

Reflections and Echoes: Ono's Life in the Floating World

Part I—Reflections

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Abstract

Masuji Ono, retired artist, recalls his life during the narration of Kazuo Ishiguro's second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*. It is a life of artistic development which leads him to the height of political power as a propagandist artist during the 1920s' social malaise, through the rise of right-wing militarism during the 1930s and finally as a wartime artist of the 1940s. Now that the war is over, Ono's elder married daughter, Setsuko, suggests that he take "certain precautionary steps" to protect the marriage prospects of his younger unmarried daughter, Noriko. Ono comes to realize that in certain contexts, his past may be seen as a liability. During Noriko's omiai dinner, Ono publicly acknowledges his past and apologizes for the suffering he may have caused. Yet, a year later, Setsuko denies ever making any suggestion to him and questions Ono's inflated opinion of his influence. Clearly, there is a discrepancy here and the reader only has Ono's narrative to depend on. Ono's life is related in retrospection, delivered in four installments between October, 1948 and June, 1949. An analysis of Ono's narrative can be broken into two general areas—reflections and echoes. This paper will be written in two installments. The present one presents the idea of "reflections" in looking at Ono as a reliable narrator. There are problems of Ono's nonlinear style, his memory and, more centrally, how he views himself. The subtext of this paper presents three different meanings of "reflection"—the mirror of seeing what is there, the thoughtful recollection of what may have happened, and the more opaque innuendoes of unwanted distortions. The second installment of this paper will take up the "echoes" within the novel.

Introduction

Masuji Ono, the protagonist and narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, is a man caught between two worlds. Now retired, he spends much of his time reflecting on the paths of his past. To insure the successful marriage of his re-

maintaining unmarried daughter, Ono reluctantly comes to terms with his role as a propagandist artist during the rise of Japanese militarism. Ono's life is revealed gradually and nonsequentially, unfolding with flashbacks and flashforwards. Superficially, the plot is revealed through the ramblings of a retired artist with nothing better to do than to reminisce on his glory days, but there is much more subtlety and gravity to this.

Ishiguro's style has been described as minimalist, a style that Malcolm Bradbury says, "forces us to read exactly, aesthetically, as few modern British writers do. The story hides behind itself, forcing the reader persistently to unlock it, since the strange distances of politeness, respect, deference and reserve...allow little to be said but much to be implied."¹

Ishiguro himself said, "If I borrow from any tradition, it's probably from that tradition that tries to avoid anything that is overtly melodramatic or plotty, that tries basically to remain within the realms of everyday experience."² "I try to put in as little plot as possible,"³

In a text where the details of everyday conversations and observations are dense, the reader must work hard to put together the pieces of a life's story. Yet, what he has to work with are mostly innuendoes, nuances, gradual revelations, uncertainties and ironies.

The fact that the plot is minimal in no way means that little happens. In fact through the novel we are given a complete biographical tour of the artist's life, beginning from age twelve right up to the present moment (April, 1950). The story, told in four unequal-length sections from October, 1948 to April, 1950, is a series of what Ishiguro calls "narrative diaries,"⁴ unconnected monologues, as if told to a old friend.

The story, like Ono's monologues, unfolds leisurely, never revealing more than necessary until enough information is given to reveal that the novel itself has moved on to a deeper level. For example, the basic conflict of the first section (October, 1948) is, ostensibly, his younger daughter, Noriko's, upcoming omiai, and certain "precautionary steps" his elder daughter, Setsuko, implies he should undertake to hide "the past."

The climax of the shorter second section (April, 1949) is the omiai itself and Ono's confession of his past association with the rise of right-wing militarism. The reader is left hanging over the effect of Ono's confession and whether the match, which was the driving concern of everyone in the first two sections, was successful.

Yet, seven months later, at the beginning of the third section, (November, 1949), instead

of telling us directly, Ono off-handedly mentions that Setsuko's yearly visit was brief because "she spent it staying at Noriko and Taro's new home..." (p. 132) To refer to the resolution of Ono's major preoccupation in the first half of his narrative in so casual a way is a striking understatement, to say the least. Yet it is typical of Ishiguro's style and Ono's sense of revelation to constantly shift the figure/ground relationship of the importance of events.

With the major plot conflict resolved, Ishiguro and Ono move on to the real subject of the novel—Ono himself. The "past" alluded to is chronicled in the narrative of the third section and here we begin to see Ono as an "artist of the floating world." The difficulty of understanding Ono is compounded by the reliability of the only source of information. The events of Ono's past are recounted on four different occasions, driven by different motivations. The picture that emerges of Ono is a self portrait, painted at different times.

Hence, the novel is both a self-portrait and a retrospective of an artist's career. The canvas of Ono's life is broad, the historical contexts he lived in changing, just as his painting style changes through his artistic development. Furthermore, Ono's relationship and attitude toward the main events of his life changes throughout his narrative.

This paper will be presented in two installments. The present paper will analyze the concept of reflection—how Ono views himself and the problems that presents to the reader. This takes the form of the non-linearity of his narration, the reliability of his memory, and the more fundamental question of Ono's evaluation of his life.

The second installment will focus on the echoes found in the narrative—the repetitions, parallels, consonances and dissonances. Both reflections and echoes are secondary effects, deflecting or replaying the actual events of Ono's life. To use this kind of indirection is a deliberate decision by the author to create the kind of ambiguous or unreliable insight which we must accept as Ono's view of himself as an "artist of the floating world." The portrait Ono paints of himself through his monologues is a kind of montage of various techniques, forms, colorings, shadowings and perspectives. The reader then is free to decide for himself where the truth lies.

Narrative structure

To call Ono's narration a monologue would be overstating the audience; yet it is neither

a soliloquy rendered to himself. Ishiguro has referred to his technique where each of the four sections is “ostensibly written in a sitting or whatever at the point when the date is given....” At the same time, he justifies the vocalization of Ono’s drifting, “but people do tend to talk like this...”⁵

The narration assumes a listener, one who may be familiar with some of the events and places in the story, but not a reader. Ono is not writing for posterity to judge him. The style is too conversational in tone and too nonlinear for comprehension to be intentional. It seems more in the line of ruminations, extended interior monologues.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that both the first long section and the last section revolve around his old friend Matsuda. The first section (October, 1948) is recounted the day after he visits Matsuda at his home in Arakawa after not seeing him for three years, since the end of the war. The last section (June, 1950) is recounted the day after Ono hears of Matsuda’s death. One can only speculate whether these two incidents were the spur to release Ono’s narrative process, or even, that Matsuda or someone like him is the projected listener of his monologues.

Motivation aside, the reader is left with the corpus of Ono’s recollections to reveal his purpose. In the first three sections, Noriko’s omiai appears to be the ostensive thread that Ono keeps coming back to. In the first section, he comes back to the conversation he had with Setsuko at his home before the omiai about his need to take “precautionary steps.” In the second section, the narrative builds up to the actual scene of the omiai. And in the third section, Ono is agitated about another conversation with Setsuko in Kawabe Park, in which she denies making any suggestion to Ono and questions whether Ono and Dr. Saito even knew each other before the omiai. These three sections and the short fourth coda (June, 1950) form the basic structure of the narrative.

Stylistically, Ono’s reflection has three aspects. First and most concretely, is Ono’s habit of recounting the events of his past and weaving them into the events of his present (conversations with Mrs. Kawakami, walks into the city, etc.). As the narration flows, the listener receives the basic details of Ono’s life as an artist.

Yet, second, around this basic narrative, there are several details which Ono keeps coming back to in order to clarify his own recollection of events. The narrative in the first and third sections revolve around the two conversations with Setsuko, before and after Noriko’s omiai, and it seems that all the other stories he relates are merely digressions. It

is as if the digressions gives him the chance to rearrange the context of his “past” as well as his subsequent response to it.

The third aspect of Ono's reflection is a more passive or intransitive one, that of seeing what is being reflected. That is, instead of Ono simply looking back and mulling over his past in his own terms, when he looks back, his past reflects itself in some unexpected or unpleasant ways. Ono is subsequently forced to transform this reflection in ways that will conform to his own self-concept.

These three aspects of Ono's narration—direct description of past or present events, recall and consideration of specific actions and conversations, and the intrusion of unsummoned realizations—represent three aspects of reflection. And as a thing reflected is not the real thing itself, the reader is forced to constantly realign himself within the narrative structure to find the source of the reflection—Ono himself.

Nonlinearity of plot

To say that Ono meanders in his narrative is an wild understatement. In the 90 pages of the first section (October, 1948) there are more than 20 different scene changes, zigzagging between the time of the telling and somewhere in the past. Ono is usually scrupulous in telling his listener when and where the events he is describing took place even as he changes the scene of his memory. The following chart summarizes the topics Ono talks about and time of their occurrence:

Events in “October, 1948”

<u>Pages</u>	<u>Topics</u>	<u>Time</u>
7-12	Buying Sugimura house	1933
13-19	Conversation with Setsuko	last month
	Conversation with Ichiro	
20	Shinaro's visit	1935 or 36
21-29	At Mrs. Kawakami's:	the other night
	Shintaro	one night recently
	Migi-Hidari	late 1930's
28-40	Setsuko's visit:	last month

	Conv. about Noriko's omiai	
	Ichiro-Lone Ranger	
	Making plans	
40-48	Reception room	second day of Setsuko's visit
	"Business meeting" w/ father	age 12-15
	Father burns paintings	
48-50	Conv. with Sestuko:	second day of
	Need for "precautionary steps"	Setsuko's visit
50-53	Going to Arakawa	yesterday
53-56	Conversation with Jiro Miyake	over a year ago
56-59	Conversation with Suichi	two years ago last month
59-61	At Mrs. Kawakami's:	the other night
	Hirayama boy	
61-	Going to Arakawa	yesterday
63-65	Establishing the Migi-Hidari	1933 or 1934
65-72	First coming to the city:	1913
	Working at Takeda's studio	
	The Tortoise	
	Leaving Takeda's studio	
72-75	At Migi-Hidari:	late 1930's
	Kuroda praising Ono	
75-77	At Mrs. Kawakami's:	quite often these days
	Reminiscing about old days	
	'A Lord must gather his men'	
77	Seeing Kuroda	during the first year of the occupation
78	Meeting Dr. Saito	last month
	Going to the monster movie	
	Recounting the meeting at dinner	
	Conversation with Setsuko	

85	Going to Arakawa	yesterday
	Visit to Matsuda	
86-89	First meeting Matsuda	after six years at Mori-san's (1921)
89-96	Conversation with Matsuda	yesterday

Ishiguro defends this style:

"I don't like the idea that A has to come before B and that B has to come before C because the plot dictates it. I want certain things to happen in a certain order, according to how I feel the thing should be arranged tonally or whatever.... People tend to think like this. So I'm not dictated to by the chronology of events, and I can reveal things just when I want to."⁶

The nonlinearity of plot relies on recognizing the points of departure and emphasis of repetition to give outline and shading to the portrait Ono is creating. The points of departure set the events of his life in location on the canvas. The repetition represents the stronger brushstrokes, outlining the forms desired to be emphasized.

Ono's Memory

Ono's reflection on his past has two main problems. The first, as we have seen, is his meandering style of narration. Throughout his narrative, he keeps drifting off on digressions and keeps bringing himself back with phrases like, "But I am digressing..." (p. 28); "However, I see I am drifting. My intention had been to record here that conversation..." (p. 48); "It was not my intention to dwell on Sugimura..." (p. 134); "But again I have drifted..." (p. 151) and "I believe I was recalling the events of that day last month..." (p. 184).

During the course of the narration, Ono recounts not only the changes in his life but also the changes in the city he came to in 1913—more than 35 years before. There is much made of changing times, as Ono looks back on his past. He uses phrases like, "Many things have changed since the old days, Shintaro," (p. 21); "There was a time..." (p. 22);

and “For nothing really remains of the old pleasure district now;...” (23). In fact, Ono has seen the old pleasure district change twice in his life—from its shabby days when he first arrived in 1913 to the center of artistic nightlife during the pre-war days to the razed and rebuilt office center of the post-war present.

What seems to be a problem of an aging wandering mind for Ono is a stylistic benefit for Ishiguro:

I can have Ono in a certain kind of emotional mood or emotional way of talking about things when I want him to be, and it looks like he’s just drifted, but from my point of view, it’s quite contrived. I’ve figured out little transitory connecting paragraphs whereby he appears to drift from one section to the next.⁷

The second, more serious problem, however, is the reliability of Ono’s memory. Because all the information we receive is filtered through Ono’s memory, it is important to look at how accurate it is. We only have Ono’s word for his own accuracy and, by his own admission, his record is mixed. On some matters, he seems very sure of the events or conversations. At other times, some very crucial moments, he can’t quite recall clearly. Some examples will illustrate this:

Today *when I try to recall* that evening, *I find my memory of it merging* with the sounds and images from all those other evenings.

(p. 25)

I cannot recall precisely what I did with myself for the next several minutes.

(p. 34)

In all likelihood, it was in one of the corridors that I encountered her, *though I do not remember this*.

(p. 47)

Yesterday...*the recollection of that exchange* in the reception room *came into my mind*, causing me to experience a wave of irritation....

(p. 50)

I remembered again the way she had turned her face towards me slightly to say...

(p. 50)

And I remembered again her knowing manner on the veranda that first morning of her visit.

(p. 50)

I found myself casting my mind back to that encounter [with young Miyake], searching it for significance.

(p. 53)

...only a week after the actual encounter, *I could hardly recall the conversation* I had had with young Miyake.

(p. 54)

...as *I pondered over the whole business* during the days which followed...

(p. 54)

...so that *I am obliged to think back yet again* to that encounter with Miyake, to turn it over from yet another perspective.

(p. 54)

Did Miyake really say all this to me that afternoon?

(p. 56)

I believe I have already mentioned that yesterday I took a trip...

(p. 61)

I believe it was 1931 when the present lines began to operate...

(p. 62)

Of course, this is all a matter of many years ago now and *I cannot vouch that those were my exact words* that morning.

(p. 69)

These, of course, *may not have been the precise words* I used that afternoon at the Yamagawa 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.*

(p. 72)

Quite often these days, in the evenings down at Mrs. Kawakami's, *I find myself reminiscing* about the Migi-Hidari and the old days.

(p. 75)

[of the omiai] *...for my memories of the evening are not as clear as they might be.*
(p. 116)

My recollection of the first time I ever met Dr. Saito remains quite vivid, and I am thus confident enough of its accuracy.
(p. 131)

Of course, *he may we not have used that precise phrase....* For it occurs to me that expression was one I myself tended to use frequently in later years and *it may well be that I am remembering my own words* to Kuroda on that later occasion in that same pavilion.
(p. 177)

And when that evening after supper I continued to get Taro to confirm this,...*for there was never any doubt in my mind. I have, for instance, the most vivid recollection* of that sunny day some sixteen years ago when Dr. Saito first addressed me...
(p. 194)

I remember that meeting quite clearly, and there can be no doubt that Setsuko is mistaken.
(p. 194)

Whereas Ono's memory has problems in remembering events and conversations, these general lapses are only superficial to the more central issue of Ono's memory of his conversations with Setsuko which initiated his reevaluation of his past and subsequent confession of guilt and apology.

Ono's entire narration revolves around two conversations with Setsuko: the first on in September, 1948, two months before Noriko's omiai with the Saitos. During this conversation Setsuko cautions Ono:

'I merely wished to say,' she went on, 'once the negotiations begin in earnest, it may be as well if Father were to take certain precautionary steps.'

"Precautionary steps? Naturally, we'll go carefully. But what preceisely did you have in mind?"

'Forgive me,' I was referring particularly to the investigations.'

'Well, of course, we'll be as thorough as necessary. We'll hire the same detective as last year. He was very reliable, you may remember.'

Setusko carefully repositioned a stem. 'Forgive me, I am no doubt expressing myself unclearly. I was, in fact, referring to *their* investigations.'

'I'm sorry, I'm not sure I follow you. I was not aware we had anything to hide.'...

'You must forgive me, Father. In my place, Suichi would express things better. But of course, he isn't here. 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.'

'Misunderstandings about what, Setsuko?'

'About the past. But please, I'm speaking quite needlessly. Father has no doubt thought ahead of all these things and will do whatever is necessary.'

(pp. 48-49)

and several days later, after the chance meeting with Dr. Saito on the tram:

'I wonder how Mr Kurodo is these days. I can remember how he used to come here, and you would talk together for hours in the reception room.'

'I've no idea about Kuroda these days.'

'Forgive me, but I wonder if it may not be wise if Father were to visit Mr Kuroda soon.'

'Visit him?'

'Mr Kuroda. And perhaps certain other such acquaintances from the past.'

'I'm not sure I follow what you're saying, Setsuko.'

'Forgive me, I simply meant to suggest that Father may wish to speak to certain acquaintances from his past. That is to say, before the Saito's detective does. After all, we do not wish any unnecessary misunderstandings to arise.'

'No I suppose we don't,' I said, returning to my paper.

(p. 85)

These two conversations are the impetus for Ono to take stock of his past life as an artist from the perspective of a father whose daughter's marriage prospects might be tainted by his past. It gives him the chance to revisit old friends. His conversation with Matsuda was warm and friendly; the two old friends comfortably reminisce about their years together. But his attempt to make contact with Kuroda, his former star pupil and protege, was a stinging rejection. The conversation with Enchi, Kuroda's protege, possibly revealed to Ono for the first time that he, in fact, may have been the cause for Kuroda to have been tortured while in jail. This would be serious news indeed! The knowledge that the politically resurrected Kuroda was known to Dr. Saito and that young Mitsuo was a student at Kuroda's new university may have caused Ono to feel that he needed to renounce his past and admit that he made mistakes which caused untold suffering—for the sake of Noriko's successful omiai.

Yet, the whole question of Ono's confession, as distasteful as it was for him, its motivation and purpose, is called into question by Setsuko a year later. Setsuko seems shocked by Ono's behavior at Noriko's omiai and denies having given him any advice at all. Ono and Setuko are walking in Kawabe Park, talking about Noriko's successful marriage with Taro Saito:

'And of course,' I said, with a laugh, 'it was you who warned me last year. "Precautionary steps"—you remember that, Setsuko? As you see, I didn't ignore your advice.'

'I'm sorry, Father, what advice was this?'

'Now, Setsuko, there's no need to be so tactful. I'm quite prepared now to acknowledge there are certain aspects to my career I have no cause to be proud of. Indeed, I acknowledged as much during the negotiations, just as you suggested.'

'I'm sorry, I'm not at all clear what Father is referring to.'

'Noriko hasn't told you about the *miai*? Well, I made sure that evening there'd be no obstacles to her happiness on account of my career. I dare say I would have done so in any case, but I was nevertheless grateful for your advice last year.'

'Forgive me, Father, but I don't recall offering any advice last year. As for the

matter of the miai, however, Noriko has indeed mentioned it to me a number of times.... Noriko told me she was extremely puzzled by Father's behavior that night. It seems the Saitos were equally puzzled. No one was at all sure what Father meant by it all...

'But this is extraordinary,' I said, laughing. 'Why, Setsuko, it was you yourself who pushed me to it last year. It was you who suggested I take "precautionary steps" so that we didn't slip up with the Saitos as we did with the Miyakes. Do you not remember?'

'No doubt I am being most forgetful, but I am afraid I have no recollection of what Father refers to.'

'Now, Setsuko, this is extraordinary.'

(pp. 190-91)

That these earlier conversations, so central in propelling Ono's actions, are categorically denied by Setsuko, throws a great deal of confusion, ambiguity and uncertainty over reliability of Ono's memory and recollection of his past. In this case, it is not just Ono-past and Ono-present which may be at variance but here we have another seemingly objective person by whom to measure Ono's reliability. Unless we also question Setsuko's motivation for denying her advice to Ono, which is possible but creates ambiguities of its own, we can only surmise that it was Ono who reconstructed those conversations for his own purposes. On the other hand, if we are to believe Ono's account, this renewed credibility creates more uncertainty, that perhaps Ono can be trusted to recount events accurately, after all.

Ono's view of himself

The conversations with Setsuko and their resulting action provide the central impetus of the plot. Setsuko and Ono's disagreement over their premise raises major questions of Ono's reliability as an interpreter of the events of his life. But a more persistent theme to Ono's narrative is the creation of his own self-portrait.

In describing his friend the Tortoise, Ono says:

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.

(p. 67)

To find Ono's personality, one has to look carefully between the lines of his narrative. Liberally sprinkled throughout are discursions which Ono reports which throw some illumination on his view of himself. Three points which often recur is his attitude to status, the extent of his influence and his own view of his past.

a. status

The novel begins with the description of Ono's house:

...Even if it did not occupy such a commanding position on the hill, the house would still stand out from all others nearby, so that as you come up the path, you may find yourself wondering what sort of wealthy man owns it.

(p. 7)

Although using such words as "commanding" and "imposing" to describe the house, Ono also claims that he has never been a wealthy man. He goes on to say that he only sought a new house "in keeping with our status" (p. 8), as a concession to his wife in order to enhance the marriage prospects for his two young daughters.

He was able to buy it for about half its value through an "auction of prestige" conducted by the Sugimura family. Since Ono was the one selected, he remarks, "How much more honourable is such a contest, in which one's moral conduct and achievement are brought as witnesses rather than the size of one's purse" (p. 10). Clearly, Ono believes he was the most worthy candidate.

He also recounts several times his confident recollection of first meeting Dr. Saito, shortly after moving into his new home. "I remember his repeating words to the effect of: 'A great honor to have an artist of your stature in our neighbourhood, Mr. Ono' (p. 131 and p. 194).

Another example of Ono's sense of status occurs later. In response to Setsuko's questioning as to why the Miyakes suddenly withdrew from Noriko's omiai the year before, Ono dismisses it as "simply a matter of family status. The Miyakes, from what I saw of them, were just the proud, honest sort who would feel uncomfortable at the thought of their son marrying above his station" (pp. 18-19).

But then he continues, with no sense of contradiction:

For I was very lax in considering the matter of status, it simply not being my instinct to concern myself with such things. Indeed, I have never at any point in my life been very aware of my own social standing, and, even now, I am often surprised afresh when some event, or something someone may say, reminds me of the rather high esteem in which I am held.

(p. 19)

Perhaps it is no contradiction to be proud of one's perceived status while at the same time eschewing it, but it does seem a bit fatuous on Ono's part.

b. influence

Ono's sense of status manifests itself in several other instances of his sense of enhanced influence. In one example, Ono describes his writing a letter of recommendation that resulted in Shintaro's brother getting a job. Shintaro and his brother came to Ono's house to thank him, remaining in the entryway, refusing to enter the house. Shintaro's brother offers a litany of praise to his benefactor and when they leave, Ono savors the moment:

This visit—I must admit it—left me with a certain feeling of achievement. It was one of those moments...which illuminate suddenly just how far one has come...I had brought myself to such a position almost without realizing it."

(p. 21)

But here again, he immediately follows this reflection with the disingenuous observation, "It may be that if I chose to put it to the test, I would again be surprised by the extent of my influence. As I say, I have never had a keen awareness of my own standing" (p. 21).

Another example of Ono realizing his influence was in the “small part” he played in the establishment of the Migi-Hidari (the sound of “Right-Left” marching of soldiers boots). As a result of a letter he wrote to the State Department, projecting the proposed bar as a repository of artists, “producers of work unflinchingly loyal to his Imperial Majesty the Emperor” (p. 64), the authorities enthusiastically approved his proposal. Once again Ono says:

...it still brings me a certain satisfaction to recall that I—with whatever influence my reputation had gained in this city—was able to do my small part in bringing such a place into being” (p. 75). “It was, I suppose, another of those instances when one is struck by the realization that one is held in rather higher esteem than one supposed. But then I was never one to concern myself with matters of esteem.”

(p. 64)

Having helped establish the Migi-Hidari, the owners gratefully keep a table in the corner reserved for Ono and his students. Here Ono holds forth on matters of politics, loyalty and influence:

They all listened solemnly as I recounted my view on how influence and status can creep up on someone who works busily, not pursuing these ends in themselves, but for the satisfaction of performing his tasks to the best of his ability.

(pp. 24-25)

With no trace of embarrassment or acknowledgement of the hypocrisy involved, Ono quotes an example of the kind of speech his star pupil and protege, Kuroda, would make:

...it may be said that respected enormously as he is by the public at large, it is we here at this table who alone know the extent to which that respect still falls short. But I personally have no doubt. His reputation will become all the greater, and in years to come, our proudest honour will be to tell others that we

were once the pupils of Masuji Ono.

(p. 25)

To this kind of panegyric, Ono replies, "Of course, I usually ignored them, but on this particular occasion, as when Shintaro and his brother had stood bowing and giggling in my entryway, I experienced a warm glow of satisfaction" (p. 25).

At issue here is not whether Ono should feel a sense of contentment at his influence or not, but rather whether the reader can trust Ono to accurately describe himself. In these examples, clearly his protestations are not to be believed. Ono is an intensely proud man, proud of his accomplishments and his influence.

It is the height of hypocrisy or self-conceit to quote the testimony from a person who long ago disavowed him. Yet, at the time of Ono's narration, there is no hint that Kuroda had in fact disassociated himself with his illustrious teacher, that Kuroda, in fact, bore great animosity toward him and would later refuse to see him ("I have no reason to believe a meeting between us would produce anything of value..." (p. 114)). Even more remarkable is the fact that Ono conceals the information from the reader that he had caused Kuroda to be discredited, arrested, imprisoned, and tortured.

Clearly he relishes recalling the heady days of power and influence at the Migi-Hidari. Yet he just as strongly chooses to avoid the more unpleasant aspects of his past. There is another example of the questioning of his status and influence, and Ono reacts in the same way. Aware of his ruptured relationship with his former protege, Ono still presents himself at Kuroda's studio as a "friendly visitor," to enlist Kuroda's support in case the Saito's detective inquires of his past. Faced with the truth of his responsibility in Kuroda's wartime incarceration and beating, Ono dismisses Enchi's accusations of duplicity, "Most things are more complicated than they appear, Mr. Enchi. Young men of your generation tend to see things far too simply" (p. 113).

Ono was affected by his visit to Kuroda, but not from learning about Kuroda's suffering in prison or from being called a traitor by Enchi. He peevishly says, "this matter with Kuroda did, I confess, cast something of a shadow over my mood; it certainly marred my optimism concerning Noriko's negotiations" (p. 114). Thus, as this example shows, when Ono has an uncomplimentary vision of himself reflected back to him, he either tends to dismiss it (as he does with Enchi) or alter the context to a more appropriate one (Noriko's

omia) to preserve his self-esteem.

c. attitude towards his past

The more central issue of the story, however, is Ono's attitude toward his past. Heeding Setsuko's advice, Ono embarks on a series of visits to visit two former friends which, as mentioned above, produce opposite reactions. Upon reflection on these events, Ono makes his confession of responsibility to the Saitos during Noriko's oia. As he tells Setsuko in Kawabe Park, "I'm hardly the sort to allow my own daughter to suffer simply because I'm too proud to face up to things" (p. 191).

That Ono did, in fact, "face up to things," is undeniable. His speech at the oia was quite direct:

There are some who would say it is people like myself who are 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.

(p. 124)

and

All I can say is that at the time I acted in good faith. I believed in all sincerity I was achieving good for my fellow countrymen. But as you see, I am not now afraid to admit I was mistaken.

(pp. 124-125)

At the time, Ono mentions that what he did was "painful" but that he did it to improve Noriko's marriage prospects. Having made this public confession, however, Ono derives a sense of satisfaction from it:

...it may not always be an easy thing, but there is certainly a satisfaction and dignity to be gained in coming to terms with the mistakes one has made in the

course of one's life. In any case, there is surely no great shame in mistakes made in the best of faith. It is surely a thing far more shameful to be unable or unwilling to acknowledge them.

(p. 125)

At this telling, Ono is self-satisfied to have admitted his mistakes. All the more reason for turning his back on Shintaro when he visited a few days after Noriko's omiai. Shintaro has come to ask Ono to write a recommendation letter to a high school where he had applied for a job, a letter in which Ono would disassociate Shintaro from the China Crisis poster campaign.

Although Shintaro was not one of the top-rank of his students, he is the last of Ono's former students to remain loyal to his teacher and with whom Ono still has contact. But, again, faced with the more unsavory reflection of his past, Ono becomes indignant at Shintaro's request. He admonishes Shintaro, "...why don't you simply face up to the past? You gained much credit at the time for your poster campaign. Much credit and much praise. The world may now have a different opinion of your work, but there's no need to lie about yourself" (p. 104).

Whereas his acknowledgement of his past during Noriko's omiai seems genuinely contrite; on the other hand, he seems to be quite proud of his past. During Ono's last conversation with Matsuda, a month before Matsuda's death, they are reminiscing about their past campaigns. Matsuda tends to minimize their effect, "But as for the likes of us, Ono, our contribution was always marginal. No one cares now what the likes of you and me once did" (p. 201).

Ono cannot quite concur and has a more positive attitude about his past as he states:

...surely he would have recognized also those aspects he could be proud of.... We have the satisfaction of knowing that whatever we did, we did at the time in the best of faith. Of course, we took some bold steps and often did things with much single-mindedness; but this is surely preferable to never putting one's convictions to the test, for lack of will or courage. When one holds convictions deeply enough, there surely comes a point when it is despicable to prevaricate further.

(pp. 201-202)

Ono seems to prefer seeing his role reflected in the broader context of courage, will and conviction rather than the reality of the suffering his actions caused, including the deaths of both his wife and son.

In one final example, Ono summons this more positive reflection of his past in recalling the moment of his greatest triumph. After winning the Shigeta Foundation Award, he is feted and lionized at the Migi-Hidari. But to savor his accomplishment, he sets out to see Mori-san, his old teacher and mentor. He mentally discusses whether he will continue to call him 'sensei' as he always did or to acknowledge their equality. But he never gets to Mori-san's. Overlooking the villa, Ono has a kind of epiphany:

that deep sense of triumph and satisfaction.... It was a proud sense of happiness deriving from the conviction that one's efforts have been justified; that the hard work undertaken, the doubts overcome, have all been worthwhile; that one has achieved something of real value and distinction.

(p. 204)

The moment recalled occurred in 1938, yet the fact that Ono is still savoring it in April, 1950 must be accepted as Ono's more accurate attitude of his past.

Conclusion

With the plot of the story held to a minimum and the narrator our only source of information about events, it is all the more necessary to be sure that our narrator can be trusted. Yet the reader is left in greater uncertainty as to how to accept Ono's more fundamental perceptions and judgements of his feelings and attitudes. The reader is given plenty of reason for doubt; there are many examples of contradiction, ambiguity, and irony in Ono's self-portrait. Part of this is Ishiguro's choice of style. As Malcolm Bradbury puts it, *An Artist of the Floating World* is:

a novel of concealments in which the hidden secrecies of an cunningly constructed narrative merge with the practised concealments of a mannered and civil culture.... The story hides behind itself, forcing the reader persistently to unlock

it, since the strange distances of politeness, respect, deference and reserve that dominate Japanese social and expressive practice allow little to be said but much to be implied...Like some devastating irony, concealment dominates every scene and every relationship, functioning both as courtesy and as hypocrisy.⁸

Ono is quite unabashed in his description of his artistic transformations, including the one that brought him most acclaim—becoming a propaganda artist on behalf of the right-wing political rise of militarism and subsequent war effort. Yet in the post-war climate, the new generation—suggested by Young Miyake, Suichi, Mitsuo, Enchi—have a different, less charitable opinion of the warmongers of the recent past. The choices of perception are widely divergent. Is Ono a self-satisfied, opportunistic, ambitious artist or is he a guileless, doddering old retired painter?

We see the world reflected through Ono's eyes and attitudes. It is like Ono is standing by a pond looking at himself and his past. At some moments the pond is calm and the reflection may be clear and accurate. But other times, because of the events he is recounting, the surface shows more agitation and the reflecting is not so clear. And sometimes, Ono himself stirs the waters to create a reflection he prefers to see.

The reader is looking for Ono on the surface of the pond. We can hear his words but can't entirely trust his memory, nor his bias. Ono's life changes through the years but there runs through it a sense of self-determination and independence and a pride of self-satisfaction. We must piece together a portrait of this artist through the reflections he shows us and, in the second installment of this paper, the echoes we can hear.

Notes

Text:

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *An Artist of the Floating World*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).

Notes:

1. Malcolm Bradbury, "The Floating World" in *No, Not Bloomsbury*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 365.
2. Gregory Mason. "An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro," *Contemporary Literature*: Vol. 30, Fall, 1989, p. 343.
3. Bill Bryson. "Between Two Worlds," *New York Times Magazine*. April 29, 1990, p. 38.
4. Gregory Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 344.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 341-2.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 344.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 342.
8. Malcolm Bradbury, *op. cit.*, p. 364.

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