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## **THE SELECTIVE NARRATOR: CONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD***

### **1. Introduction**

This paper deals with the first-person narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*. As Masuji Ono, a former painter, looks back on his life, it becomes apparent that certain episodes from his past had harmful consequences – indeed, his nationalism seems to have contributed to the horrors of the Second World War. I will analyze the ways in which Ono both discloses and hides these parts of his life story and how he comes to terms with the fact that he has lost the status that he held in the pre-war society. As in his other novels, Ishiguro lets his narrator tell a painful story, which makes him hesitate between revealing and concealing the significance of his past.

First I will outline what I consider the three main aspects of the manner in which Ono narrates his story: that is his frequent digressions, his indirectness and his metanarrative comments. These features provide the reader with clues about how to read the narrative in that they show Ono as an unreliable or, more specifically, selective narrator whose aim is to tell his story and at the same time evade some of its parts. The analysis of Ono's attitude to his past will examine the narrator's motives for this strategy. It will demonstrate that apart from two forces steering Ono's remembering – his nostalgia and his fear of the past's impact on the present happiness of his family – there exists another reason for the character's plunging into memory: his attempt at self-justification. In the end, Ono manages to convince himself that the mistakes he committed in the past were inevitable and that accepting these mistakes justifies his past behaviour. However, I argue that the effect of this wish for self-justification amounts to the narrator's avoidance of the pieces of his story that would provoke his feelings of guilt and regret. While the painter successfully deceives himself in order to achieve self-satisfaction and contentment regarding his past and present life, the reader can discover the narrator's silences that betray Ono's confession as incomplete. Therefore, the determination of the stimulus of Ono's remembering as his struggle for self-justification leads us back to the narrative technique of the text, to the selective narrator.

## 2. Specific Features of the Narrator's Account

### Digressions

“It is perhaps a sign of my advancing years that I have taken to wandering into rooms for no purpose,” says Ono, drawing attention to his lack of concentration (40). This roaming through the house, seemingly aimless, has a parallel in Ono’s manner of narration: he is drifting through various stories without obvious intent, digressing from one topic to another in no apparent order. Ono’s account of the events present or recent at the time of the narration (more precisely, at the four different times) is thus often interrupted by excursions into his past. Digressions in a narrative are often connected with what Monika Fludernik, drawing on Tamar Yacobi’s ideas, labels “exegetical deflection”, which involves the narrator’s providing “excessive information about marginal issues and insufficient treatment of what the reader constructs as crucial topics” (Fludernik 1999: 76). In this way, the reader of *An Artist* gradually starts to notice that Ono withholds some facts and feelings concerning the negative aspects of his past, while he often digresses to stories which present his past in a favourable light. For example, he digresses to the story of his revolt against his father, speaking at length about his ability to make decisions opposing authority’s opinion, instead of reporting a recent conversation with his daughter which contains implications of his guilt: “However, I see I am drifting. My intention had been to record here that conversation I had with Setsuko last month” (48). On the other hand, some of the deflections betray just what Ono tries to hide in other cases, such as the consequences of his denunciation of Kuroda (see 181–84). What leads the narrator to these kinds of digressions? Is it a compulsion to speak about, or avoid, certain topics? An analysis of the character’s attitude to his past will show that these two types of motivation do not exclude each other. On the contrary, both aspects are present in Ono’s narration.

Ono’s “struggle both to reveal and to veil meaning” (Wong 1995: 130), manifested particularly by his perpetual deviation and drifting from not yet concluded topics, undermines Ono’s authority as a narrator: it signals to the reader that the narrator’s account of the narrated events and of their implications is probably distorted. In other words, Ono’s deflections arouse suspicions that the novel features an unreliable narrator. Furthermore, Gaby Allrath argues that digressions in unreliable narration also draw attention to the narrators’ passion for themselves: the narration centres upon them and their own experience and views (1998: 66). Thus, even when they speak about the other characters, they really give information about themselves, often in the form of projecting their own characteristics or states of mind (Allrath 1998: 66). As will be shown later, self-projection is an important feature of Ono’s narrative: his frequent asides about other people, seemingly unrelated to the main topic, gain their meaning as demonstrations of Ono’s own actions, feelings, opinions and self-assessment.

### **Indirectness and incompleteness**

The way the characters, especially Ono himself and the members of his family, communicate with each other reflects another characteristic of Ono's account. Their conversations are mostly full of insinuations instead of direct imparting of the message. For example, when Ono's elder daughter Setsuko bids her father to ensure that the mistakes he made in the past do not interfere with her sister Noriko's marriage negotiations, she does so in oblique hints: "I merely wished to say that it is perhaps wise if Father would take certain precautionary steps. To ensure misunderstandings do not arise. After all, Noriko is almost twenty-six now. We cannot afford many more disappointments such as last year's" (49). Conversations such as this one contain many unspoken messages – gaps that the addressed characters fill in. These gaps leave much space for one's own interpretation of the utterance's meaning – Ono is not always sure what other people's speeches mean. He comments on his confusion, for example, as follows: "Indeed, it is possible I misinterpreted entirely what she actually said" (158). More often than not, these gaps stem from the speakers' avoidance of unpleasant topics and statements that might lead to conflict.

By its indirectness, Ono's narrative strategy resembles these conversations. He approaches many topics, but stops before going into detail about certain parts of his past. Importantly, he keeps mentioning some mistakes that he made in the past, yet never really reports any specific deeds. Ono's evading a description of his actions that shed a negative light on his past is expressed in the most obvious way in his comment on his treatment of a former colleague: "Certainly, what we did to Sasaki following his dispute with our teacher was quite unwarranted, and there seems little to be gained in my recalling such things here" (142). However, frequently Ono disguises these uncommunicated parts of his story more effectively – he does not directly warn the narratee about the gaps in the narration. Nevertheless, the reader notices the absence of some information and feelings. Like the characters in the case of the evasive conversations, the reader gets an opportunity to fill in these gaps in the way he or she understands the message of the narration. When the reader detects the meanings hidden in the narrative's absences, he or she gets a version of the story different from the one Ono tries to present. In my interpretation of Ono's viewpoint as regards his past, I will show that what motivates the indirectness and incompleteness of the narration is the narrator's avoidance of those parts of the past that would arouse his regrets.

### **Metanarrative comments**

The third feature that reflects Ono's way of narrating is his scepticism concerning the correctness of his account and the reliability of his memory, expressed both directly and indirectly. Once he airs such doubts in the following comment: "These, of course, may not have been the precise words I used that afternoon at

the Tamagawa temple; for I have had cause to recount this particular scene many times before, and it is inevitable that with repeated telling, such accounts begin to take on a life of their own” (72). This assumption can be applied to more instances than just this particular one as Ono often admits returning to an event or statement and reassessing its implications, for example, “as I pondered over the whole business during the days which followed, a new idea struck me” or “I am obliged to think back yet again to that encounter [...], to turn it over from yet another perspective” (54). Under these circumstances, the narrator’s acknowledgement that accounts that are dealt with repeatedly might not be entirely accurate – that they might ‘take on a life of their own’ – leads the reader to distrust some parts of the narrative. It is by these metanarrative comments that the text “self-consciously raise[s] the question of the narrator’s unreliability”, as Nünning (1997: 98) says generally about works employing unreliable narration. In other words, the narrator himself provides the reader with a clue about how to read his tale in that he displays himself as not a fully trustworthy narrator.

Another clue of this kind, though somewhat less apparent, can be detected in Ono’s opinion of a self-portrait as a necessarily subjective painting: “I cannot recall any colleague who could paint a self-portrait with absolute honesty; however accurately one may fill in the surface details of one’s mirror reflection, the personality represented rarely comes near the truth as others would see it” (67). Ono’s account mostly deals with the narrator himself; it revolves around his own person. Consequently, the narrative as a whole amounts to a kind of self-portrait. Bearing this in mind, one can interpret Ono’s observation about self-portraits as another of his metanarrative reflections that help the reader discover the subjectivity of the narrated tale.

As Allrath (1998: 68) points out, remembering does not correspond to “eine Rekonstruktion des vergangenen Geschehens,” [a reconstruction of past events], but to “eine aktive, durch die momentane Umstände geprägte Vergangenheitsskonstruktion” [an active construction of the past, affected by the present circumstances] (my translation). Therefore, the metanarrative comments provide information about the narrator’s viewpoint at the time of the narration and not at the time of the action (Allrath 1998: 68). This presupposition applies to Ono as well: his account of the past is distorted by his present state of mind.<sup>1</sup> As he says still in connection with his reflection on self-portraits, “each of us, it seems, has his own special conceits” that twist our own view of ourselves (Allrath 1998: 67). What are Ono’s present conceits that deform his picture of himself and of his own past? This is another question that I intend to answer in my analysis of the character and his standpoint further on.

The three features of Ono’s narration discussed above are interrelated. His frequent digressions facilitate his avoiding certain pieces of information and thus contribute to the indirectness and incompleteness of his discourse. And omitting parts of the story leads to a distortion of the account, to which the metanarrative comments draw attention. The combination of these features enhances the

implication of narratorial unreliability, already present in the individual aspects. To specify the narrator's category more closely, one could use David Hidgon's term "the *reluctant narrator* [...], who is often quite learned and perceptive, but who has seen, experienced or caused something so traumatic that he must approach the telling of it through indirections, masks and substitutions" (qtd. in Petry 1999). Ono talks around certain facts, implies them, but does not speak about them directly. The narrator of *An Artist* can also be labelled a 'selective narrator' because he – be it consciously or unconsciously – chooses to convey some parts of the 'whole truth' and to withhold others. An analysis of Ono's emotions and viewpoints in relation to his past will reveal the source of his selections – his silences on the one hand, and the instances of garrulousness on the other hand. It will demonstrate that the narrator's selectivity stems from his attempt to avoid the topics and memories that threaten to give rise to his regrets and sense of guilt and thus endanger the success of his struggle for self-justification.

### 3. Ono's Attitude to His Past

#### Nostalgia and fear

Examining Ono's attitude to the pre-war era, one discovers a struggle between two opposing forces: his nostalgia and his awareness of his own mistakes. Ono enjoys remembering the high social status he held in the pre-war era. This predilection is symbolized by Ono's relationship to his former pupil, Shintaro. He likes meeting Shintaro because

There is something reassuring about [...] finding Shintaro sitting up there at the bar, just as one may have found him on any evening for the past seventeen or so years, [...]. It really is as though nothing has changed for Shintaro. He will greet me very politely, as though he were still my pupil, and throughout the evening, however drunk he may get, he will continue to address me as 'Sensei' and maintain his most respectful manner towards me. (21–22)<sup>2</sup>

Ono admits that "it is probably this very quality of Shintaro's – this sense that he has remained somehow unscathed by things – which has led me to enjoy his company more and more over these recent years" (23). In the environment hostile to the patriotic sentiments of the pre-war period and to their former proponents, Shintaro's persevering respect provides Ono with a feeling of importance that he otherwise misses. Ono's longing for the times when he occupied a high position in society is further reflected in his nostalgia for the pleasure district in which he spent a great amount of time in the 'old days' and which therefore represents the era in Ono's mind. He keeps returning to Mrs Kawakami's bar, which has remained in the area as the last element of what once used to be the pleasure dis-

strict and which can be considered an oasis of the old times in a desert of modern development and thinking hostile to Ono's pre-war doings: "for all the changes which have transformed the world around it, Mrs Kawakami's remains as pleasing as ever" (26). When Ono looks over the rubble surrounding this last bar, sees "two columns of smoke rising from the rubble," becomes lost "in a melancholy mood" and views the columns "like pyres at some abandoned funeral," he is actually mourning over his lost position (27–28).

An analogical situation appears in Ono's position within his family. We get to know through his daughter Noriko that earlier her father was "a tyrant and ordered [his family] all around" (13). At the time of the narration, his place in the family is, by contrast, rather subordinate. Noriko shows her disrespect in impertinent statements such as "he does take a lot more looking after, moping around the house all day" (13). More importantly, the daughters enforce their will in two family disputes: in the first one, their suggestion of a trip to the deer park wins over their father's plan to go to the cinema, and in the other one, the daughters prevent Ono from serving sake to his grandson Ichiro. Ono shows his disapproval with the current state of affairs by remarks aimed to play down the importance of these events, such as "There is nothing to get upset about. [...] We can't have the women ruling over us, can we?" (39). Ono's reluctance to admit the change in the division of authority in his family is another sign of his yearning for the old times. He misses his important position in society, and he similarly misses his role as the patriarchal head of the family.

In addition, the nostalgic stream in Ono's narrative manifests itself in his dislike of modern developments, and especially importation from the USA. His aversion becomes obvious in Ono's reaction to his grandson playing cowboys: "It's more interesting, more interesting by far, to pretend to be someone like Lord Yoshitsune" (30). This revival of Ono's patriotic feelings contrasts with Setsuko's husband Suichi's opinion: "Suichi thinks the American heroes are the better models for children now" (36). As a similar clash of Ono's and Suichi's opinions occurs more often, Suichi becomes a representation of modern thinking and of Americanization, of the "younger generation" with its "bitterness for [their] elders" (59). Therefore, when Ono voices his "sense of irritation [...] directed [...] against her [Setsuko's] husband," he expresses his antipathy not only to Suichi, but to the whole generation of young people who are critical towards Ono's generation and their convictions that have proved wrong (50).

The opposite force that guides Ono's perspective in regard to his past and that determines his selectivity as a narrator grows out of his present fear of the repercussions his past deeds might have on his younger daughter Noriko's marriage negotiations. This stimulus leads him to ponder over the negative aspects of his personal history. At the first point in his narration (October, 1948), Ono seems to be reluctant to acknowledge the danger springing from his past and from the mistakes he once made. As Setsuko, his elder (and already married) daughter, insinuates that Ono might have an idea about the reason for the failure of Noriko's previous marriage negotiations, the father senses an accusation in this implica-

tion and defends himself: "My own guess is that there was nothing so remarkable about the matter" (18). Instead of examining the connection of the family's motives to his past, he argues "that it was simply a matter of family status. The Miyakes, [...], were just the proud, honest sort who would feel uncomfortable at the thought of their son marrying above his station" (19). Ono combines his nostalgia for his lost reputation with his avoidance of facing the bad consequences of his past. In the same context, he reports a recent incident proving Shintaro's belief that "'a recommendation from a man of Sensei's standing will command respect from anyone,'" which "reminds me of the rather high esteem in which I am held" (19). This incident serves as a means to hide Ono's situation as a fallen hero (note the present tense in "in which I *am* held") and at the same time supports his view of his respectable position as the explanation for the Miyakes' withdrawal from the marriage arrangements. The way he clings to his pre-war reputation is illustrated by Ono's remark that "Shintaro likes to believe he is still the idealistic young artist I first took under my supervision": he expresses his own longing for his lost status by projecting the nostalgia onto his pupil (22).

At the later points of his report, Ono seems to become aware of the existence of the problematic parts of his past; the stories attesting to his good social status are substituted by incidents indicating the negative elements of his former life. His stance changes from refusing responsibility for his wrongdoings to ostentatiously admitting to his mistakes:

There are some who would say it is people like myself who were responsible for the terrible things that happened to this nation of ours. As far as I am concerned, I freely admit I made many mistakes. I accept that much of what I did was ultimately harmful to our nation, that mine was part of an influence that resulted in untold suffering for our own people. I admit this. You see, Dr Saito, I admit this quite readily. (123)

This shift in Ono's point of view is reflected in the modification of his approach to the pleasure district: "Of course, the old district had been fine. We had all enjoyed ourselves and the spirit [...] had never been less than sincere. But then perhaps that same spirit had not always been for the best. Like many things now, it is perhaps as well that that little world has passed away and will not be returning" (126–27). Compared to his earlier melancholic view of the area that used to be the pleasure district as a graveyard, these lines emphasize the artist's move from nostalgic yearning for the old days to accepting the modern period with its repudiation of pre-war sentiments.

### **Absences in the narrative**

Yet, for all his boasting about the acceptance of his mistakes, Ono fails to provide a direct account of those faults; nor does he show any regret or feeling of guilt.

This absence becomes particularly visible in Ono's recounting of the incident that resulted from his reporting of his former pupil Kuroda's 'unpatriotic activities' to the authorities. Seeing the harsh consequences of his action, he defends himself: "I had no idea", I said, "something like this would happen" (183). Yet, as Wong (2000: 46) notices, Ono "shows no remorse for what happened to Kuroda," which is further demonstrated by his lack of compassion when recording Kuroda's shabbiness on a different occasion (after the war, when he meets him in the street). Moreover, we learn about Ono's act of betrayal only indirectly – through his direct speech to one of the officers – and he refuses to remain in the dangerous area of these memories for a long time: "But this is all of limited relevance here" (184). Ono's attitude to Kuroda can be seen as a good example of the narrator's treatment of his mistakes: he talks more around them than about them. By carefully selecting the memories to be recalled, he manages to escape his sense of guilt and remorse, and simultaneously fails to really acknowledge his mistakes to himself.

In addition, he keeps excusing his mistakes by relativizing them. He sees his situation as similar to that of "the Hirayama boy," a local fool who is beaten for singing the same patriotic songs that brought him popularity before the war (61). Ono, too, is being criticised for the same things for which he was once admired. He justifies his deeds by having "acted in good faith" (123). This kind of defence is another sign of Ono's avoidance of the actual acceptance of the wrongfulness of his pre-war actions.

What is more, he actually praises his ability to make decisions, to go against the stream, notwithstanding the consequences these decisions brought about (cf. Wong 2000: 41–2). Digressions to other people's fates betray Ono's positive assessment of his own achievements:

whenever I find myself wandering around Kawabe Park these days, I start to think of Sugimura and his schemes, and I confess I am beginning to feel a certain admiration for the man. For indeed, a man who aspires to rise above the mediocre, to be something more than ordinary, surely deserves admiration, even if in the end he fails and loses a fortune on account of his ambitions. (134)

Ono speaks highly of the likes of him who had big plans and attempted to do something exceptional, even though their efforts turned out wrong, and denounces the 'Tortoises' who never had the courage to step out of line. In this way, he tries to justify his behaviour in the pre-war period.

Another feature of the painter's account appears as a particularly striking one: the absence of a manifest grief for his wife and son lost in the war. According to Wong (2000: 49), "[t]oo much explicit grievance over their deaths may begin a process of self-blame and regret that may be more than Ono can bear – after all, he supported sending young men like his own son to fight for Japan, and he remains proud of the Sugimura house in which Michiko was located when the freak

bombing killed her". This implies that Ono tries to evade regrets about his past actions and all the above-mentioned attempts to excuse his conduct thus amount to an effort to justify his actions in the face of his own accusations. To be able to accomplish this self-justification, he constructs a version of his past that presents him as a man doing the best under the given circumstances. The consistency of this version would be jeopardized if Ono really acknowledged his mistakes to himself. Yet the same wish for self-justification forces him to recall some events that hint at his wrongdoings. Both the need to tell and the necessity to avoid some parts of the truth lead to the digressions and indirectness in the account: Ono runs to and from certain recollections in an attempt to render an acceptable picture of himself and his past. This wish forces him to omit some parts of the story and thus makes him a selective narrator.

Furthermore, Ono wants to find some compensation for his present insignificance succeeding the loss of his former position. He does so by looking back to his past and reminiscing about his achievements (such as receiving the Shigeta Foundation Award) that had resulted in "a moment or two of real satisfaction" (204). Again, he has to repress the knowledge of the consequences of such achievements so that regrets do not mar the pleasure these memories yield. In this way, he feeds his 'conceits' about whose distorting effect on the self-portrait Ono warned us in the aforementioned metanarrative comment. In the end, Ono succeeds in creating a picture of his life with which he can be satisfied because it shows an admirable person who made use of all the opportunities he was offered.

#### 4. Conclusion

Ono's manner of narrating, characterized mainly by his digressions to different topics, his indirect way of conveying a message and his metanarrative comments that hint at his narratorial unreliability, reveal him as a selective narrator who does not say everything but chooses what to tell and what to withhold. This quality of Ono as a narrator originates in his wish for self-justification, provoked by his present situation, especially his being considered a traitor, and his lack of patriarchal power in the family. More specifically, his desire to plunge into his past and to vindicate his own life is led by his fear of the repercussions of his past on his daughter's happiness and by his nostalgia for the pre-war years in which he was held in high esteem. Consequently, Ono constructs his past in order to create a positive picture of himself. By selecting only the suitable parts of his story, he deceives himself into believing that he lived a good life and does not let feelings of guilt and regret arise. In other words, the narrative technique of the selective narrator results in Ono's composing a self-portrait that reflects his illusions more than the way other people see him.

## Notes

- 1 In fact, the ‘present’ of Ono’s narration corresponds to four moments, as if diary notes. Consequently, four different points of view are presented, which vary in regard to the narrator’s attitude to his past. Ishiguro says about this feature of his novel that the strength of a “diary narrative is that each entry can be written from a different emotional position. What [Ono] writes in October 1948 is actually written out of a different set of assumptions than the pieces that are written later on ... so we can actually watch his progress” (qtd. in Wong 2000: 38).
- 2 *Sensei* is a Japanese word used to address a teacher; in the novel it applies specifically to a senior painter leading a group of younger artists who admire him and imitate his style.

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