedzy, jakie przebaczenie*: konfesyjne narracje Kazuo Ishiguro

W konfesyjnych powieściach Kazuo Ishiguro tematyczną dominantę stanowią procesy autoanalizy wynikające z poczucia winy i współwystępujące z nimi mechanizmy zaprzeczania, względnie wypierania. Te wątki rozwijają się na dwu wzajemnie związanych poziomach: na poziomie mimetycznym oraz w sferze symboliczno-etycznej, ukazanej z perspektywy narratora pierwszoosobowego, który porusza się na płaszczyźnie łączącej teraźniejszość i przeszłość, doświadczenie i pamięć oraz fantazję i rzeczywistość. Punktem wyjścia każdej z sześciu narracji jest konkretna, wyraźnie dookreślona sytuacja, której rezultatem jest ujawnienie ukrytej traumy rzucającej cień na teraźniejszość bohatera, a związanej z poczuciem winy czy zaniechania. Artykuł jest propozycją odczytania kolejnych narracji w kategoriach realizmu psychologicznego i traktowania ich jako różnych literackich wersji procesu wymazywania przeszłości, który z jednej strony polega na ustaleniu stopnia odpowiedzialności wobec siebie i innych, a z drugiej na jednoczesnym uwalnianiu się od wyrzutów sumienia.