

Making and Breaking Hegemonies: Kazuo Ishiguro and History

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One of the central themes of Kazuo Ishiguro's novels is the effect of historical change on the lives of ordinary individuals. In an interview in 2000 he testified to the fact that

I've always been interested in what happens to peoples' values when they have invested all their energies and their lives in the prevalent set of social values, only to see them change...and to see what happens to people when, at the end of their lives, they find that the world has changed its mind about what is good and what is bad. But for this particular individual, it's too late. They had the best intentions, but history has proved them to be either foolish or perhaps even someone who contributed to evil.¹

In general terms, this central concern is clearly discernible in each of his novels to date, in which first-person narrators attempt to come to terms with their values and identities against a background of historical change. Indeed, it is the undercurrent of historical change that provides the motivating force behind the telling of the tale in each of these texts. Far from being a historical novelist in the traditional sense, Ishiguro's attitude to history itself is anything but straightforward. As he has said: 'What I started to do was to use history....I would look for moments in history that would best serve my purposes, or what I wanted to write about.'² However complex Ishiguro's purposes may be, there are distinct features to his use of history that recur time and again throughout the novels, regardless of their specific historical contexts. These recurring features function in ways that highlight different aspects of the relationship between the individual narrators and their changing historical contexts. In other words, even though the historical contexts of Ishiguro's texts may be accurate to a greater or lesser degree, and may call into question specific issues relevant to that

¹ Writers Bloc, *Kazuo Ishiguro with F. X. Feeney: Wednesday, October 11, 2000 at the Writer's Guild Theatre, Los Angeles*, <http://www.writersblocpresents.com/archives/ishiguro/ishiguro.htm> p.17

² Kazuo Ishiguro and Oe Kenzaburo, 'The Novelist in Today's World: A Conversation', *Boundary*, 18/3 (1991), p.115

particular historical era, this is not the point of the narrative. Ishiguro's main interest is in historical processes and their imprint upon individuals, rather than historical periods.

Ishiguro problematizes historical change not as a transcendent grand narrative but rather as a deep internal, structural, dimension of his texts, and combines the narrow perspective of first-person narrative with an underlying sense of the greater movements involved in continuous historical transition. This process of historical transition is what causes the rise of prevalent sets of social values, and it is also what in turn destroys them. It both makes and breaks hegemonies. As Antonio Gramsci stated, social hegemony is created through

the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.³

Ishiguro's concern is with the experiential aspects of these processes for ordinary people, the constituent members of what Gramsci refers to as 'the great masses', and historical change is mediated through the individual lives of the narrators. Through his detailing of their experiences, Ishiguro provides exemplifications of Gramsci's notion of 'spontaneous consent' to 'the general direction imposed' on society, and a critique of the consequences of consenting. That is, his work provides insight into the powerful effect of historical context in the formation of hegemony in the minds of ordinary people, and its role in shaping the way in which people come to invest 'all their energies and their lives in the prevalent set of social values'.

³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p.12

More specifically, however, this investment is characterised by the subsumption of personal identity beneath a commitment to the discourse of a particular vocation, historically pertinent and valid at the time in which it is adopted, but not necessarily historically valid for a lifetime. For instance, Stevens, the butler in *The Remains of the Day*, has not simply invested in the prevalent values of his age, but also in the specific values of the discourse of the butler, which has become everything for him. All the events in his narrative are related from this point of view, that of the butler's. The same is true, in relation to their respective vocations, for the narrators of Ishiguro's other texts.

Each narrator has made a heavy investment in a particular set of values which, while those values were dominant and sustained by the wider historical context, allowed them to function in relation to their social environment. However, their reflections reveal the way in which the passing of time has made those value systems redundant, and put them out of step with their changing historical environment. The effect of such an anachronistic situation is that the narrators' identities no longer have currency in the surrounding world. This fact, opens a gap between individuals' values and their surroundings, and allows for the re-emergence of forgotten histories, and history.

In this essay, I engage with the compelling nature of these patterns that recur throughout Ishiguro's writing and in the relation between historical transition and the first-person narrators of his texts. I present an interpretive conceptualisation of this aspect of his fiction, which involves the introduction of two new concepts by which I aim to pin down analytically the experiential processes which Ishiguro describes, concepts which I term the 'vocational imperative' and 'interpretive consonance'. By

‘vocational imperative’ I refer to the overriding compulsion to fulfilling the requirements of one’s social function. And by ‘interpretive consonance’ I refer to the tendency to interpret events in a way that is consonant with an already established set of values. The usefulness of these two concepts for an understanding of the workings of hegemony in Ishiguro’s texts will, I trust, emerge more clearly as I proceed.

The relationship between ordinary people and the mechanisms of power in Ishiguro’s work can be viewed not only in its repressive form, but also from the standpoint of Michel Foucault’s conception of its performative aspect:

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse.⁴

In Ishiguro’s writing, this coercive, creative aspect of power – particularly the aspect of power that produces discourse – manifests itself in relation to the subjectivity of the narrators of his novels. Their reflections on their present circumstances and memories of the past clearly define the power relationships that have formed their consciousness.

The first impact of historical circumstance and its accompanying power constellation on the formation of subjectivity occurs in the childhood experiences of his narrators and is mediated to them through family relationships. In *An Artist of the Floating World*⁵, for example, the narrator makes explicit reference to his personal childhood experiences.

⁴ Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1984), p.61

⁵ Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) All further references are given as *AFW* in parentheses in the text

Masuji Ono, a retired artist, is thrown unwillingly into a process of self-reflection when the marriage engagement of his youngest daughter is terminated suddenly. He becomes concerned that this sudden change of heart on the part of the groom and his family has a connection with his own previous occupation as a painter of propaganda posters that promoted the rise of Japanese militarism during the Second World War, and that other people may now hold this against his daughter as well as himself. Despite his best efforts to deceive himself and others during the course of his self-justifications, he not only fails to reaffirm his previously held beliefs but also exposes the childhood foundations of the psychological predispositions that eventually led him to use his artistic ability in the way that he did. His narrative reveals both the constituent parts and the process of formation of a final unity of self and function that is the source of his identity.

This part of Ono's narrative returns him to Japan at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which was a pivotal time in the historical development of that country: 'Japan's take-off into sustained modern economic growth occurred in the final years of the nineteenth century and the first decade or so of the twentieth.'⁶ By situating his account of the development of Ono's character in a time when Japan was going through a process of intense modernisation and internal reform in which the values and techniques of Western capitalist societies was being rapidly assimilated, Ishiguro sets the scene for a demonstration of the impact of changing hegemonies. According to Foucault it is generally true that a capitalist economy, tends to promote the formation of a disciplinary society with far-reaching effects on personal development:

⁶ Jean-Pierre Lehmann, *The Roots Of Modern Japan* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982), p.174

The growth of a capitalist economy gave rise to the specific modality of disciplinary power, whose general formulas, techniques of submitting forces and bodies, in short, “political anatomy,” could be operated in the most diverse political regimes, apparatuses, or institutions.⁷

In terms of the development of subjectivity, the most powerful of these institutions is the family. In his representation of the early development of Ono’s character, Ishiguro illuminates the way in which social values and controls are able to filter through patriarchal family relationships into the developing sense of identity of an individual.

What is revealed in this part of Ono’s narrative, which is centred around his antagonistic relationship with his businessman father, is an intrinsic lack of borders between social forces and familial and personal relationships. Ishiguro constructs Ono’s personality and psychological predispositions within the context of a family subjected to uninhibited economic force, a family that was not simply a microcosm of society, but an embodiment of the forces of a growing capitalist economy.

Ono’s total identification with his artistic abilities is constructed around a negative relationship with his father, represented by the son as a living embodiment of business discourse. Ono’s father burnt his paintings in an effort to stop his son from becoming an artist, and this brought down the full weight of discourse conflict onto his son while he was still enclosed within the family. Ono was making no idle gesture of defiance when, in response to his father’s burning of his paintings, he told his mother: ‘The only thing Father’s succeeded in kindling is my ambition.’(AFW, p.47) That is, the father’s action has triggered, in retaliation, the onset of Ono’s identification with his artistic practices.

⁷ Paul Rabinow ed., *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 211

But Ishiguro goes beyond a straightforward psychological description of the formation of his characters' psychological predispositions within the microcosm of the family into a much more sophisticated explanation of the way in which the potential created through these experiences was eventually released in a social environment.

Ono recalls that, after having spent some time working in a studio producing cheap prints, his talent caught the eye of Seiji Morayama, a painter and printmaker. Morayama invited Ono to become his pupil; and Ono, since he considered Morayama to be 'a *true* artist. In all likelihood, a great one,' accepted.(AFW, p.71) He moved to Morayama's delapidated villa to continue his studies. It is at this point that his psychological and ideological predispositions really begin to surface in the text.

One day Chishu Matsuda, a representative of the Okada-Shingen Society, which held exhibitions that provided a forum for new artists to present their work to the public, called at the villa. Ono was excited at the prospect of participating in such an illustrious forum. But through his deepening association with Matsuda, he underwent a gradual but radical transformation that was articulated through the medium of his art; their relationship encouraged the realisation of Ono's latent predispositions by restructuring them in the form of political propaganda. The development of the subject matter of Ono's posters exemplifies this transformation. In the description of these posters, Ishiguro has condensed, within the text, a reflection on the process that is one of the driving forces of the narrative itself.

Despite the fact that Ono is concerned to remember his work strictly in terms of its artistic merit and technique, he cannot avoid revealing the much more sinister influence that his relationship with Matsuda had on the content and the form of what he painted. For instance, while being taken through one of the poorest parts of the city by Matsuda, Ono witnessed the following scene:

...I noticed three small boys bowed over something on the ground, prodding at it with sticks. As we approached, they spun round with scowls on their faces and although I saw nothing, something in their manner told me they were torturing some animal. Matsuda must have drawn the same conclusion, for he said to me as we walked past: 'well, they have little else to amuse themselves with around here.' (AFW, p.167)

As they were approaching this area of the city, Matsuda had also pointed out that the squalor of these places was rarely seen by businessmen or politicians who were careful to keep their distance. This was evidently a deliberate ploy on the part of Matsuda to share his ideas with Ono, and the result of this became clear later on. A few days later Ono produced a painting entitled 'Complacency'. In this painting, he portrayed the three boys in a way that, as he says:

...differed from their models in one or two important respects. For although they still stood in front of a squalid shanty hut, and their clothes were the same rags the original boys wore, the scowls on their faces would not have been guilty, defensive scowls of little criminals caught in the act; rather, they would have worn the manly scowls of samurai warriors ready to fight. It is no coincidence, furthermore, that the boys in my picture held their sticks in classic kendo stances.

Above the heads of these three boys, [the viewer] would have seen the painting fading into a second image – that of three fat, well-dressed men, sitting in a comfortable bar laughing together. The looks on their faces seem decadent; perhaps they are exchanging jokes about their mistresses or some such matter. These two contrasting images are moulded together within the coastline of the Japanese islands. Down the right-hand margin, in bold red characters, is the word 'Complacency'; down the left-hand side, in smaller characters, is the declaration: 'But the young are ready to fight for their dignity.' (AFW, p.168)

Typically, Ono's response to the poverty that he witnessed was to attempt to find a solution based on art. It is later revealed that he suggested to Matsuda that the Okada-Shingen Society should hold an exhibition to raise money for the poor - a suggestion which Matsuda was quick to reject as naïve; preferring, instead, his own solution. What that solution was emerged through his influence on Ono and his art, which Ono reveals in his description of his later re-working of the subject-matter of 'Complacency' into the print 'Eyes to the Horizon':

'Eyes to the Horizon' was indeed a reworking of 'Complacency'...The later painting...also employed two contrasting images merging into one another, bound by the coastline of Japan; the upper image was again that of three well-dressed men conferring, but this time they wore nervous expressions, looking to each other for initiative. And these faces...resembled those of three prominent politicians. For the lower, more dominant image, the three poverty-stricken boys had become stern-faced soldiers; two of them held bayoneted rifles, flanking an officer who held out his sword, pointing the way forward, west towards Asia. Behind them, there was no longer a backdrop of poverty; simply the military flag of the rising sun. The word 'Complacency' down the right-hand margin had been replaced by 'Eyes to the Horizon!' and on the left-hand side, the message, 'No time for cowardly talking. Japan must go forward.' (AFW, pp.168-169)

As Ono himself indicates, he only mentions this print because of its relationship with the earlier painting and as a kind of acknowledgement of the influence that Matsuda had on his career. A more precise analysis of the relationship between the two paintings reveals not only the obvious and straightforward influence of Matsuda on Ono, but also the shocking and subtle way in which Ono's psychological predispositions became embroiled in a political identity.

Both paintings were split into two halves. In the top half of each painting there were well-dressed men, and in the bottom half were three poverty-stricken boys. In 'Complacency' the well-dressed men were decadent, obviously financially well-off, and self-satisfied, but otherwise non-descript. The three boys in the lower part of the

painting wore expressions on their faces that were not the guilty ones that Ono had originally witnessed; but rather, the unapologetic, defiant, scowls of little samurai warriors in fighting spirit.

It seems possible that, in 'Complacency', what Ono had represented in the form of the three well-dressed men was a facsimile of his relationship with his father as business discourse. Although Ono makes no direct reference to them as businessmen, their identity could easily be construed as such. Also, by using the word 'Complacency' on one side of the painting, and the phrase 'But the young are ready to fight for their dignity' on the other, Ono seems to have been repaying his father for the condemnation of his character as lazy, weak willed, and as having a dislike of useful work. In his representation of the men as decadent and complacent, and of the boys as courageous and defiant, Ono was performing a reversal of his father's claims about the condition of their relationship that also functioned as a rebuttal of his criticism; the well-dressed men were 'complacent', while the boys, being 'ready to fight', were anything but lazy or weak willed.

The production of 'Complacency' was the deepening of the process of convergence that allowed him to identify specific social problems in a particular way; and his response, in the form of his proposal to hold an art exhibition for the sake of raising funds, was entirely consistent with his commitment to pursuing an artistic career. However, this was not the end of the matter because Ono failed, at this point, to *identify himself* with the socio-political situation as he saw it. In this sense, the imperative nature of his vocational aspiration could still be said to have been in the process of formation. There was, evidently, one more step to be taken. This was not

an easy process, and it was taken under the increasing influence of Matsuda. As Ono himself points out: 'It is, I suppose, a measure of the appeal his ideas had for me that I continued to meet him, for as I recall, I did not at first take much of a liking to him. Indeed, most of our earlier meetings would end with our becoming extremely antagonistic towards one another.'(AFW, p.169)

The driving force of the transformation of latent aggression from personal psychological characteristic into conspicuous social discourse, was the fact that, as I have pointed out, inherent in Ono's relationship with his father was an attitude towards his *father as business discourse*. When, under the coercive influence of Matsuda, Ono became capable of articulating this attitude, society reaped what it had sown. In this sense, Ishiguro has created a character with a deeply ingrained latent ideological dimension. This dimension, along with Ishiguro's implicit critique of it, is an underlying motivating force of the narrative that becomes increasingly conspicuous as the contexts recalled by Ono progress.

The progression from 'Complacency' to the later 'Eyes to the Horizon' clearly reveals the fact that Matsuda's influence radically politicised both Ono's perception of the problem of poverty and his solution to it; the well-dressed men came to resemble 'three prominent politicians' who 'wore nervous expressions,' and the three boys were transformed into empire-building soldiers. And, since, on the level of personal psychology, turning aggression outwards is consonant with the reluctance to confront feared authority figures, it was a very easy and subtle step to transform the three well-dressed men into three prominent politicians, turning the aggression, in the form of the three soldiers, outwards onto a socially legitimised target, Asia. The complex

relationship between Ono's psychological predispositions, his relationships with his father and Matsuda, and the social environment all worked in a way that eventually fixed Ono's identity.

Matsuda, as the seductive voice of imperialism, argued that the solution to the poverty that surrounded them lay in the rightful restoration of the Emperor as head of state:

'It's time for us to forge an empire as powerful and wealthy as those of the British and the French. We must use our strength to expand abroad. The time is now well due for Japan to take her rightful place amongst the world powers. Believe me, Ono, we have the means to do so, but have yet to discover the will. And we must rid ourselves of these businessmen and politicians. Then the military will be answerable only to his Imperial Majesty the Emperor.' Then he gave a small laugh and turned his gaze back down to the patterns he was weaving in the cigarette ash. 'But this is largely for others to worry over,' he said. 'The likes of us, Ono, we must concern ourselves with art.'(AFW, p.174)

This statement clearly demonstrates the ideological influence of Matsuda on Ono. The seductiveness, for Ono, of Matsuda's statements lay in the fact that the discourse of imperialism was here being condensed and packaged within a concern for art. In this deeply cynical manoeuvre, Ono's already established identity with the discourse of art was used by Matsuda as a point of entry that would allow him to connect Ono's unconscious predispositions with his own political views. The result of this psychological infestation was the institution of a fascist hegemony of values in Ono's mind, which is articulated in his final conversation with his master, Morayama:

'I have learnt many things over these past years. I have learnt much in contemplating the world of pleasure, and recognizing its fragile beauty. But I now feel it is time for me to progress to other things. Sensei, it is my belief that in such troubled times as these, artists must learn to value something more tangible than those pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light. It is not necessary that artists always occupy a decadent and enclosed world. My conscience, Sensei, tells me I cannot remain forever an artist of the floating world.'(AFW, pp.179-180)

Initially, Ono's conscience dictated a very different response than Matsuda's to the social problems around him. However, it seems that, through the process of continuous discussion and argument, Matsuda finally won the day and his ideology became Ono's conscience. The combination of the above two statements marks both the assimilation of Ono into the whole system of imperialist discourse and his internalisation of it, the proof of which manifested in his art.

The transformation from 'Complacency' to 'Eyes to the Horizon' is indicative of the deepening convergence of Ono's psychological and ideological predispositions with the specific characteristics of his social environment. Through his relationship with both Matsuda and his teacher in a poverty-stricken social environment, Ono's enforced identification with artistic discourse and his latent anger towards his father transformed into a deep identification with a particular social function.

The point is that the internalisation of discourse happens at such a deep level that it is no longer recognisable as such. Genuine freedom, in this sense, would mean the open acknowledgement of function *as* function, not the identity of *function as self*, an idea which has a deeply co-ercive effect on human individuality.

It is the consolidation of vocational discourse as an absolute standard, as a cultural and personal hegemony of value, that I have termed 'the vocational imperative'. In this sense, Ishiguro's subtle construction of the vocational identities of his narrators resonate in a particular way with what Gramsci referred to as the "spontaneous" consent given to the general direction imposed on society. That the vocational imperative is a feature of the times is shown in the fact that the parents of the

narrators, particularly the fathers have also identified themselves with their jobs. It is a universal condition that is passed on because the power constellation of society establishes itself partly by working in a way that maintains adults in an aggravated childhood state. In this way Ishiguro constructs his narrators as people of their time, the embodiment of a particular hegemonic constellation at a particular point in history.

The continuation of the hegemonies established by Ishiguro's construction of the functional identities of his narrators also raises the question of his approach to the issue of historical agency.

In *The Remains of The Day*⁸, Lord Darlington, Stevens's employer, after having come under the influence of fascists such as Mosely and von Ribbentrop, one day declares, 'I've been doing a great deal of thinking, Stevens. A great deal of thinking. And I've reached my conclusion. We cannot have Jews on the staff here at Darlington hall' (*RD*.155). Despite his own incredulity, Stevens says and does nothing except blindly obey his master's instruction to dismiss the two Jewish housemaids. This refusal to take any moral stance at all is emphasised when he is confronted by Miss Kenton's question as to whether he may not consider this action to be '*wrong?*' ... [He replies that] if his lordship wishes these particular contracts to be discontinued, then there is little more to be said' (*RD* p.157).

According to the critic Rebecca Suter, the experience of Stevens 'underlines ... the difficulty of defining the role and responsibility of those "ordinary people", and the

⁸ Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989) All further references are given as *RD* in parentheses in the text

way everyone is involved in the dynamics of power.’⁹ But Ishiguro’s emphasis is rather on the fact that Stevens’s dedication to his profession and his “consent” to hegemony has made him into an unknowing and ignorant historical agent. He is a historical agent, nonetheless, but as Ishiguro himself noted, ‘Often we just don’t know enough about what’s going on out there, and I felt that’s what we’re like. We’re like butlers.’¹⁰

In Ishiguro’s texts, the relation between the problem of agency, the difficulty of cultivating a consciousness of history, and the tendency of hegemony to colonise language and shape conceptual thinking is clear. Ishiguro’s construction of Stevens’s thought processes are revealing in this respect. Much of Stevens’s seamless narrative is taken up with his attempts to define the concept of dignity. As he states:

The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstances tear it off him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when he is entirely alone. It is, as I say, a matter of ‘dignity’.(*RD*, p.43-44)

Clearly, Stevens’s definition of dignity fixes a functional meaning onto language in a way that reaffirms his vocational imperative at the same time as it prevents any critical thinking about his own actions, the commands of others, or the undeveloped potential of both himself and his historical environment. According to Herbert Marcuse:

If the linguistic behaviour blocks conceptual development, if it militates against abstraction and mediation, if it surrenders to the immediate facts, it

⁹ Rebecca Suter, ‘ “ We’re Like Butlers “ Interculturality, Memory and Responsibility in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of The Day*.’ *Qwerty*, 9 (1999), p.248.

¹⁰ Allan Vorda, ed., ‘Stuck on The Margins: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro’, in *Face to Face: Interviews with Contemporary Novelists* (Houston, TX: Rice University Press, 1993), p.32.

repels recognition of the factors behind the facts, and thus repels recognition of the facts, and of their historical content. In and for the society, this organisation of functional discourse is of vital importance; it serves as a vehicle of coordination and subordination. The unified, functional language is an irreconcilably anti-critical and anti-dialectical language. In it, operational and behavioural rationality absorbs the transcendent, negative, oppositional elements of Reason....The functional language is a radically anti-historical language: operational rationality has little room and little use for historical reason.¹¹

As an embodiment of hegemony, it is in the nature of vocational discourse to set parameters for both language and thought. Stevens's use of the concept of 'dignity' is an example of the confinement of language to a specific functional definition. According to Stevens, 'dignity' is the ability of a butler to maintain the persona of his profession regardless of the emotional duress, or moral conflicts, with which he may be faced. This purely functional definition of the concept of 'dignity' reduces the potential for critical thought. For Marcuse, One of the features of vocational narration is that

Discourse is deprived of the mediations which are the stages of the process of cognition and cognitive evaluation. The concepts which comprehend the facts and thereby transcend the facts are losing their authentic linguistic representation. Without these mediations, language tends to express and promote the immediate identification of reason and fact, truth and established truth, essence and existence, the thing and its function.'¹²

Rather than considering the various potential meanings of the concept of 'dignity' and thereby opening a space for the critique of his circumstances, Stevens actively inhibits the wider cognition of his situation by failing to properly raise the question of exactly how dignified it is to be so totally servile. Even his imagination is reduced to imagining the further possibilities of discipline and technique rather than dialectical imagination of the possibilities of life. Much of Stevens's time is taken up with working out how he can serve his master better.

¹¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (1964; London: Routledge, 2002), pp.100 -101

¹² *Ibid.* p.89

In terms of Stevens's relationship with his environment, the inhibiting tendency of the functional definition of language amounts to a check on any potential for critical thought that might reveal the irrationality of a system that seems rational. Stevens's rationalisation of the demands of his duties, without considering the nature of the events unfolding all around him, which will eventually lead to war, can be seen as an example of the way in which vocational narration suffocates the kind of dialectical thinking that would reveal this atrocious state of affairs. The all-powerful rationality functioning *within* a system serves to conceal the *irrationality of the whole system itself*. It is this tendency of hegemony to colonise the language of Ishiguro's texts that I refer to as 'Interpretive consonance'.

'Interpretive consonance' briefly stated indicates the tendency of hegemony to promote an interpretation of events that is consistent with itself. For instance, this tendency can be found in Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*¹³, in which Etsuko, a Japanese housewife now living in England, recalls a short-lived friendship she had with a woman named Sachiko while she was still living in Nagasaki, shortly after the dropping of the atomic bomb on that city. Many years later, this recollection is prompted by the recent suicide of her own eldest daughter, Keiko, and the visit of her younger daughter, Nikki. Etsuko's interpretation of the experiences of Sachiko and her daughter, Mariko, is implicitly constrained within the parameters of her identification of herself with her vocation as wife and mother. However, because of the force of hegemony and its tendency to homogenise experience, her conflation of her own identity with that of Sachiko means that she ends up, not simply projecting

¹³ Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982) All further references are given as *PV* in parentheses in the text

her own story onto Sachiko, but telling Sachiko's story, and by implication the story of many women in post-war Nagasaki, in one narrative line. As Cynthia F. Wong puts it, as she recalls her own personal history, 'Etsuko's augmenting knowledge of the past provokes the reader toward a gradual move toward disclosure, ... or unworking, of the wartime past remembered by Etsuko.'¹⁴ In Ishiguro's work the first-person narrative is also a societal narrative, in which one character's interpretation of her own experiences is consonant with the actual experiences of many others. Thus, the interpretive consonance of the narratives of Ishiguro's texts is a manifestation of Foucault's statement regarding the expression of the coercive aspects of power through discourse that I referred to earlier.

Ishiguro, however, takes this one step further and shows how the failure of the tendency towards interpretive consonance reveals the way in which historical transition sets limits to, and eventually breaks, hegemony. The most dramatic example of the effect of an already changed historical environment on an established constellation of values that are embodied by an individual character as a socio-psychological paradigm can be found in *The Remains of the Day*.

During the course of the journey that Stevens makes in an attempt to solve the staffing crisis at Darlington Hall, the car runs out of petrol and he is forced to stop at a pub in Moscombe, where the local inhabitants mistake him for a gentleman. As the evening progresses, the local people become interested in whether Stevens – as the gentleman – was ever involved in 'great affairs' (*RD* p. 197). He answers in the affirmative, and

¹⁴ Cynthia F. Wong, 'The Shame of Memory: Blanchot's Self-Dispossession in Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*', *Clio*, 24/2 (1995), p.136

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.137.

the discussion then turns to the question of the nature of democracy and dignity. At this point, Stevens, as the embodiment of a hegemony in which 'dignity' means unquestioning obedience to one's superiors and the perfect fulfilment of one's duties, comes into direct confrontation with the opinions of Harry Smith, a working class man, who's post-war opinion is that

'...it's one of the privileges of being born English that no matter who you are, no matter if you're rich or poor, you're born free and you're born so that you can express your opinion freely, and vote in your member of parliament or vote him out. That's what dignity's really about, if you'll excuse me sir.'(RD. p.196)

In this short exert, Ishiguro has positioned Stevens on the borders between two conflicting value systems, which infuse the same words with diametrically opposed meanings, so that Stevens and Harry Smith can barely comprehend the fact that they do not understand one another's perspective. In this way, Ishiguro uses historical transition as a way of pressing hegemonic discourse up against its own psycho-sociological limitations.

Ishiguro also investigates the chronological limits of the imposition of hegemony through interpretive consonance in an implicit critique of the attempt to project sets of values both forward and backward in time. The forward projection of values occurs when the narrators attempt to pass on their own values to the younger generation in some way. For instance, in *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko's narrative includes a recollection of the way in which, after the bombing of Nagasaki, the attempt to cope with the situation was based on a continuing adherence to traditional values, by which, according to Cynthia F. Wong, the Japanese found 'a dependable structure in the institution of the family. ... In emulating their symbolic head of state, their

emperor, [they stressed] the importance of solidifying their familial relationships.¹⁵ This tendency became deeply entrenched in Etsuko's psyche. Later, when she attempts to encourage her daughter to follow the same path, they have a disagreement. Niki, when pressed on the issue of marriage to her boyfriend, does not understand the significance of her mother's statement that 'in the end, Niki, there isn't very much else' (*PV* p.180). Nikki has no intention of marrying her boyfriend, and rejects Etsuko's subtle attempt to maintain her outdated values out of hand.

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono's attempts to persuade his grandson to develop his painting ability, and to reject his fascination with American cultural icons, such as The Lone Ranger and Popeye, meet with the same fate in a way that is reminiscent of his own rejection of his father's values when he was a child. The lack of forward motion means that the narrators are already left high and dry on the outskirts of historical transition. They occupy a position of liminality, which is not only cultural but also chronological. The process of cultural transition goes hand in hand with the chronological disjunction of the generation gap and the impossibility of crossing its boundaries. This is what forces the realisation of the repetitiveness of both individual and historical life-processes to the surface in the texts. By virtue of their position in place and history, the narratives of Stevens, Ono and Etsuko cannot help but reveal the limitations of hegemony in its relation to the passage of time. The future generation has already 'consented' to a different, and emergent, hegemony.

Finally, I would like to suggest that it is Ishiguro's recognition of the anxiety caused by finding oneself on the outer limits of history, as a representative of a hegemony

that is no longer the dominant driving force of society, that fuels his preoccupation with the question of the reliability, or unreliability, of memory. The narrators' sense of the fragmentation and disintegration of an old hegemony, and the formation of a new one, is the trigger for their reflections. Because the narrators have identified themselves so deeply with a particular set of values, the act of remembering becomes an attempt to preserve their subjective identities by reasserting disintegrating hegemonies, and resisting newly forming ones. For instance, in *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono recalls his childhood as if his commitment to art and fascism were already there, and does not comprehend the ways in which his own narrative reveals the processes by which his identity, vocation and values were formed. In other texts the collapse of faith in the vocational imperative goes hand in hand with the recognition that the force of interpretive consonance is no longer enough to convince the younger generation to consent to the same hegemony. For instance, In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko's attempts to resist acknowledging the part her own behaviour played in the suicide of her eldest daughter fail and she reluctantly acknowledges that her youngest daughter's values are not her own. And in *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens's attempt to rekindle the greatness of Darlington Hall, and his own ruined personal life, fail as he is left in a position of having to assimilate the values of his new American master in order to carry on with his duties.

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- 3 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p.12
- 4 Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1984), p.61
- 5 Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) All further references are given as AFW in parentheses in the text
- 6 Jean-Pierre Lehmann, *The Roots Of Modern Japan* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982), p.174
- 7 Paul Rabinow ed., *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 211
- 8 Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989) [All further references are given as RD in parentheses in the text].
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- 14 Cynthia F. Wong, 'The Shame of Memory: Blanchot's Self-Dispossession in Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*', *Clio*, 24/2 (1995), p.136
- 15 Ibid. p.137