

Title: Ageing without Remembering: Neomedieval Fantasy, Memory and Loss in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*

Highlights

- Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* questions the narrative of progress by focusing on the quest of two elderly characters and the ways in which they come to terms with individual and collective pasts.
- The novel foregrounds the ethical necessity to both forget and remember in order to build individual and social history, with the old characters offering the uncertain hope of regeneration through their experience.
- The novel deconstructs generational hierarchies and positions the frailty that may come with age as a strength.
- The novel interrogates the association of youth with progress and futurity.

Abstract

In his most recent novel, *The Buried Giant* (2015), Ishiguro presents an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice, who live in a Britain afflicted by a mist that makes everyone forget not only their common historical past but also their own life experiences and memories. By focusing on the journey of the two elderly and increasingly frail protagonists within a fantastic, neomedieval world, the novel challenges the chronometric and future-oriented model of time in which youth is an asset and old age inevitably a burden. Related to this, the novel interrogates the model of generational succession as straightforward renewal and progress, instead positing a cyclical movement through which the mistakes of past generations are repeated once and again. In this novel, endurance in the face of vulnerability, as experienced by the elderly characters of the novel, seems to be the only plausible answer to an inevitable repetition of mistakes and the cyclical nature of trauma.

Keywords: ageing, fantasy, memory, trauma, generational succession

Introduction

In Kazuo Ishiguro's most recent novel, *The Buried Giant*, Axl tries to hold on to the past and make sense of his current life as an older man living with his wife in a small Saxon village:

Had they always lived like this, just the two of them, at the periphery of the community? Or had things once been quite different? Earlier, outside, some fragments of a remembrance had come back to him [...] But now [...] nothing would quite settle in his mind, and the more he concentrated, the fainter the fragments seemed to grow. Perhaps these were just an elderly fool's imaginings. (2015: 7)

Ageing characters here seem to represent metonymically the failure of memory. They suggest a horrifying story of decline and marginalisation, as they are unable to access the past and with it to move forward into the future. Set during the Briton/Saxon conflict and peopled with dragons and knights, *The Buried Giant* draws on the neomedievalism of fantasy in order to posit recurrent questions in Ishiguro's work; namely, the ethical necessity of both forgetting and remembering, and the relationship between individual memory and historical memory. As the quotation above suggests, central to Ishiguro's exploration of trauma, memory and shared cultural narratives is ageing. Overlooked or sidelined in most critical responses to this novel is the importance of the life course, time and the narrative of progress in its imaginative engagement with what it means to forget and to remember. The novel elevates its exploration of memory, trauma and forgetting by acknowledging the centrality of ageing and generation in these processes of cultural and national construction. The frailty and failing physical and even cognitive processes of the novel's ageing characters do not, in fact, suggest that they are to be made redundant in the face of the health and strength of the young. Frailty, vulnerability and doubt are valued in this novel, deconstructing generational hierarchies and positing that the frailty that may come with age can be a strength.

Our understanding of ageing is, of course, inextricably linked to the ways in which we order time itself. Jan Baars (2012) and Judith Halberstam (2005) suggest that the dominance of chronometric time in our understanding of the life course – the linear organisation of our lives by our progress through life stages marked by key events such as completing education, getting married or retirement – produces a narrow and restricting vision of ageing. Baars considers that “chronometric categories are not important by themselves but are made important by cultural macro-narratives that present acceleration, innovation and youth as the only way forward” (2012: 7). He goes on to argue that “the predominance of the chronometric perspective leads in late modernity to a one-sided focus on living longer, but since aging has scarcely been integrated as an important and dignified phase of life, aging well tends to be equated to staying young” (2012: 9). Drawing on queer theory, Cynthia Port

similarly contends that our current, future-orientated model of time marginalises the old because they are “[n]o longer employed, not reproducing, perhaps technologically illiterate, and frequently without disposable income”; as a consequence, “the old are often, like queers, figured by the cultural imagination as being outside mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future” (2012: 3). The promise of the future is connected to a generational model which prioritises the young and relegates the old. As age studies critics such as Margaret Gullette (2004) state, this model not only makes the old as well as old age per se invisible, but also broadens generational gaps rather than bringing generations together.

As a genre, fantasy, with its destabilisation of the real and the rational, *may* seem an ideal form in which to interrogate the temporal orders that dominate our understandings of the life course. Critics rarely agree on the definition of fantasy writing; indeed, what they tend to agree about is that it is very difficult to define (see Mendelsohn and Armitt). Few would nevertheless disagree with the idea that it exists, as seminal critics Tzevan Todorov (1975) and Rosemary Jackson (2003) argue, somewhere between the real and imaginary. In her study on fantasy as a genre of subversion, Jackson draws on Todorov’s work to define the fantastic as a genre that by questioning the existence of an empirical world, “raises questions of the nature of the real and unreal, foregrounding the relation between them as its central concern” (1975: 37). Heike Hartung, one of the few critics to consider the possibilities of the fantastic genre in relation to discourses of ageing and old age, draws on Todorov’s definition of fantasy “as the implicit reader’s hesitation or doubt about the status of reality” to argue that “the unresolved hesitation of the fantastic mode makes it amenable to the representation of old age” (2017: 337). She therefore argues that fantastic fiction serves to “open up alternative visions of time and ageing” (Hartung 2017: 336). What this reading draws attention to are the possibilities that the ontological and temporal instability of fantasy might offer for thinking about age and the life course.

Forms of fantasy that employ neomedievalism more explicitly engage with time in their treatment of history itself. Kim Selling, drawing on Umberto Eco’s discussion of medievalism, points to the current popularity of “fantastic medievalism”, where fantasy meets the medieval in what is often a positive, clearly recognisable representation of the Middle Ages as a reaction to late-capitalist Western society. Combining the comfort of a familiar version of the Middle Ages, one influenced by Western fairy tale and Romance traditions, with the “otherness” generated by its distance from our contemporary world, these texts provide the reader with “a satisfying escapist encounter” (2004: 212). *The Buried Giant*, however, offers a more sceptical and much less positive vision of the Middle Ages than many popular contemporary texts. In its very self-conscious and questioning use of the medieval it is closer to what many term neomedievalism. In the seminal essay “Living with Neomedievalism”, Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements insist on the neomedieval as something that rejects history and uses the Middle Ages playfully: “neomedievalism is further

independent, further detached, and thus consciously, purposefully, and perhaps even laughingly reshaping itself into an alternative universe of medievalisms, a fantasy of medievalisms, a meta-medievalism” (Robinson and Clements 2009: 56). If medievalism, as Louise D’Arcens argues, foregrounds time and temporal ordering (D’Arcens 2016: 9), then a striking feature of the neomedieval is both its self-consciousness about its use of the past, and its explicit relationship with our contemporary world. Amy S. Kaufman describes this relationship with our time as neomedievalism’s “sometimes insufferable presentism” (2010: 5-6). Neomedieval fantasy, then, is a form (or sub-genre) that foregrounds our relationship with the past and draws attention to the instability of both history and the ways in which we order time itself, offering further opportunities for rethinking the dominant temporal structures that order our lifecourses.

Neomedieval fantasy as exploratory tool in *The Buried Giant*

The Buried Giant employs its neomedieval fantasy to explore the ways in which we remember, and forget, following much of Ishiguro’s other work in its central concern with trauma and memory. The novel is set during the Briton-Saxon conflict, which roughly corresponds – given what D’Arcens calls the “classificatory slipperiness of the period” (2016: 4) – to the early Middle Ages. The novel starts when Axl and Beatrice, an “elderly couple” (Ishiguro 2015: 4), as the narrator refers to them, decide to leave the “warren” where they live in order to start a journey to join their son, a young man they can barely remember who, apparently, lives a few days away from their village. Despite the seemingly easy correlation between ageing and loss of memory that the opening chapter toys with, the amnesia experienced is, from the start, depicted as both individual and collective. As the narrator explains, “in this community the past was rarely discussed. I do not mean that it was taboo. I mean that it had somehow faded into a mist as dense as that which hung over the marshes. It simply did not occur to these villagers to think about the past – even the recent one” (2015: 8). The mist in the novel comes from the she-dragon, Querig, and has been produced at the behest of King Arthur, in order to quell the population after the Britons’ slaughter of Saxon civilians during their bloody war. The novel asks us to consider what good or ill may come of remembering past collective (and individual) trauma. Central to this question is how we imagine the future and its relationship with the past. *The Buried Giant* therefore exploits the medieval and is undoubtedly very much concerned with the history of the Middle Ages, but at the same time, it employs what might be termed the neomedieval shorthand of the fantastic in its world building, relying on the refractions of the medieval through time, from the literary medieval to the current vogue for all things fantastically ‘meta-medieval’. The novel draws on both late medieval texts, notably the fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but also on more modern literary medievalism, such as that found in Tolkien. In the world of *The Buried Giant*, fantastic creatures such as dragons and giants are mentioned in passing, and the socio-historical coordinates are mapped upon

fantastic and mythical elements, that are nevertheless offered up to the reader with little explanation.

In these ways, *The Buried Giant* is then an “immersive fantasy”, a type of writing that “consciously negates the sense of wonder in favor of an atmosphere of ennui” (Mendlesohn 2013: 17). Nevertheless, there are limits to this immersion and the narrative voice, in particular, disturbs the immersive readerly relationship. Particularly in early sections of *The Buried Giant*, the voice reminds us of that of a retrospective chronicler, relating past times to his/her own present:

The people who lived nearby – one wonders what desperation led them to settle in such gloomy spots – might well have feared these creatures, whose panting breaths could be heard long before their deformed figures emerged from the mist. But such monsters were not cause for astonishment. People then would have regarded them as everyday hazards, and in those days there was so much else to worry about. (2015: 3)

Our attention is drawn to the temporal and cultural gap between this world and that of the narrator, and also, therefore, to his/her role as mediator of the story, and of the history it relates. Taking us back to the concerns with the past and reconstruction that lie at the heart of the neo/medievalisms debate, this strategy reminds us of the instability of narrative, time and history (see Borowska-Szerszun 2016: 39). Neomedieval fantasy like *The Buried Giant*, therefore, employs obviously fantastic modes, but also deals with a period in history which is subject to constant (and often fantastic) revision, providing a metanarrative reminder of the instability of history itself.

What is significant about this novel’s exploration of memory, trauma and history, however, is the way it links cultural and national memory to individual experience, the life course and generational identity, making ageing itself central to the exploration of time and history in the novel. The focus of *The Buried Giant* is the journey of the two old protagonists, Axl and Beatrice. Older characters play important roles in many of Ishiguro’s novels, often as those who bring to light collective pasts through individual recollection. For example, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) is narrated from the point of view of old artist Masuji Ono, who revises how his positioning at the side of a totalitarian regime after World War II fragments not only his promising career as an artist and the construction of a beautiful family, but also his perception of events and the choices he made, which were clearly influenced by ideological and political tenets. In *The Remains of the Day* (1989), it is the British butler Stevens who reflects on his decision to stay loyal to his boss, Lord Darlington, ignoring the affection he feels for one of his colleagues, Miss Kenton, as well as the relationships that Lord Darlington keeps with German sympathizers after World War II. According to Cynthia F. Wong, Ishiguro’s “main characters search [...] for compensation or consolation from a loss in their lives. Whether

the loss is a physical or an emotional one, the characters revisit the traumatic events surrounding their past as they move into an uncertain future” (2000: 2). Ishiguro states in an interview about *When We Were Orphans* (2000):

‘I’ve always been interested in memory, because it’s the filter through which we read our past. It’s always tinted – with self-deception, guilt, pride, nostalgia, whatever. I find memory endlessly fascinating, not so much from a neurological or philosophical viewpoint, but as this tool by which people tell themselves things about the lives they’ve led and about who they’ve become.’ (Drag 2014: 2)

As this quotation makes clear, in Ishiguro’s work memory is seen in the context of the life course and through the lens of ageing. Characters in their old age are required to make sense of their pasts at an individual and also at a collective level, since their individual experiences and choices are intricately related to collective ones. Masuji Ono and Stevens revise their life stories from the point of view of old age and, despite being able to point to and narrate their losses, they are critical neither about the choices they made nor their responsibility in relation to the world conflicts through which they lived. In the case of *The Buried Giant*, through their journey, Axl and Beatrice not only come to terms with their forgotten memories and their personal and collective pasts, but they also acknowledge their roles in the conflict and try to establish a desire for peace in the next generation. Unlike Ishiguro’s previous older protagonists, Axl and Beatrice intend to have a positive impact on the world they were part of creating, while accepting not only their own responsibility but also their mortality.

At first sight, this novel seems to construct a traditional temporal and generational chronometric narrative, one premised on the young as the promise of the future and the old as irrelevant. Andrew Lynch points out that recreations of the Middle Ages are very much tied to violence and war, investing in the association between war, heroism and masculinity (Lynch 2016: 136). In *The Buried Giant*, warrior Wistan best represents heroism, violence and masculinity, all of which are inherently tied to youth. Snatched by Britons from a Saxon village as a child and treated harshly by many, Wistan intends not only to seek his own revenge, but to murder she-dragon Querig, instituting remembering across the land and, with it, a collective Saxon desire for violence and retribution. The ageing bodies and redundancy associated with all three older characters – Gawain in his rusty armour riding an ageing horse; Axl and Beatrice living a marginalised life, discriminated against by other villagers – are juxtaposed with the youth and vigour represented by Wistan and, in turn, by the developing warrior, Edwin. Gawain, Axl and Beatrice represent the generation responsible for the horrors of the Saxon/Briton conflict. Edwin and Wistan are members of the next generation, those harmed by the violence instituted by their elders and in pursuit of a future that will, in their eyes, make redundant the previous generation and repair the harm it wrought. Nevertheless, in

fundamental ways, the novel upsets this temporal order and generational narrative.

Significantly, as the story of two old people and their journey to find their son, the novel displaces the quest narrative of the young warrior in favour of the arduous and repetitive journey of Axl and Beatrice. The physical and the psychological, space and time, are intimately linked in the use of the trope of the journey, which inevitably conjures up metaphorical associations with the life course and ageing. Axl and Beatrice struggle with physical impediment, and Beatrice, in particular, is afflicted with an unnamed illness about which both are concerned. They nevertheless display great perseverance and overcome obstacles – from supernatural beings to topographical challenges – but rarely through any great and dramatic feats. Instead, it is their devotion to each other and their partnership that see them through, symbolised by Beatrice repeatedly asking if Axl is behind her as they travel, and Axl repeatedly assuring her that he is. Sir Gawain, the ageing knight, is similarly experiencing the physical effects of age and, in his case, a long-itinerant lifestyle. In his old armour, astride his decrepit horse, Gawain risks becoming parodic, the image of an old man clinging to a past dream. As Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun points out, this “geriatric knight [...] contrasts sharply with the figure of the young and vigorous knight glistening in red armour from the original [*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*]” and also with the “virile Wistan” (Borowska-Szerszun 2016: 35). Nevertheless, like Axl and Beatrice, Gawain is a contradictory mix of frailty and strength. At one point, young Edwin fails and Gawain steps in to rescue Axl and Beatrice. We also become aware of Gawain’s acuity in battle and of Wistan’s potential weakness. The linear and climactic story of the heroic quest – and the binary youth/age that lies beneath this – is, therefore, displaced and undermined by Axl, Beatrice and Gawain’s repetitive and circular narratives based on endurance in the face of vulnerability.

If the novel interrogates the linear quest narrative through the repetitive journeys of Axl, Beatrice and Gawain, then the land through which they travel further prompts us to question the linear narrative of generational conflict and revenge, in which the future is the preserve of the young. The landscape is, as is common in fantasy, central to the novel’s representation of the individual and collective past. The fantastic landscape through which the characters travel is employed in a highly metaphorical way that implicitly links ageing bodies and the land through the secrets and experiences (the history) that they share. The Britain of this novel is, like its people, characterised by many suppressed and hidden stories and the dreamlike atmosphere of the novel accords with Lucy Armitt’s definition of “the literary fantastic” as a linguistic construct that expresses our inner as well as outer worlds: “Literature, more than any other aesthetic medium, reminds us that we understand, create and experience not only the world around us, but also the world of our dreams, desires and fears, in terms of the very language we learn to articulate. Fantasy fictions simply bring this to the fore” (1996: 18). The past emerges, sometimes cryptically, from its preservation in the land, echoing the moments of fragmented recall experienced

by the older characters, particularly Axl. The violence of the past cannot be entirely hidden in this novel and erupts in uncanny and disturbing ways. For example, the monastery in which the weary travellers find rest was a Saxon hill fort, something realised by Wistan, who recognises the bloody purposes of its gates and tower: to trap invaders in order to enable their slaughter. Nevertheless, the land may preserve these memories, but in this fantastic and estranging other world – as indeed in our own – what the remains of the past mean is uncertain and subject to interpretation. In the case of the monastery/fort, Wistan’s reading becomes a story of Saxon cruelty as a result of their own anticipation of a horrific death at the hands of the Britons:

‘They know the infants they circle in their arms will before long be bloodied toys kicked about these cobbles. [...] They’ve seen the enemy burn and cut, take turns to rape young girls even as they lie dying of their wounds. They know this is to come, and so must cherish the earlier days of the siege, when the enemy first pay the price for what they will later do.’ (Ishiguro 2015: 162)

Set against Axl’s different interpretation of the actions of these Saxon families – whom he reads as “‘good people who once took shelter here [and] would have kept alive their hopes to the end, and surely watched all suffering of friend and foe, with pity and horror’” (2015: 162) – Wistan’s story clearly becomes a very partial and subjective one, coloured by his own bloody experiences, as he admits. Competing visions of material evidence of conflict – whether this evidence is the landscape or the human body – are foregrounded throughout the novel. At one moment, for example, a bat in a tunnel is seen by Beatrice as a dead baby, a poignant reminder of her own lost child, whilst Axl sees only the bat. Beatrice’s later visions of dead babies beneath the surface of a pond provide further evidence of both personal and cultural trauma (2015: 310). In these ways, landscape and the bodies that traverse this become interpretable and unstable evidence of the past. Ageing bodies, like the palimpsestic landscape, offer material evidence of experience and of history, but we are constantly reminded of the dangers inherent in our attempts to interpret this evidence and to construct narratives of the past that are then used to shape the future.

The culmination of the journey is the end of Wistan’s quest, but the novel subverts the quest narrative’s linear and youthful heroism. It may be Wistan who emerges victorious to kill Querig in the end, but, like Axl, we are not sure that this is the right course of action. And the death of the dragon is, like other key, seemingly heroic moments in the text, underwhelming instead of climactic. Querig is not a fear-inducing monster, but an ageing prisoner, another example of an embodied and yet uncertain history: “it was hardly clear at first she was alive. Her posture – prone, head twisted to one side, limbs outspread – might easily have resulted from the corpse being hurled into the pit from a height. In fact, it took a moment to ascertain this was a dragon at all: she was so emaciated she looked more some worm-like reptile” (2015: 325). Slain as she sleeps,

Querig is hardly a match for warrior Wistan, and thus not in any sense a fitting end to his quest. Thus, the four old characters, including Querig, stand for the generation who helped to create the conflict and who have long lived with its traumatic and repressed effects. Unlike Wistan, they have enough experience to recognise the dangers of the past – even if, like Beatrice, they do want the mist to lift and to remember – and the necessity both to come to terms with it and try to ensure that it is not simply repeated by the next generation.

Nevertheless, the novel makes clear that the hope of the young as the promise of a brighter and better future is misplaced. As the youngest character, Edwin is the focus of Wistan's desire for a future of bloody retribution. Wistan adopts a paternal attitude towards the warrior-to-be, whom he sees as a successor, urging him: “There are Britons that tempt our respect, even our love, I know this only too well. But there are now greater things press on us than what each may feel for another. It was Britons took your mother and mine. We've a duty to hate every man, woman and child of their blood” (2015: 276). Axl attempts to shape Edwin's ideas differently, pleading with him before they part: “Master Edwin! We both beg this of you. In the days to come, remember us. Remember us and this friendship when you were still a boy” (2015: 344). But we sense that this will not happen and that Edwin, like Wistan, will only remember a particular story of the past. The future is then only one of violence and horror – it is a return to the past. The young – Wistan and Edwin – do not bring the promise of happiness and peace. Instead, they will return the country to bloodshed and conflict.

It is here that the novel engages with what Kaufman identifies as neomedievalism's central concern with trauma and loss. Building on, and to some extent critiquing, the influential Robinson and Clements version of neomedievalism, Kaufman traces these concerns back to the separation between medievalism and the medieval:

Neomedievalism finds a way of clinging to the past by rejecting the “history,” the alterity, the time and space that separated it from its desired object and bringing it into the present. But what initially appears to be medievalism's denial of history may, instead, be a desire for history alongside the uncomfortable suspicion that there is no such thing. Neomedievalism consumes the Middle Ages in fragmented, repetitive tropes as a way of ensuring against loss. And, as we shall see, in many of neomedievalism's manifestations, futurity is foreclosed, for the future leads only to the past. (2010: 3)

The Buried Giant foregrounds the tension between the desire for and the denial of history, as it self-reflexively reminds us of the “uncomfortable suspicion” that we cannot rely on any account of the past. At the same time, the novel undermines the narrative of generational succession, in which the young function as the promise of the future; instead, the future leads only to the past. Drawing on neomedievalism's concerns with trauma and loss and its insistence

on the fragmentary and repetitious nature of any reconstruction of the past, the novel simultaneously interrogates the narratives of history as progress, and the future (and the young) as brighter and better.

Life story and individual accommodation

Gawain, Wistan and Axl may debate the value of remembering past cultural trauma, but Beatrice and Axl's story also explores the role of remembering in identity formation at a micro level, drawing together individual and historical memory in its exploration of trauma and loss across the life course. The physical journey that Beatrice and Axl share is also a psychological one, in which they reflect on their life together, closely connecting their remembering with the national forgetting/remembering that provides the focus of the story. Just as the novel displaces Wistan's quest in favour of the arduous journey of Axl and Beatrice, so it foregrounds the realisation and psychological growth of older characters rather than the development, or *bildung*, of the young. An advocate of the need to remember, Beatrice explains: "Axl and I wish to have again the happy moments we shared together. To be robbed of them is as if a thief came in the night and took what's most precious from us" (2015: 171). As Axl and Beatrice draw closer to Querig's cave, bits and pieces of memories of their life together surface and bring with them sadness – as they must realise that their son is dead – and doubt. The doubt is related to the possibility that one of them, probably Beatrice, was unfaithful. As Axl reflects: "She had talked of a long night spent alone, tormented by his absence, but could it be he too had known such a night, or even several, of similar anguish? Then, as Beatrice stopped before the cairn and bowed her head to the stones as if in apology, he felt both memory and anger growing firmer, and a fear made him turn away from her" (2015: 308). Remembering their shared past means that Axl and Beatrice have to come to terms not only with the loss of their son, but also with the deceptions and little losses of a long life together. In the same way as Ishiguro's older protagonists in his previous novels, Axl and Beatrice in *The Buried Giant* try to construct a past which, as Wojciech Drag argues, quoting anthropologist Henrietta L. Moore, "is never "just about the past" but rather about what makes the present able to live in itself" (2014: 2). Thus, it is precisely in their last stage of life that the couple need to make sense of their individual trajectories as well as their life together and, by extension, of the legacy that they may leave to future generations.

At the end of the novel Beatrice and Axl meet again the boatman (who may be the narrator of the novel) whom they encountered near the beginning of their journey. At that point, he told them of the island to which people cross to live in solitude. This boatman explains that only

'[o]ccasionally a couple may be permitted to cross to the island together, but this is rare. It requires an unusually strong bond of love between them. It does sometimes occur, I don't deny, and that's why when we find a man and wife, or even unmarried lovers, waiting to be carried

over, it's our duty to question them carefully. For it falls to us to perceive if their bond is strong enough to cross together.' (2015: 45)

Facing the boatman again, Beatrice and Axl must recall and retell the darkest moments of their life together, namely Beatrice's infidelity and the death of their son after their estrangement from him. Finally, Beatrice is the first one taken to the island while Axl stays behind. These characters make peace with their life together and are ready to go on (even to death) without regrets: "Tell me, princess,' I hear him say. 'Are you glad of the mist's fading?' 'It may bring horrors to this land. Yet for us it fades just in time.'" Their shared, familial traumas and vulnerabilities are part of the fabric of their lives and can be accommodated and not avenged. As Axl explains, "God will know the slow tread of an old couple's love for each other, and understand how black shadows make part of its whole" (2015: 358). This vision of the past and the life course is premised on accommodation and partiality. Implicitly, it rejects the association of old age and an idealised wisdom, reminding us of Woodward's warning about this link:

It is time to declare a moratorium on wisdom. I do not mean that we would not be correct to describe certain people as wise or certain actions as wise. What I mean is that we should not resort to wisdom in theorizing or imagining a social role for older people in general. Wisdom should not be advocated as an emotional (or unemotional) standard or ideal. ... The notion of wisdom as a developmental capacity that ideally characterizes old age interferes with the crucial work that needs to be done to reclaim these years as meaningful in the broadest sense. (2003: 63)

Just as the novel interrogates the association of youth with progress and futurity, so it here undermines the idealisation of wisdom in old age. Axl and Beatrice's particular 'wisdom' emerges as they come to terms with their past and face their future without regrets. For William L. Randall and Gary M. Kenyon, "an avenue to wisdom" is precisely the ability to interpret, re-interpret and "entertain alternative interpretations" to one's own life story (2004: 337); an avenue that, according to these gerontologists, may lead to an acceptance of mortality. In this respect, one can conclude by arguing that Axl and Beatrice's quest and the recovery of their memories allows them a form of "harmonious ageing", a term introduced by Liang and Luo and which, in their words, "stresses the complementary coexistence of body and mind, harmonious family and social relationships, and a balanced outlook that appreciates both opportunities and challenges in old age" (2012: 33). Axl and Beatrice's journey through land and history as well as their interpretation and reinterpretations of their own life stories as well as their collective history allows them a kaleidoscopic, yet ultimately fragmented, vision of their lives and their cultural and national history. Thus, in *The Buried Giant*, as in other novels, Ishiguro highlights the

reiterative nature of humanity's mistakes, both at a personal and at a historical level, which, as the novel shows, are intimately interrelated. No matter how far Axl and Beatrice may encourage our empathy and understanding, we cannot escape knowing they were part of a generation who promoted hatred and war instead of friendship and understanding. In this text, it is the older characters who make peace with their particular individual stories and collective history, in order to face their final years. But this is not an idealised vision of wisdom and positivity; rather, it is an acceptance of complicity and guilt.

Conclusion

The Buried Giant utilises fantasy to explore issues found in much of Ishiguro's work: memory, loss and responsibility. How to deal with the "black shadows [that] make part of [the] whole" is the question that this text persistently explores, both at the level of national history and the individual lifecourse. And it finds no easy answers. Beatrice's commitment to remember is shadowed by Axl's doubt about this process. Gawain's wilful forgetting proves no more effective (or ethical) than Wistan's desire for bloody remembering. Taking as its centrepiece the long physical and psychological journey of two old and increasingly frail protagonists, the novel exploits the temporal and spatial instability of the neomedieval fantastic to interrogate generational succession and the chronometric and future-orientated model of time that privileges the young and makes redundant the old. This model is part of the narrative of human progress and history that the novel finds wanting. The determination and fortitude of the two older characters challenge stereotypes related to passivity in old age, on the one hand, but also underscore the fact that ageing involves the biological deterioration of the body. In the novel, Axl and Beatrice are part and parcel of history and historiography, even more so because they have been active exponents of the construction of a shared cultural past. Thus, as stated in the introduction, vulnerability and doubt become valuable features of the life course, especially when trauma and loss are so central to the lives lived. The questions of remembering and forgetting that this novel prioritises – in which questions of justice and revenge are central – are then refracted through a story of accommodation, resilience and partiality. Axl and Beatrice's initial quest becomes an impossible desire to save the next generation from repeating the mistakes that they made, but it is also an individual and couple's journey to come to terms with their past and, thus, present and future life stories, a key step in accepting their own mortality.

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