

Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*, London:  
Faber and Faber, 2015. pp. 1-345.

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“The giant, once well buried, now stirs. When soon he rises, as surely he will, the friendly bonds between us will prove as knots young girls make with the stems of small flowers. Men will burn their neighbours’ houses by night. Hang children from trees at dawn. The rivers will stink with corps bloated from their days of voyaging. And even as they move on, our armies will grow larger, swollen by anger and thirst for vengeance” (324).

Kazuo Ishiguro is not afraid of a challenge. In each of his works, he has explored a new world, all of which are original and imaginative.<sup>1)</sup> Many readers must have wondered what would come after *Never Let Me Go* (2005), a science fiction dystopia that discusses human clones. Few, however, might have expected that Ishiguro would ever produce a fantasy novel in line with what Hannah Arendt once called the “tradition of dragon-slayers” in British fiction.<sup>2)</sup> In fact, his much awaited new – and his seventh – novel, *The Buried Giant*, shares some resemblance to works such as *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit* for its inclusion of risky adventure, fighting ogres and slaying a dragon.

Did his challenge go too far this time? Some readers certainly think so. They believe Ishiguro not only failed to create a persuasive adventure story, but also ruined his usual subtlety.<sup>3)</sup> To be fair to Ishiguro, however, *The Buried Giant* is a successful adventure novel with characters you can feel for. As is always the case with his works, it is a page turner with mysteries and secrets unfolded little by little. Moreover Ishiguro manages to retain his subtlety and produces a touching human drama. Nevertheless, *The Buried Giant* might still be disturbing for many readers, because unlike other novels in the “tradition of dragon-slayers”, the end of the dragon in this novel does not bring about peace. Instead it marks a new age of war.

The novel is set in a post-Arthurian Britain in which the Britons and the Saxons live in peace. The memory of past wars is long lost, and there is friendship, mutual respect and even mixed marriages between the two. Though people’s lives are sometimes plagued by non-human actors such as ogres who blunder into the village, injuring slow villagers, people regard such misfortunes as “everyday hazards” (3). They are focused on more basic matters such as securing enough food and firewood. It is in this relative tranquility and peace that the story starts, but there is something unsettling from the first.

The main characters, Axl and Beatrice, are an elderly couple. They are Britons and are

leading a humble life in a Briton village. They do not remember their past well, but it is not just their old age which makes them forgetful. The whole village is in a strange state of amnesia and people do not talk about the past. Beatrice says “It’s queer the way the world’s forgetting people and things from only yesterday and the day before that. Like a sickness come over us all” (19). The cause of the amnesia is a mist which surrounds the land all the time. It is this mist which deprives people of memories and keeps them ignorant about their past.

Dealing with memory is characteristic of Ishiguro’s works. As Ishiguro himself notes, his stories revolve around characters who “have done things they later regret” and who try “come to terms with it”.<sup>4)</sup> At the beginning of each story, Ishiguro’s hero is often in a state of forgetfulness, pushing away memories of the past. But memory does not stay buried. At some stage it emerges to be confronted. *The Buried Giant* is also about the main characters’ emerging from a state of amnesia and encountering the past. But in this story amnesia is not just a personal act of forgetting. It is something that is forced upon the people in the whole land from without. The mist must be dispersed in order to restore memory, and this is what Axl and Beatrice accomplish in the story. Unfortunately what is discovered is regrettable. In fact their sad personal history is revealed and the brutal and bloody history under the Britons is uncovered. Moreover, the restored memory awakens old hatreds and the urge for vengeance long forgotten by the Saxons, and the novel ends with the beginning of their brutal conquest of the Britons.

Though a work of fantasy, *The Buried Giant* makes one think about history. In this story, digging up old memories and facing the past is a tragic act. Despite the words of Sir Garwain, King Arthur’s last surviving knight, that “our king’s name [is] well received everywhere” and “Arthur was one so generous to those he defeated they soon grew to love him as their own”, the revealed history says otherwise (120). Here remembering the past awakens the buried giant, “dark hatred as bottomless as the sea”, and creates the “circle of hate” (155, 233). One cannot easily decide which is better (or worse), peace based on forgetting or war based on remembering. Our century – and I believe Ishiguro was thinking of our century when he wrote this novel – seems to be more inclined to the latter, becoming less and less tolerant. We know the past is the source of hatred, and serves as a peace-breaker. This is why Arthur and his followers in the novel chose a peace based on forgetting, thinking it crucial to keep the people (both Britons and Saxons) in a state of amnesia. Luckily they have one secret weapon: the mist.

When the story first starts, Axl and Beatrice, like other victims of the mist, do not remember what sort of life they have been leading. They believe they have a son who lives in a not faraway village, but cannot recall his face, and why and how he left home. What seems certain is that they care about each other – Axl always calls his wife “Princess” – and they are now eager to meet their son. Mistreated by the community for their old age, the old couple one day decide to set out on a journey to find their son who would protect them. It is during this journey they become involved in the “daunting task” of slaying the fierce she-dragon, Querig (69).

In a Saxon village, they meet a brave Saxon warrior from a remote village who is passing by. His name is Wistan, and he is, in Axle's judgment, "no more than thirty" but has "about him a natural authority" (57). The village is lucky to that he is there, because earlier that day one village family were attacked by fiends who carried off their twelve year-old boy, Edwin. After the first rescue party returned in terror and in vain, "there was not a single man brave enough to join a further expedition" (59). It is Wistan who dared to go out to kill the monsters and who successfully rescued the boy "alive and (...) without serious injury" (73).

The time of relief, however, does not last long. Soon it is discovered that Edwin was bitten by the fiend. Saxons, unlike the Christians Britons, have a pagan superstition "that once bitten by a fiend, the boy will before long turn fiend himself" (81). This means the boy cannot stay in the village and the wise elders ask Wistan to take the boy with him. But Wistan thinks it would be safer to leave the boy with the Britons who do not share the superstition. He thus asks Axl and Beatrice to take the boy, and decides himself "to travel at least part of the same road" to fulfill his errand entrusted by his king (90). This is how the four travelers come to embark on their journey of discovery.

Wistan's errand is no ordinary one. He has been ordered to kill Querig, "a dragon of great fierceness" (69). In his village they have reports that a Briton called Lord Brennus has "ambitions to conquer this land for himself and make war on all Saxons now living on it" (134). Moreover, they also have the reports that "Brennus entertains in his castle a dangerous guest. A Norseman said to possess the wisdom to tame dragons" (134). Like Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* who tries to destroy the ring of power before it falls into evil hands, Wistan seeks to destroy the dragon before Lord Brennus uses her as a tool to fight against the Saxons.

As the story proceeds, however, it turns out that Load Brennus is not the only enemy who wants to tame the dragon. The other enemy is found among seemingly well-meaning Britons such as the monks in the monastery of high mountains, and Sir Garwain, King Arthur's loyal nephew and honourable knight. For them, the dragon is important for a different reason. As Wistan discovers, it is the she-dragon Querig who is the "cause of the mist", and they have protected her for years to create historical amnesia and maintain peace (168). Here Wistan's mission comes to acquire a new meaning. The dragon must be killed in order to uncover the hidden history and restore memory. Thus the story depicts the battle between Wistan and these *peace-lovers* who try to destroy him in vain.

Despite the initial plans of everyone, slaying the dragon becomes a joint project of the four travellers. Wistan's teammates, however, seem hardly reliable. Edwin, the twelve-year-old, is too young and too unskilled to fight, and Axl and Betarice are so old that they require "rest at each turn of the road" (100). Yet Wistan has his own reason to keep them. From the moment Wistan saved Edwin from monsters, he saw in this boy "the hunter's gift" (useful to find the dragon) as well as "true warrior's spirit" (237, 324). As for the old couple, the reason is related to Wistan's personal history.

Wistan understands the Briton language and is well acquainted with Briton manners,

because though Saxon fully by blood, he was brought up among Britons. From the moment Wistan was introduced to the old couple, he vaguely feels that he has seen Axl before. He senses that Axl was the “gentle Briton” who was adored as “the Knight of Peace” in Wistan’s village as a child but who betrayed the Saxons and exposed them to Arthur’s men’s brutal slaughter (319, 232). (This was how Wistan was brought up by Britons who killed his kin and took his mother.) It was in fact with a sense of vengeance that Wistan first approached the old man.

Wistan is, like some other characters like Sir Garwain, not completely affected by the mist. He remembers the past fairly well. It is certainly because of this special “gift to withstand strange spells” of the mist that his king chose him for this mission of slaying the dragon (308). And thanks to this gift and Edwin’s “hunter’s gift”, Wistan succeeds in destroying the dragon and killing its primary protector Sir Garwain.

As the mist starts to clear, Axl too remembers that he was once a warrior, serving Arthur. He also remembers how much he suffered when he heard the news of slaughter of innocent Saxons by Britons and how much he accused Arthur of making him “a liar and a butcher” with all his effort to befriends Saxons (232). Though Wistan has been wishing to punish Axl, he now understands that Axl “may have acted with no cunning, wishing well for his own kin and ours alike” (320). After all, not all Britons are evil and responsible for the brutal crimes done in their name. Unfortunately, however, such forgiveness and softness is not likely to play a part in the future. Wistan will train the young like Edwin to “carry in your [his] heart a hatred of Britons” and all Britons including even “those who show you [him] kindness” and those “who tempt our respect, even our love” (264). Because “greater things” must be done for the sake of justice and vengeance (264). Thus the age of hatred starts. Not only malicious Britons like Lord Brennus but good ones like Axle and Beatrice will be destroyed by the Saxons.

One might wonder what Ishiguro wants to say with this depressing ending. Is he suggesting that peace based on forgetting is better than war based on remembering? He certainly does not deny that there is some consolation and bliss in it. It is understandable why Britons chose amnesia, for there is no stopping the chain of hate, and people cannot engage in wars forever. Yet even if we had the magic solution of the memory-depriving dragon today, would we choose it? Perhaps we cannot stand such a false peace either. What we want is the real solution: peace with remembering.

Of course, this will not be easy. International politics today shows how hard it is. Museums and memorials are not infrequently built to commemorate brutal aspects human history such as holocausts and massacres. But such commemoration often does not work as an instrument to promote future peace. Instead, the past is politicized, and provokes hatred and sometimes even violence among peoples. At some stage people need to learn to forgive to stop the chain of hatred without discarding their memories. The Christian idea of mercy and forgiveness is important, but unfortunately in this story (and probably in real history too), it only gives men “license to pursue their greed, their lust for land and blood, knowing a few prayers and a little penance will bring forgiveness and blessing” (165). We have to be careful not to make the idea (of

mercy) a mere caricature.

Perhaps the key to solution lies not on the big stage of international politics but in our daily lives. In the novel there is a scene in which a boatman who ferries people to an island test the love of the married couple by asking questions. Those who pass the test can go to the island together and those who fail cannot. Though there are many couples who “claim to be bonded by love”, there is often “resentment, anger and even hatred” between them (47). “Abiding love that has endured the years”, as boatman says, is very rare (47). Even between Axl and Beatrice “a pair tied by an extraordinary devotion”, there lies a resentment (335-336). In the last chapter it is revealed that there was an act of infidelity on the side of Betrice. Though Axl “spoke and acted forgiveness, yet kept locked through long years some small chamber in my [his] heart that yearned for vengeance” (340). This is why he has forbidden Beatrice to visit the grave of their son who died of plague long ago. But now he finally forgives her and agrees to visit the place together. In *Candide*, Voltaire famously suggested to start improving society by cultivating our own gardens. Perhaps we could do the same with forgiveness and love.

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- 1) Although it must be said that first three novels are in essence similar. Ishiguro himself once said “I have written the same book three times”. Kazuo Ishiguro interviewed by Susannah Hunnewell, “Kazuo Ishiguro, The Art of Fiction, No. 196”, *The Paris Review*, Spring 2008, at <http://www.theparisreview.org/interview/5829/>.
- 2) Hannah Arendt, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, London and New York: A Harvest Book. A Harcourt, Inc, 1951/1968, p. 209.
- 3) See, for instance, Michiko Kakutani, “In ‘The Buried Giant’, Ishiguro Revisits Memory and Denial”, *The New York Times*, Feb 23, 2015, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/24/books/review-in-the-buried-giant-ishiguro-revisits-memory-and-denial.html>.
- 4) Kazuo Ishiguro, cited in Lawrence Graver, “What the Butler Saw”, *The New York Times*, 8 October 1989, at <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/10/08/books/what-the-butler-saw.html>.

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