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# “Many Strange Tongues” in the Fenlands: *The Buried Giant* as Brexit Allegory?

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## ABSTRACT

*The Buried Giant* is now established as an uncanny precursor of an emerging “Brexlit” canon. However, Ishiguro’s long-held interest in how nations other than Britain forget, remember and memorialise their pasts, together with his response to civil conflict and resolution in the 1990s, should modify overly “presentist” Brexit interpretations. Integrating Giorgio Agamben’s work on the Greek idea of *stasis* as civil war, I argue that *The Buried Giant* tests the ethical limits of amnesty, revealing both the culpability of national amnesia and injurious wielding of reawakened collective memory. The essay then turns to allegory and *allegoresis*, considering the novel’s refusal of the dystopian mode, despite that genre’s concern with the state’s nullification of memory. In the end, *The Buried Giant* frustrates a point-by-point allegorical decoding of its ancient Britons and Saxons. Acknowledging the historical continuity between the 1990s and the post-Brexit present, I argue for a political unconscious in the text which, in taking us to a “pre-posterous” place before England was, is timely in its untimeliness. If the novel is to be read as Brexit allegory, this must be to understand Brexit less as a singular, aberrant crisis and more as a contraction within the *longue durée*.

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## Introduction

In his state-of-the-nation study of Brexit England, *Dreams of Leaving and Remaining*, James Meek argues that it is the tension between the St George and Robin Hood legends that defines English mythologising and self-remembrance: seeing off the foreign threat to national sovereignty (defeating Nazism) or creating the welfare state (robbing the rich to provide for the poor). Meek writes back from parts of England, such as Grimsby, Norfolk and Leicestershire, which felt excluded by what they perceived to be a remote metropolitan elite. He turns to Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* to elaborate this analogy. The relationship between conscience and remembering is symbolised for Meek by the role of the memory-erasing breath of the dragon Querig:

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those who seek to kill the beast present themselves as wanting to end an evil, but in fact desire the people of Britain to disinter the buried memories of past wars in order to restart the cycle of ethnic and sectarian vengeance.

Despite his empathetic inquiry into the mindset of dragon-slaying Leavers, Meek cites their prioritisation of higher defence spending, and goes so far as to claim that there is “war in their dreaming”.<sup>1</sup>

*The Buried Giant* is now securely part of an emerging canon of “Brexlit”. This association has been most recently sealed by Kristian Shaw, who remarks that “Ishiguro has unintentionally produced perhaps the most prescient and hauntological Brexlit novel”.<sup>2</sup> Some of Ishiguro’s comments about the EU and Brexit, made soon after the publication of the novel, have emphasised this affinity. He referred, for example, to how the transformation of Europe “from a slaughterhouse of total war and totalitarian regimes to a much-envied region of liberal democracies living in near-borderless friendship” has now been “so profoundly undermined by such a myopic process” [that is, Brexit].<sup>3</sup> And in his Nobel Prize speech, he mused not only on his personal, “mythical” version of England, but also on the proliferation of tribal nationalisms and on racism being “once again on the rise, stirring beneath our civilised streets *like a buried monster awakening*” (my italics).<sup>4</sup>

This pigeon-holing of *The Buried Giant* as a Brexit novel should, however, be approached carefully. Most obviously, it was published a year before the Brexit referendum and cannot be classified as quick-response Brexit literature. It is Brexlit only in the prescient, rather than reactive, sense that Shaw identifies. Ishiguro has long ruminated over the necessity of active forgetting: he expressed the idea that “to forget makes you free” many years ago.<sup>5</sup> Thus, when pondering over the metaphor of the memory-mist in *The Buried Giant* or over a character saying “what is forgotten is best forgotten”, the long-term reader recognises the familiar contours of Ishiguro’s imaginative world. His first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), is structured as classic Freudian psychopathology, in which the misremembering of the past emerges as a self-protective screen erected to “forget” traumatic experience, both personal and historical. *The Buried Giant* should not, then, be read off as discretely “about” Brexit but seen as continuous with Ishiguro’s lifelong preoccupation with memory, mis-memory and forgetting. Added to this, the novel had a notably long creative gestation which also warns against an exaggeratedly presentist interpretation. Ishiguro has referred, for example, to how the 1990s civil wars in Bosnia and Rwanda initially suggested the idea of the “buried giant” of inter-ethnic civil war. These were situations, he has said, “in which a generation (or two) has been living uneasily in peace, where different ethnic groups have been coexisting peaceably [until] something happens that reawakens a tribal or societal memory”.<sup>6</sup> Even though *The Buried Giant* has been fruitfully read as allegorising the contemporary destabilisation of British sovereignty, it also suggests elements of mid-to-late twentieth-century history:

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<sup>1</sup>Meek, *Dreams of Leaving*, 21. Peter Sloane has recently noted that war ‘is the backdrop of all Ishiguro’s works’ and that ‘he is, finally, a war writer’. See Sloane, *Gestural Poetics*, 126.

<sup>2</sup>Shaw, *Brexlit*, 96.

<sup>3</sup>Ishiguro, “Britain after Brexit”.

<sup>4</sup>Ishiguro, *Nobel Lecture*, 33.

<sup>5</sup>Ishiguro, *Der Spiegel*.

<sup>6</sup>Ishiguro, “A Language that Conceals”.

the collective forgetting or memorialising of the Second World War, the upsurge of ethno-nationalism after the end of the Cold War, the truth and reconciliation committees in post-apartheid South Africa and the movement towards devolution in the 1990s Britain, a process which included the signing of the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland, marking that statelet's transition to a more optimistic, post-conflict future.

As this last detail suggests, *The Buried Giant* helps us understand Brexit less as a singular, irreducible crisis and more as a historical moment in the *longue durée*. We may consider the etymological roots of crisis as a decisive turning-point in an illness or disease from which the patient can get better or worse (Greek, *krisis*). A character in an eighteenth-century novel, for example, refers to an illness as “a favourable crisis”.<sup>7</sup> In itself a crisis does not initiate a decline, even where the evidence tends that way. Viewed historically, the transitional crisis of Brexit should not be regarded as an irrevocable before/after decision or limit-event – though, mired in the present, it may feel like one. The allegorising of *The Buried Giant* as Brexilit can, I argue, be approached without it binding it “teleocratically” to the eventhood of Brexit.<sup>8</sup>

This essay first discusses Ishiguro's engagement with works of history which have exerted an influence on the novel's representation of politically-sanctioned forgetting and remembering – the “long shadows” of the Second World War. This specifically relates to the role of amnesty and amnesia at the level of state: what Giorgio Agamben has traced back to the etymological origin of *stasis*, that transitional period of civil violence from which democracy emerged and on which it is founded. The novel's supposed trespassing on to the genre of fantasy was a source of controversy, but the essay concentrates rather on its relationship with allegory and with *allegoresis*, the latter regarded as collapsing the distinction between literal and metaphorical planes of allegorical meaning. It is significant that, although Ishiguro has written arguably dystopian fictions, *The Buried Giant* is not one of them – this despite occupying similar thematic territory, not least relating to state power, and the manipulation of individual and mass memory. Finally, I return to what initially seems to be the convenient chronological elsewhere of a post-Roman, pre-Norman Britain, and to a modified Brexit allegorising which emphasises the timely remoteness of a setting before England was.

## Long Shadows

Ishiguro has cited works of history which have influenced the writing of *The Buried Giant*, Tony Judt's *Postwar* (2005), Erna Paris's *Long Shadows* (2000) and Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999), all of which point to his interest in collective memory, historical amnesia and national identity.<sup>9</sup> What is striking about these books is that they were published around or soon after the turn of the millennium and are themselves passing into history. For these historians, a retrospective assessment of national forgetting and remembering is still unsurprisingly dominated by the Second World War. These books cast “long shadows” on *The Buried Giant*.

<sup>7</sup>Tobias Smollett cited in *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 424.

<sup>8</sup>For the notion of ‘teleocratic’ eventhood, see Aquilina, *Event of Style*, 14, 23.

<sup>9</sup>Ishiguro, “A Language that Conceals”.

Tony Judt's *Postwar* shows how, in the immediate post-war period, forgetting was a pragmatic necessity in political and economic rebuilding – most relevantly, the signing of the Treaty of Rome (1957) and the establishment of the European Economic Community – but that it was also associated with a culpable unwillingness to confront one's past: what has been termed “Waldheim's disease”.<sup>10</sup> In order to unify France, General de Gaulle encouraged “a resistancialist myth”, which involved the granting of amnesties to nearly all French citizens, even those with strong Vichy connections. What Judt calls “deliberate mis-memory” or “forgetting as a way of life” is suggestive, then, of the pall of the memory-mist in Ishiguro's post-Roman Britain. Wilful forgetting was followed by a belated remembering, prompted by events such as the trial of Adolf Eichmann (1961), which initiated a compensatory period of “surplus memory”. Institutionalised, public remembering, now the very foundation of collective identity, eventually reached an unsustainable pitch. Judt advocates a later measure of active forgetting as necessary for civic health: “A nation has first to have remembered something before it can begin to forget it”.<sup>11</sup>

In *The Buried Giant*, it is implied that Ishiguro's Arthurian Britain has a self-protective interest in burying its own violent past and that the Saxons will wreak vengeance for their subjugation: there will be a “coming conquest” in which this “will become a new land, a Saxon land, with no more trace of your people's time here” (323). The suggestion is of ethnic cleansing, a term coined during the 1990s Bosnian wars (*etničko ciscenje*). In *Long Shadows*, Erna Paris describes how Slobodan Milosevic had justified mass killing by claiming that the short-lived South Slavic brotherhood was a nation, like Ishiguro's Ancient Britain, where as Wistan comments, “a man calls another brother who only yesterday slaughtered his children” (127).<sup>12</sup> Paris witnesses in Bosnia how people who were once personal friends were suddenly treated as subhuman.<sup>13</sup> She shows how the unscrupulous, such as Milosevic, undid the Yugoslav “brotherhood”. Milosevic gave a speech in 1989 in Kosovo, supposedly a place where a Serb prince was beheaded by the invading Ottoman Turk in the fourteenth century, thus “tying a mythologized past to mythologized present” in a site of violence and national memory. Milosevic used history – the kind of mythologised history which commemorated Kosovo as a “Serb Jerusalem” – to destroy history. As one Serbian intellectual of nationalist sympathies admits to Paris, “Lying is a form of patriotism”.<sup>14</sup> Lest this is essentialised as a localised and ancient bloodlust, it should be emphasised that civil wars often follow upon imperial occupation. Parts of what became Yugoslavia were administered by the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires. In Rwanda, the Belgian empire reified and exaggerated the importance of racial difference between Hutu and Tutsi after independence.<sup>15</sup> In the Middle East, the vacuum left by the Ottoman empire and filled by the administering western powers after the First World War resulted in a map without Kurdistan and with an

<sup>10</sup>Judt, *Postwar*, 812.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 829.

<sup>12</sup>Paris, *Long Shadows*, 121.

<sup>13</sup>Judt too mentions that since ethnic identity could not be ascertained from appearance or speech, roaming militias relied on villagers ‘fingering’ their neighbours – families with whom they had often lived at peace, sometimes as friends, for years and even decades. Judt, *Postwar*, 675.

<sup>14</sup>Paris, *Long Shadows*, 346, 363.

<sup>15</sup>See van Reybrouck, *Congo*, 413: ‘The social and economic differences between the two groups were real enough, but the Belgian colonial regime had accentuated them and rendered them categorical. You were either a Hutu or a Tutsi’.

Iraqi state administered by a British-selected Sunni elite. And so it is for the imminently warring “tribes” of *The Buried Giant*, who occupy a post-imperial but also nascent state. Erna Paris’s book may contain contemporary reportage from war-torn Bosnia but as a work of comparative history, one which also considers how post-war Japan and France have commemorated their pasts, it resists treating such ethno-national violence as aberrant and fearfully “other”.

Like Judt, Peter Novick identifies a post-war phase of forgetting the Holocaust, followed by an increase in remembering from the 1970s. A Jewish American historian, he is sceptical of the institutionalisation of Holocaust memory, curated by professionals and dependent on consensual symbols which sacralise rather than making serious demands on the viewer. Novick cites Maurice Halbwachs’s foundational theory of collective memory, formulated in the interwar period – that it is an anti-historical phenomenon which tells us about the concerns of the present rather than about the past, and which perpetuates a monolithic narrative of the future. (Halbwachs himself died at Auschwitz.) Collective memory implies an organic metaphor which suggests the natural transmission of memory in homogeneous, stable, pre-modern societies – but it breaks apart in the fragmentary present.<sup>16</sup> The perennial memory of grievances grasps and victimises us, Novick claims, rather than we grasping them: in this way, after Leon Wieseltier, “the scar does the work of the wound”.<sup>17</sup> Novick’s view is that American memory of the Holocaust is not a significant collective memory because it is uncontroversial and apolitical, divorced from the contestations and divisions of the contemporary. That emblematisation of continued suffering is a scar rather than a wound, and the Holocaust is remote from the realities of current American Jewish life. In the light of his interest in Novick’s study, it is instructive to note that Ishiguro’s characteristic preoccupations – “What should we choose to remember? When is it better to forget and move on?” – were once again given substance after his visit to Birkenau and in discussion with the International Auschwitz Committee in 1999.<sup>18</sup>

These works of history consulted by Ishiguro also consider the question of national commemoration after the Second World War – how the very monumentalisation of a heroic version of history is always likely to suggest disunity in the site of national memory. This is the context for the French historian Pierre Nora’s monument project, a response to the forgetting and remembering of Vichy, and his insistence on the plural *lieux de mémoires* – for an idea, in this case, of *les France* rather than of *la France*. The image of gigantic busts of Lenin being carted off to a backyard of the former Eastern bloc has become a cliché of post-Cold-War, “end of History”, iconography. Judt’s book concludes with a less familiar image – that of a statue of General Franco being taken down at dawn in 2005, watched by a hundred people. This is the twenty-first century not yet as itself but as the bathetic tremor of the history of the previous century.

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<sup>16</sup>Novick, *The Holocaust*, 267.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 281.

<sup>18</sup>In his Nobel speech, Ishiguro also asks the following questions in relation to Holocaust memory: ‘Should Perspex domes be built to cover them over [‘the rubble remains of the gas chambers’]? Or should they be allowed, slowly and naturally, to rot away to nothing? How were such memories to be preserved? It seemed to me a powerful metaphor for a larger dilemma. How are such memories to be preserved? Would the glass domes transform these relics of evil and suffering into tame museum exhibits? What should we choose to remember? When is it better to forget and move on?’. Ishiguro, *My Twentieth Century Evening*, 23.

That the monumental weight of twentieth-century history can be reduced to such a quasi-kitsch scene suits Ishiguro's drollery. Take the unwitting Ryder, gurning and stiff-tied in the wind, standing before the mysteriously controversial Sattler monument, "a tall cylinder of white brickwork, windowless apart from a single vertical slit near the top". A faction of the sycophantic citizens seizes the opportunity of a celebrity endorsement of this partial symbol of their history, even though Ryder has no idea of the significance of the building (and neither does the reader, other than that it is a site of divisive historical memory). No matter: "they'll have a whole lot of pictures and there'll be nothing the shit can do".<sup>19</sup> Observing that public commemoration is always inadequate, Susan Rubin Suleiman refers to André Malraux's phrase *comédie du monument* – in this case, referring to petty squabbles about how best to remember a hero of the French resistance.<sup>20</sup> We may think of Donald Trump speaking on American Independence Day in front of Mount Rushmore, that monument to a narrative of American history presided over by great white men. Commemoration has a crisis-laden immediacy *because* it is so often kitsch. In Milan Kundera's sense, kitsch denies history and shit: Trump's Rushmore photo opportunity could be said to occlude the historical "shit" of African American slavery and Native American genocide.<sup>21</sup>

*The Buried Giant* returns to the Sattler-like estrangement of the monument but with a change of emphasis. The oddly positioned, occasionally personal narrator – to whom I turn later in the essay – belatedly reappears in order to muse on a supposedly "fine" monument high in the mountains. It is a cairn:

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. You are in any case part of an ancient procession, and so it is always possible the giant's cairn was erected to mark the site of some 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? (291)

Is this a category error? A cairn is not an "erected" monument but a collective endeavour over time, each wayfarer adding a stone, perhaps choosing to be part of "an ancient procession" – though only of mountain-walkers. It is not an Ozymandias-like ruin, which at least bears some trace of its origin, some connection to its otherwise effaced glory. As a site for institutionalised national commemoration, it is self-defeating: often mist-covered, beyond the public ken. Ishiguro's blank pastiche of national commemoration, its arch intimation of monument and statue as merely *lapidary*, may not quite be a *comédie du monument*. Neither is it quite a kitsch folly, such as the purposeless wall in the divided city of *The Unconsoled*, which preposterously blocks the progress of the citizens and yet is cheerily sold by them as a postcard curiosity.<sup>22</sup> But the cairn seems to symbolise the problem of connecting a pile of stones to a heroic history of the nation. It points to the unknowability of the past and to the concealment of unrecorded violence,

<sup>19</sup>Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 180–2.

<sup>20</sup>Suleiman, *Crises*, 74.

<sup>21</sup>Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness*, 248. Mount Rushmore, in South Dakota, is on the land of the Lakota Sioux.

<sup>22</sup>Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 388.



and thus to the past's vulnerability to monocultural historical narrativisation. Any and every inscription will be ideological.

Ishiguro's immersion in histories of twentieth-century collective memory is manifest in *The Buried Giant*. The Britain of the early Middle Ages is free of archival obligations to documented historical fidelity: a metaphorical landscape whose "surface" fantasy elements – ogres, dragons, pixies – are sufficiently defamiliarising to confirm its anti-realist, fabulist and mythic properties.<sup>23</sup> As ever, Ishiguro wishes to exercise a creative autonomy: a setting which may be Britain but is a kind of amalgam-land which can speak generally to post-War collective memory and civil war conflicts. Taken together with Ishiguro's acknowledged wish to be translated for the widest world literary audience – a will-to-universalism which resists being tied to singularity of place – this must modify exceptionalist or overly presentist "Brexit" readings of *The Buried Giant*.

### Amnesty and Amnesia

*The Buried Giant* places particular emphasis on *collective* forgetting and remembering. This is not to say there are not continuities with previous novels. They too ask the reader to assess the self-deception of conformist individual narrators in the larger context of national histories which could be misrepresented, propagandised and mobilised for treacherous reasons. The prominent motif in this novel of literalising amnesia, of making it an observable pathology, is also familiar from *The Unconsoled*. Ishiguro likened Ryder to a man with a torch who moves forward, shining a light on a particular part of the table as he does so. But as he moves along what lies behind him is plunged back into darkness, recently seen but now unremembered.<sup>24</sup> This accounts for Ryder's unaccountable behaviour in a kind of perpetual present, albeit one beset with anxieties about past and future. Time has no extensity for Ryder, and memory takes its revenges upon him. Memory remains a personal and interpersonal matter in *The Buried Giant*, which concludes with the long-deferred revelation of marital infidelity and belatedly voiced resentments. The return of memory threatens the couple's union as they move, eventually separately, towards their resting-place on the symbolic isle of the dead. The painful memory of the son's loss (what we initially take to be his departure and long absence, but then understand at the last to be his death *and* the memory of his death) is a prolonged mis-memory which distorts the reader's grasp of the ontological reality of the novel, as is the case in *A Pale View of Hills* and *When We Were Orphans*. The prolonging of mis-memory and the "lifting" of forgetting is, finally and as ever in Ishiguro, a painfully personal exposure of self to self and of self to other.

Nevertheless, *The Buried Giant* conceptualises collective (or national) memory in distinctive ways. The novel is certainly not reducible to the message, in the words of Eileen Battersby's unimpressed review, that "memory is vital to humanity".<sup>25</sup> The philosophical mystery dwells in the novel not simply articulating that it is a nation's duty to remember; rather, the novel explores whether there may be an *ars oblivionis*, an art of good forgetting, which is neither pathological nor dysfunctional.<sup>26</sup> In *Untimely Meditations*,

<sup>23</sup>For an objection to Ishiguro's incorporation of 'surface' elements, see Le Guin, "Fantasy?".

<sup>24</sup>Krider, "Small Space," 152–3.

<sup>25</sup>Battersby, "Ishiguro Could use Some Ogres".

<sup>26</sup>Ricoeur, *Memory*, 412–56.



Nietzsche considers happily grazing cattle contained in a present which they will not remember. We cannot be like such cattle. We depend on knowing where the dividing-line lies between the bright and dark regions of memory and forgetting. Nietzsche feels that there can be too much history: “the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture”.<sup>27</sup> As Marc Augé has written, to praise forgetting is not to revile memory: “memory itself needs forgetfulness”; “memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea”.<sup>28</sup> There is a benign and necessary oblivion which wards against the monstrous delirium of total recall (as imagined in Borges’s “Funes the Memorium”), and which accepts that the loss of memories is a necessary part of memory itself. In Augé’s words, “We must forget in order to remain present, forget in order not to die, forget in order to remain faithful”.<sup>29</sup>

But there are ethical problems with the idealising of forgetting, too, not least that we should be aware of who is imploring us to forget and why. Susan Rubin Suleiman has emphasised the hollowness of injunctions to forget if uttered by perpetrators. She mentions Adorno’s scepticism about how post-war Germany was supposedly “coming to terms” with, but not properly “working through”, its recent past, trying to forget it too soon and too easily: “The attitude that it would be proper for everything to be forgotten and forgiven by those who were wronged is expressed by the party that committed the injustice”.<sup>30</sup> Considering Marcel Ophüls’s film about tracking down Klaus Barbie, the so-called Butcher of Lyon, she wonders to what extent this forgetting becomes a symptomatic collective amnesia. Is it premature to turn the page on history?<sup>31</sup>

*The Buried Giant* poses such ethical questions about the political instrumentalisation of national memory upon its subjects. The perpetrator has a vested need to enforce a collective amnesia and to erase the histories which do not fit the national myth. The victim too has a vested need to keep the wound open – to remember in a certain way – in order to exact bloodthirsty revenge.<sup>32</sup> National memory requires a form of consensual forgetting in order to function as a polity. But in doing so, how can it avoid repressing and exacerbating violent energies which will inevitably return? The Saxon Wistan asks, “What kind of god is it, sir, wishes wrongs to go forgotten and unpunished?” His appeal seems juridically sound, resisting the too hasty turning of the page by perpetrators, and consistent with the idea that the truth of civil conflicts must be acknowledged to allow reconciliation or reform. However, Wistan also asks, again with rhetorical fervour, “How can old wounds heal while maggots linger so richly?” (311). According to Paul Ricoeur, history, in its movement from personal memories to testimony to archiving, is the Platonic *pharmakon* – remedy and poison.<sup>33</sup> Wistan presents the wound as infected, and unable to heal without intervention into the body politic. But this is a far from impartial ethics of statecraft: he is apparently the agent of vengeance and ethnic cleansing, the bearer of “the coming conquest” (323). To keep the wound open is not

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<sup>27</sup>Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 63.

<sup>28</sup>Augé, *Oblivion*, 3, 20.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>30</sup>Suleiman, *Crises*, 78.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 77–105.

<sup>32</sup>The wound is an important motif in the novel, particularly quarrels about the significance of Edwin’s bite-wound; Brodsky is pathologically attached to his wound in *The Unconsoled*.

<sup>33</sup>Ricoeur, *Memory*, 141–5.

to let the scar form, and is thus to encourage an atavistic narrative of tribal hatreds designed to provoke future violence. Although this is a bad remembering, its justification is couched as an ethically principled resistance to a bad forgetting.

The novel does not solely ask us to demonise recidivist Saxon nationalism but also to bear in mind that the Arthurian state is amnesiac because it is itself founded on violence. In this it is disconcertingly typical of modern democracy. The paradigm is Athens. Giorgio Agamben's essay on civil war focuses on the original meaning of *stasis*, which refers to a transitional condition of internecine conflict in the emergent Greek polis. *Stasis* is the Athenian condition of being on a threshold between the privacy of the non-political family (*oikos*), and the public citizenship of a political state (*polis*); it is a process during which the domestic becomes political and the political is domesticated. In Agamben's words, "the civil war assimilates and makes undecidable brother and enemy, inside and outside, household and city".<sup>34</sup> Commanded forgetting, or amnesty, is foundational to the modern democratic state. The state must agree to forget its constitutive violence in order to imagine itself into being as a civic community. As Aristotle records, in 403 BCE it was decreed, after the defeat of the Thirty Tyrants, that it was forbidden to recall the evils of what had gone before; the war was now over and not to be remembered. We note the interdiction: Athenian democracy required the trace of state power (*kratos*), which remains in the establishing of political order (the idea of *politeia*). The state demands that its citizens forget their previous murderous *dissensus* to become a consensual polity. Agamben cites the example of Nakone in Sicily, where the names of citizens were drawn in lots in order to become "brothers by election" and where blood kinship was overruled by a new political fraternity. Kinship was to be reconstituted within the polis.<sup>35</sup> The forgetting of old wounds is, in this account, inceptive of modern politics, an "ineliminable" part of the West's political system, the imagined rather than consanguineous community of the nation.<sup>36</sup> It is significant that Athenian *stasis*, aware that civil violence may always remain in memory but should not be remembered at state level, reverses the modern responses to civil war. This demands that, in order to make civil war impossible, past intra-national violence *must* be remembered at state level in trials, prosecutions and reconciliation committees.

In what ways can this model of *stasis*, of the sanctioned "forgetting" of civil war, or more contemporary injunctions for states to remember and forgive, be aligned to the state of post-Arthurian Britain which Ishiguro imagines? The dragon, once fearsome, has stood as Arthur's enforcer of commanded forgetting, breathing a mist across the lands which deprives the people of its memories of prior conflict (both within the family and between sectarian groups). Certainly, then, this Britain has crossed over what Ricoeur refers to as the "thin line of demarcation separating amnesty from amnesia".<sup>37</sup> The Arthurian command to forget is an abuse of memory, a culture of official forgetting enforced by the past reality of state violence. When examined more closely, the Athenian state's amnesiac oath is less simply "do not remember" or "do not be resentful, do not have bad memories", and more an exhortation not "to do

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<sup>34</sup>Agamben, *Stasis*, 14.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>37</sup>Ricoeur, *Memory*, 456.

harm with memory, to make bad use of memories”.<sup>38</sup> The Arthurian Britain of the novel does not meet this definition of amnesty. Although the coming Saxon conquest is reliant on the injurious wielding of memory, the status quo is also reliant on the injurious suppression of memory – the imposition rather than art of oblivion.

If this encourages a “plague on both your houses” form of argument on Ishiguro’s part, it is important to acknowledge that a different sort of preceding peace is also imagined in the novel. This is the brokered peace that “held”, through the diplomacy of Axl, then Axelum or Axelus, the so-called “Knight of Peace”. Axl is recalled as the great man with the flowing cloak (157) that Wistan as a child remembers visiting his Saxon village: the leonine “wise prince” (319), the treaty-maker. We imagine a fragile but consensual accommodation dependent on the state’s willingness to listen and encourage dialogue. Such an attentive consolidation of relationships between Briton and Saxon took the form of negotiated *law*. Gawain refers to “that great law [Axl] once brokered” as “a thing truly wondrous thing while it held” (232). That law seems to include the fourth Geneva convention of 1949: the “Law of the Innocents” (233) is the “solemn agreement not to harm” civilians in their villages (231). The novel dimly hints at the formalising of an institutional agreement between formerly warring national groupings. In this, it can be compared to the immediate post-war conditions which led to the forming of the United Nations and the creation of the European Economic Community, and which were, in the view of Jean Monnet, its founding father, imperative for the preservation of peace. Retrospective Brexit mythologising has forgotten the extent to which supranationally agreed law-making and forgetting were seen as necessary for a vulnerable peace to “hold” after war – also by the likes of Winston Churchill, who called for a United States of Europe. In contrast to previous centuries, that European peace did hold. The knowingly consensual amnesty of the first peace – that brokered by Axl – aligns with the *agreement* to “forget” and implies the continuity of remembrance, unlike Waldheim’s disease or the post-Vichy myth of resistance-without-exception. But the enforcing of the later Arthurian peace is amnesiac rather than amnesic, and it indeed breaks the convention of peace. Those very same Saxon villages visited by the gentle Briton have now been subject to Arthurian violence: the slaughter of those innocents the old “law” was meant to protect. This accounts for Axl’s memory of furiously denouncing Arthur in his tent when the “great victory” has been won (297). The subsequent threat of state-sponsored violence now hides behind the current, uneasy peace.

One of the gradually revealed subtleties of the novel is that it does not insist exclusively on the brotherhood-turned-enmity of Saxon and Briton, but explores a schism within both national groups. Axl (or at least “Axelus”) and Gawain are disclosed as representing different types of Briton. Axl was the pragmatic mediator, the wise counsel, the sympathetic village whisperer; he had to denounce Arthurianism (“our deeds make me a liar and a butcher” (232)), compelling his retreat from public life. His worries are of a forgetful old man preoccupied with domestic rather than civil strife. Axl is subjected to – a subject of – national amnesia and political quietism. Gawain, on the other hand, is a duty-burdened warrior beholden to an ideal of nationhood compromised by the bloody history it must repress. His narratives are indeed reveries, in that they are self-deceiving dreams of a chivalric (that is, Christian) code which disguises “pagan” military violence, not only against

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<sup>38</sup> Agamben, *Stasis*, 21.

fellow-combatants but also civilians. Self-defensive protestations simply draw attention to his complicity with the exercise of state power. Gawain is comically rendered as a typically repressive Ishiguran misfit: “What do you suggest, mistress? That *I* committed this slaughter?”; “But a slaughterer of infants? How dare you, mistress?” (188–89). He condemns himself out of his own mouth: he has only “forgotten” his past in that he denies it. Ishiguro’s deployment of a creaking “idylls of the king” model – after the Gawain-poet, Malory and Tennyson – hints at the evasiveness of Arthurian nostalgia. As with the younger Gawain of the medieval poem who fails the code (flinching before the blade, or unable to resist the seductive appeal of his host’s wife), such idealism contains the seeds of its own downfall, inviting betrayal and exposing all-too-human fallibility. The Gawain of *The Buried Giant* is a successor of those self-deceivers, such as the painter Ono and the butler Stevens, who are in thrall to a notion of duty and obligation which does not bear ethical scrutiny. Such characters manipulate memory to fit the dangerous claim of the ideal.

The political affiliations of the characters are disguised, and the outcome of buried conflict deferred until the last moment. Initially it seems that Gawain and Wistan might both be on the same mission to slay Querig. The early scene of combat with the grey-haired soldier apparently unites them in resistance to Lord Brennus’s plan to use the dragon for his own British expansionism. But it soon becomes clear that Gawain does not wish to slay the dragon just yet (if at all). His role is rather to prolong an uneasy *pax Britannica* so that Arthurian-sponsored violence can be forgotten. Uncomfortably, then, Brennus’s aggressive new Britishness cannot be held in diametric opposition from the chivalric myth, even in the clapped-out state of the superannuated knight. Equally, alignments within the Saxon tribe are not secure. Wistan surprisingly does not fully stand for the coming times, despite his promising a future Saxon land cleansed of Britons. Eventually, Wistan resembles the valetudinarian Gawain he has just killed when he says that he is “enfeebled”, wishing to turn “from the flames of hatred” (324). He, like Gawain, is too late. He has trained and is now supplanted by the new generation represented by the wounded and poisoned Edwin, whose sense of national mission is even more fatally infused by grievance and personal myth-making. The Saxon violence to come will be his, not Wistan’s.

The novel does not, then, offer up a perfectly symmetrical structure of agonism and antagonism. Doubt persists, in the long run, as to who symbolises the colonist, who the colonised, who the oppressor, who the oppressed. Part of the estrangement and suspense of the narrative is that it defers and finally evades “saying” that warring tribes (or married couples) are better to remember or to forget. Ishiguro is brooding about how identitarian positions are divisive and oppositional, sure enough, but also about how they are bound together in a mutually constitutive relationship. This pervasive hermeneutic uncertainty is related to the question of genre itself: allegory.

## Allegory and Allegoresis

James Wood’s objections to *The Buried Giant* are less to do with Ishiguro “trespassing” into fantasy and more with the question of allegory.<sup>39</sup> To Wood, the novel is “not about

<sup>39</sup>As well as Ursula Le Guin’s review, see also Adam Mars Jones’s unimpressed “Micro-shock”.

historical amnesia but [is] an *allegory of historical amnesia* [...] the giant is not buried deeply enough" (my italics).<sup>40</sup> As allegory, *The Buried Giant* is both "too literal and too vague"; it is overtly fixed to "another story". The allegory may point to an "enforced amnesia, a kind of psychological Dayton Agreement" but also, confusingly, to a "theology of suffering" imposed from God on the people. This damages its fictional autonomy: *The Buried Giant* is not about itself enough but too coded to its allegorical "other" (Greek: *allos*). Its aim to allegorical translatability and universalism is undermined because it lacks solidity of historical specification.

Wood's objections can be situated within reflections on allegory as a twentieth-century literary mode. Angus Fletcher, for example, has written of postmodern allegories as being "without ideas". Fletcher imagines the hermeneutic wall of allegory, on the other side of which lies a set of meanings.<sup>41</sup> In medieval allegories such as *The Divine Comedy*, the other meanings can be resolved on to a fourfold schema (literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical). The last, the anagogical, is the fixed plane of meaning above all: the spiritual ascent, the Last Judgement. This is the immanent "idea" of classical allegory – the Platonic essence, the transcendent universal, utopia, God. In the later, secular allegories of the West, it is an engagement with power and history which replaces Christian allegory: the "idea" of Big Brother is solely a cult of power which replaces God. In the so-called postmodern allegory, according to Fletcher, ideas are materialised into things. Allegory becomes increasingly attached to names rather than revealing a faith in universals, with the result that there is "no clear division between the two sides of the hermeneutic wall", between "this" meaning and the "other" meaning. In this Platonic sense, the allegory is without that immanent "idea" which informed pre-modern allegories.

This represents a shift from allegory to *allegoresis*, that is, to an intrinsic generic self-awareness. The allegory now primarily sees itself as allegory, and the literal level does not have a concrete value (as, say, Dante's hell would have had for his readers) but is all too aware of its interpretability as allegory. Fredric Jameson notes this element of auto-referentiality in *allegoresis*: "the production of the text becomes its own allegorical meaning".<sup>42</sup> Just as an ideologically "empty" pastiche comes after the stable ironies of earlier parody, so *allegoresis* follows allegory. The age of global capitalism levels out differences between national allegories so that, for Jameson, world literature is complicit: "we are confronted, not by difference but by identity".<sup>43</sup> Modern *allegoresis* is bound up with this dispersal of national cultures and languages. The fixed four-fold structure is relativised, its levels of meaning are open to interpretative "transversality", in a term borrowed from Guattari, so that the reader does not know which the literal level, which the allegorical, which the moral. The unifying anagogical meaning of allegory is retained by Jameson, but now to explain the ideology of the genre.

Wood's criticism is an expression of this broader problem of postmodern *allegoresis*: that the flimsily literal is too easily supplanted by its other, diffusely allegorical meanings; that the novel is too auto-referential. Ivan Stacy relates the "collapse" between the literal and figurative in *The Buried Giant* to Ishiguro's necessary recourse to the mode of fantasy. This allows the novel to slide ambiguously between representing memory as

<sup>40</sup>Wood, "Oblivion."

<sup>41</sup>Fletcher, "Allegory without Ideas," 9–33.

<sup>42</sup>Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, 28.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

solid and recuperable, on the one hand, and as metaphorical and self-servingly narratable, on the other. Stacy refers to how Ishiguro's "refusal to assign a straightforward correspondence between objects and concepts" (such as that of the real or figurative giant itself) alerts the reader to partial narratives of history which rely on metaphor.<sup>44</sup> This refusal of correspondence within fantasy suggests another refusal. Unlike the novels which precede and succeed it, *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun*, *The Buried Giant* does not – surely, by dint of its archaic setting, *cannot* – tentatively inhabit what has now emerged as the genre of dystopian fiction, a literary category absent from both Fletcher's and Jameson's theorising on allegory.

This now ubiquitous literary form is inseparable from the twentieth-century history of totalitarianism. I would argue that Ishiguro's melding of fantasy and allegory represents an uncoupling of this narrative of collective memory from twentieth-century dystopias of totalitarianism. It is all the more strategic given the demonstrable force exerted on the novel by that very same traumatic history. In genre terms, then, dystopia may itself be seen as an absent "long shadow". That formal legacy is particularly suggested when thinking about the significance to dystopia of memory, forgetting and state power. The insistence in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) on the vulnerability of individual memory when faced by the relentless manipulation and fabrication of collective historical memory is paradigmatic. Winston wonders, for example, at the animal-like stupidity of comrades who, twenty-four years later, have forgotten that chocolate rations have gone down, not up: "Was he, then, *alone* in the possession of a memory?"<sup>45</sup> Individual amnesia is a symptom of complete submission to the "directing brain" which has decided that "this fragment of the past should be preserved, that one falsified, and the other rubbed out of existence", so that "the chosen lie would pass into the permanent records and become truth".<sup>46</sup> Even the rebellious Julia has to be forced to recall that Oceania used to be at war with Eastasia, not Eurasia. The tyrannical commandeering of memory, and the state elimination of its traces, puts the onus on the individual to remember: "The only evidence is inside my own mind, and I don't know with any certainty that any other human being shares my memories".<sup>47</sup> There is almost something Ishiguroan about Orwell's memory-writing.

Other novels, such as Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978), with its President of Forgetting, air-brushed photographs and lovers who doctor the archive of their intimate past, could be cited. One of Kundera's governing ideas is that "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory and forgetting";<sup>48</sup> in *The Art of the Novel* he refers to "the novelistic exploration of the theme of forgetting [which] has no end and no conclusion", and remarks that forgetting is "absolute injustice and absolute solace at the same time".<sup>49</sup> Axl and Beatrice indeed embody this last paradox, in that they are drawn to taking solace in memories which reveal personal and political injustices. In totalitarian societies, the personal is maximally political, the political maximally personal.

<sup>44</sup>Stacy, "Looking out into the fog," 14.

<sup>45</sup>Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 55.

<sup>46</sup>Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 41, 43.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>48</sup>Kundera, *Laughter and Forgetting*.

<sup>49</sup>Kundera, *Art*, 130.



A more recent dystopia of state-enforced forgetting is Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* (1994).<sup>50</sup> Objects like rose petals or birds are taken away or disposed of; they are forgotten; they cease to exist, in memory and materially. We infer the ultimate purpose of the unspecified totalitarian government: to turn the island from plenum to vacuum, and not only to eliminate objects, but the memory of objects. A "rememberer" like R is a threat to the state whom the narrator hides away. We need things to exist, and things need us for them to exist, too: in this idealist dystopia the object-world eventually vanishes if it is not perceived (after Berkeley's *esse est percipi*, to be is to be perceived). The disappearing of the material world finally invades the narrator's body. At the last, the hand that has written and the voice that speaks the story disappear: the body becomes an object of display, so that all is left in R's hands is the "void" of the narrator (274); "pure" subjectivity, physical absence. Ogawa's novel is not a ludic piece of abstruse philosophising about nullity. It follows to an extreme limit the consequences of the political *nullification* of memory.

*The Buried Giant* can be seen as a pastiche of allegory in keeping with the modern secularisation of the genre. We might imagine Jameson emphasising how the novel works through questions of identity from within the world-system of transnational, anglo-phone fiction, and how it refuses to represent the localised experience of difference or to encounter the "real" other of an uncompromised allegory. The problem of Ishiguro's translatable style which exercises reviewers – here the stilted, Monty Pythonesque archaism of the dialogue which flaunts itself as a linguistic simulacrum – could thus be viewed as one of genre as well as individual style. However, if this choice of novelistic allegory is an overly auto-referential symptom of the commodity of world literature, we can perhaps find a point of discrepancy in its refusal of the dystopian mode. As we have seen, modern allegories of extreme state power dramatise the assault on individual and collective memory. This is Ishiguro's theme, too, but I suggest that he wishes to underplay resemblance to those suggestible *allegoreses* which now come built into the domain "dystopian fiction".

This is a novel of memory and forgetting which does not take place in a near-contemporary or future world of totalitarian governmental control. What is broadly "Orwellian" – the militarised modern state's manipulation of reality and its denial of the past – cannot be retrofitted into a world of roundhouses, hill forts and monasteries, let alone of dragons and pixies. The confection of Arthurian Britain allows Ishiguro to mobilise allegorical interpretability, and to write in the shadows of twentieth-century history and British politics, by disburdening the novel of genre expectations. Dystopia might have risked distracting the reader with the question of hyper-contemporary *means* – say, the people's subjection to digital memory or forgetting. *The Buried Giant* rejects the kind of anti-historicist genre-fetish which fixates on the stylised aesthetics of a futurist technocracy. In the Derridean sense, it does not want to participate in or belong to the laws of a normative genre.<sup>51</sup> Unable to take comfort in form – in the coherence of a dystopian other-world – the reader is forced to confront the ethics of alterity. We come to understand that, in remembering and forgetting, at any given time a nation defines itself or is founded on narratives of endogamy and exogamy – on whom it constructs as its

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<sup>50</sup>Ogawa, *Memory Police*.

<sup>51</sup>Derrida, "Genre," 55–81.



other. That Ishiguro is well known in other novels for assimilating dystopian tropes, but also testing their limits, makes the allegorical performance of pre-modernity in *The Buried Giant* all the more conspicuous.

### Contrayez Straunge

A classic point-to-point allegorical reading of *The Buried Giant* in relation to Brexit is not really possible. British tribes of brothers have not been killing brothers in previous decades; an uneasy peace has neither been brokered nor militarily enforced within the polity; the English Civil War took place in the seventeenth century. If we were to apply James Meek's terms, I think Wistan would have to be a Brexiteer, as there is "war in his dreaming". It could equally be said that the Saxons were objects of xenophobic fear: an immigrant from across the North Sea rather than an invader, trying to settle in the predominantly British culture. Then again, viewed across a millennium and a half, Wistan's protégé Edwin is now constitutive of the soon-to-be dominant "Anglo-Saxon" identity: the descendant of the invader now as Leaver, the Englishman who has supplanted the Briton – but also the Saxon who will be conquered by the Norman. On it goes: stable parallelism, emblematic allegorical characterisation, is not possible. There has been war, too, in Arthur's dreaming: the chivalric code is indeed a dream about warring, and we see this stoic soldierly obligation – albeit in mock-heroic vein – in Gawain, who clings to an obsolete sense of British identity and denies the violent realities of maintaining power. In the stereotypical characterisations, he is no model for the "progressive" Remainer. Axl is in an intermediate position, a Briton and erstwhile loyalist outraged, we might surmise, by Arthurian hypocrisy, by the myth of British fair play, but now neutered as a political agent by the amnesiac power of state. We guess that he used to be a tolerant presence visiting the ethnic enclaves, sympathetic to the Saxon, but his type of "jaw jaw" diplomacy has been rendered futile by the exercise of brute power. In this interstitial state – post-Roman and pre-Norman – the precise transcoding of the allegory into the present is seductively invited but, in the end, always out of reach.

However, perhaps for that very reason, the novel plays upon contemporary anxieties about British identity within the shifting and "transversal" planes of its allegorical structure. Assessing the translation of *An Artist of the Floating World* in the 1980s, and the response of Japanese readers to the novel, Motoko Sugano suggests that there is a "fine line of difference between a historical parable that aims to achieve universality and the 'real' history".<sup>52</sup> It should be possible to exercise one (not exclusive) reading of that novel as self-identical with Japan. Sugano's fine line is like the "hermeneutic wall" of allegory, on either side of which lie the literal and "other" meanings, or mythology and "real" history. The same goes for *The Buried Giant*. Ishiguro's decision to locate the novel in a country before it became England is irresistibly contemporary because so chronologically remote.<sup>53</sup> This is indeed a Brexit question: as Michael Gardiner has suggested, the repeated epithet of Leaver "nostalgia" is itself fractured, for which

<sup>52</sup>Sugano, "Convictions," 70.

<sup>53</sup>Two years before Brexit, David Cameron said: 'I have long believed that a crucial part missing from the national discussion is England'. Quoted in Docherty, "Brexit," 185.

emblem should that aching for *nostos* attach itself to, the Union Flag or St George?<sup>54</sup> The novel invites speculation about the current viability of an archipelagic state, approximately four-fifths of whom are English, and once described by Tom Nairn as “Ukania”. Deliberately archaic, straddling the border between myth and history, *The Buried Giant* has certainly hit *home* as an oblique commentary on the contemporary rise of xenophobia and manipulative forms of nationalism in the post-truth age. One way to look at this is to argue for a political unconscious in the text, rather than seeking out the fixed allegorical purpose of the author. When Wistan refers to living “far away in the fenlands, where one hears many strange tongues but not yours” (78), the reader may or may not momentarily reflect on UKIP’s success in, say, Boston (where that party took its first ever seats on Lincolnshire County Council). Those very same Europe-facing fenlands are now close to where Polish economic migrants are employed as agricultural workers.

The recuperation of medieval romance in *The Buried Giant* deepens doubt about the existence of an “always already Britain”. Matthew Vernon and Margaret A. Miller have read the novel in relation to the Arthurian Britain of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, a confused and malleable place which takes the knight through “contrayez straunge”. In the figure of the Green Knight/Lord Bertilak, the poem also collapses the separated idea of *hospes* and *hostis*, host as guest, foreigner as native. In both the medieval poem and contemporary allegory, Arthurian sovereignty is fractured rather than unified: Britain “does not appear as a teleological necessity or a political totality”.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Dominic Dean has emphasised Ishiguro’s consistent interest in *English* institutions (such as Darlington Hall and Hailsham) as places which attempt to resist but are nonetheless complicit in organicist fantasies of a harmonious nationalist past. Dean notes that the insular monastic space of *The Buried Giant* implies that institution’s lost future: the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the “seeding of the capitalist Protestant state”, a historical moment which some have compared to the “second English Reformation” of Brexit.<sup>56</sup>

The curious role of the narrator of *The Buried Giant*, who seems to understand what it is to live in a roundhouse or describe the skin of a dragon, but also to look out at a tranquil meadow (3) from “the high windows of an English country house” (87), to eat in a “rustic canteen” or “modern facility” (80), is important to other self-identical “British” readings, too. Catherine Charlwood has written persuasively on the ruptured “illusion of synchronicity” of the novel, in which “chronological versions” of Britain compete with each other. To Charlwood, the narrator comes across as an “apologetic historian” who “fears offending current national pride”.<sup>57</sup> The narrator addresses the reader as “you” but also, implicitly, as us: this is “our country” (5). The reader is apostrophised as “part of an ancient procession” (291): that is the second-person vocative appeal, the almost collusive intimacy, which implies the fabulation of a shared Britishness.

As Ivan Stacy argues elsewhere in this volume, this panoramic and transcendent narrative voice is eventually attached to the mythic, Charon-like figure of the boatman. The

<sup>54</sup>Gardiner, “Anachronism,” 113. Gardiner contrasts nostalgia to Leaver anachronism: ‘Unlike nostalgia, anachronism is fundamentally – and perhaps despite itself, in the case of Brexit – a politics of change’.

<sup>55</sup>Vernon and Miller, “Navigating Wonder,” 74.

<sup>56</sup>Dean, “English Institutions,” 27.

<sup>57</sup>Charlwood, “National Identities,” 33, 30.

boatman, like Eliot's Tiresias, one who has "foresuffered all", offers in Stacy's account a universalising and stoic view which hovers above and perhaps offers to mend the localised anguish of Axl and Beatrice.<sup>58</sup> He is also a potential trickster and object of suspicion, as the earlier scene in the ruined Roman villa makes clear. His awkwardly late assumption of the first-person voice places him as a reporting eavesdropper on the old couple. We are left with the unkept promise of Axl "making his peace" or mending his friendship with the boatman, and with both men not meeting the other's eye (345). The boatman does not at this stage indulge in small, self-exculpatory consolations, it is true, though he continues to advertise himself to the couple as a humble figure. He remains, perhaps even more ominously because of his previous bird's eye assumption of a transhistorical role, as the arbiter who, *faute de mieux*, must be trusted. His decisive future actions are merely unevidenced promises: another example of the text generating Brexit meanings. He is the potential agent of separation between the couple and, by extension, a grim *Seventh Seal* figure who will bring the ultimate oblivion on the "Isle of the Dead". If this is a type of universalising transcendence, it still uncomfortably suggests how the words of the boatman – which amount to promise to get the couple (British people) to the far shore and thus to preserve their union – still snag upon a particular form of British readerly suspicion.

That there are intimations in *The Buried Giant* of "the mythical sanctity of the English sublime", as Kristian Shaw puts it, saves the novel from accusations of blandly globalist *allegoresis*.<sup>59</sup> The hauntological effect is achieved precisely because of its translatability from myth into modernity. But where, finally, does this leave the question of the novel's conception in the 1990s, under the long shadows of other national histories, or the author's characteristic claim, when speaking of the fictional settings he ends up with, that he has involuntarily "wandered into people's countries without knowing where [he's] landed"?<sup>60</sup> This still warns against reading the novel off against Brexit as a premeditated allegory, or as a designedly British parable which might yet yield a salutary lesson.<sup>61</sup> If there is a "moral", it could be conceived as impressing the importance of collectively remembering and forgetting well; or at least of avoiding at all costs bad remembering and bad forgetting. Viewed as such, though, the narrative remains aporetic and opaque, and not even functionally translatable into an expected jeremiad against Brexit. The same could also be said for "non-British" readings: who represents the Serbian nationalists, who the Tutsis, who the Vichy deniers?

This undecidability is probably to the novel's artistic credit, but it comes with a certain melancholic fatalism. What can be recuperated is not a blankly applicable and universal *allegoresis* but a set of cunning analogies rooted in political history. This binds together an apparent discrepancy between broadly contemporary or historical interpretations of this novel. Pre-modern Britain asks those same questions of the "deep" British history of the island nation(s) which the Brexit debate has brought to the surface. *The Buried Giant* disrupts the reader from their present in what is a calculated, exaggeratedly

<sup>58</sup>Stacy, "The Boatman's Tale." I am indebted to Barry Lewis for his association of the narrator and (Eliot's) Tiresias.

<sup>59</sup>Shaw, *Brexlit*, 96.

<sup>60</sup>Ishiguro, "A Language that Conceals".

<sup>61</sup>Shaw refers to the novel as a parable, and though acknowledging that the 'distance between us may be too great', also writes that the novel 'suggests ways by which England – a country disrupted by the hauntology of its past within the British constellation – can come to terms with its historical legacy', *Brexlit*, 96.

millennial “British” retrospection. The novel chimes with contemporary developments because of this sense of deep anteriority: the time to come after an epochal change, a past which is, in Benjaminian terms, “charged with the time of the now [*Jetztzeit*]”.<sup>62</sup> The narrative compels us to think of this fantasy landscape as uncannily still Britain, and to imagine this community at its intersecting axes of diachronic continuum and synchronic contingency: Britain as it was, Britain as it is.

To the likes of Alexander Herzen, the nineteenth-century Russian political thinker influenced by Vico’s philosophy of historical cycles (*corsi* and *ricorsi*), the notion of a singular or aberrant Brexit event would have been impossible. As with Marx, Herzen thought of the failed revolutions of 1848, brutally suppressed by the dynastic powers, as crises which would recur. This transitional period of violent history was like a “pregnant widow”: the old order was dying but the new order was struggling to be born.<sup>63</sup> Brexit is similarly to be seen as a convulsion or contraction in the *longue durée*. After the First World War and the collapse of some of the old dynasties, new borders were ratified. The Wilsonian principle of national self-determination was asserted (by the Allies, including Britain), something which required the confection of states such as Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later, Yugoslavia) and Iraq. After the next global war, the supranational project of European integration, later to be denigrated by Leavers as an expansionist and bureaucratic imperium, recommenced in a different guise. And after the end of the Cold War, during a period of ethno-nationalist conflict in Europe, Tom Nairn wrote of a “crisis in the state” which might reveal that “British Unionism was a short-lived pseudo-transcendence whose day is over”.<sup>64</sup> He was evaluating the devolutionist enthusiasm of the newly installed Tony Blair, including the establishment of power-sharing in Northern Ireland. Now the United Kingdom has seceded from the “imperial” European union twenty years on, in a decision (and thus, in its original sense, a crisis-point) which may hasten its own disunification. Stormont is at a stalemate, though hopefully not in the original Greek sense of *stasis*. With its long and ruptured chronology, *The Buried Giant* teases the reader into viewing British history as, literally, “pre-posterous”, by taking them to a time before England was. It is as a timely, untimely meditation on long-naturalised but vulnerable notions of nationhood, not excluding the “strange country” of Britain, that it can be best seen as a Brexit novel.

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<sup>62</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 252–3.

<sup>63</sup> Herzen, *Other Shore*, 3–19.

<sup>64</sup> Nairn, *Nationalism*, 210, 224.

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