

**Coming to Terms—  
Literary Configurations of the Past in  
Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating  
World* and Timothy Mo's *An Insular  
Possession***

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**Abstract**

Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and Timothy Mo's *An Insular Possession* (1986) are fictional works with a combined structural and thematic emphasis on dynamics of the past, one in terms of the personal memory, in the other in terms of colonial history. Ishiguro's fiction foregrounds the main character's reluctance to face and be held morally responsible for earlier acts—or lack of acts—with publicly momentous consequences. In Ishiguro's case the past assumes threatening proportions and must be held at bay by enforced memory-failure and displacement. If there is understatement in relation to the past in Ishiguro's fictional universe, the opposite is the case in Mo's *An Insular Possession*. This is a text pressing on its reader a discourse saturated with factual details, with the apparent aim of rendering the past as accurate and authentic as possible, but with a disrupting ironic lightness. In both works the past appears hazy, in one through the lack of certainty, in the

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other by a saturation of detail. Both works make clear the sifting, ordering, and fictionalizing negotiations that constitute private as well as public recuperations of the past.

**Key Words:** Kazuo Ishiguro, Timothy Mo, fictional construction, fiction and historiography, metafiction

But then to be fair, I cannot recall any colleague who could paint a self-portrait with absolute honesty; however accurately one may fill the surface details of one's mirror reflection, the personality represented rarely comes near the truth as others see it. (Ishiguro, 1987: 67)

Whereas what O'Rourke offers at his very best is a perfected alternative world, which at the same time is no distortion of the real, for if he changes by leaving out all that is inessential to the illusion, at least he imparts nothing that is false. He tends to see things as they are, not as they are supposed, though, paradoxically, it is his view which seems willed. (Mo, 1986: 31-32)

To sense the world we can do without language, but without language we cannot make sense of it. To make sense of world we have, quite literally, to come to terms with it. We have to find the terms that will serve as verbal symbols with meanings that we agree on. Even in the cases for which we need to find unusual terms in order to describe out-of-the-ordinary phenomena, we still need to have a stable stock of verbal symbols from which we can draw. Whereas everyday communication relies on a verbally stable consensus to come to terms with the world at large, literature itself creates a world of its own. Literature forces the verbal symbol to come to terms with the world in which the work comes into being and, at the same time to come to terms with the new world created by the work. The literary work configures terms in such a way as to create something new and different from the world as we know it and, at the same time, brings its terms into alignment with verbal symbols that we are already familiar with. The difference between a historiographical and a literary text is traditionally assumed to be a difference along exactly these lines: in the historiographical text

we expect language to come to terms with the world and not with its own configuration as historiography, but in the literary text we expect language to serve dual loyalties, one by coming to terms with the world and one by coming to terms with the work as a configuration of verbal symbols parallel with or alternative to those we use to describe our own world, always drawing attention to the configuration of the work and, hence, to the verbal symbols without which it cannot exist.

In this paper I shall proceed on the assumption of a general tendency in contemporary literature to evoke the past as it exists between history proper and the imaginative effort of fiction.<sup>1</sup> I shall address in particular two cases of Asian British authors who have creatively used their partly Asian partly European cultural legacies to explore Asian pasts in relation to explicit or implicit Western presents by manipulating time, history, historiography, and memory and using them as shaping factors responsible for private and public configurations of the past as it is significant for the present.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* and Timothy Mo's *An Insular Possession* were both published in 1986, both written by authors with double loyalties to Britain and to Asia (Japan and Hong Kong respectively), and both are not only set in the past but also configure the past in quite specific ways. The two works of prose fiction, however, configure the past in ways which are very different from one another, thus suggesting the various ways of negotiating the past. It is my argument that the confrontation of the two texts with one another brings out with great clarity their common concerns with the need to retain and come to terms with the past. These concerns emerge from an uneasy awareness of verbal instability, insufficiency, even duplicity, existing in language, and suggests that the nature of fiction, like

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<sup>1</sup> In Sauerberg 1991 I have studied the integration of factual texts in fiction on the basis of a number of literary cases, opting for a functional criterion when it comes to categorizing a given text as factual or fictional.

memory, is inherently selective, interpretive, and individualist.

The technique of stretching fiction's narrative present in the traditional realistic mode to including the more or less recent past without simply becoming a historical novel is an approach employed by several writers who hope to give voice to experiences for which traditional and conventional senses of temporal continuity or of spatial identity no longer apply. In American literature a recent striking example would be Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), a critique of North American civilization that sweeps across the last half century. In British literature we have Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) and *Last Orders* (1999), both of which are concerned with re-articulations of the recent past (World War II and after) in order to investigate the tensions which exist between past dreams and present-day realities. Graham Swift's *Last Orders* epitomizes such a re-articulation in its deconstruction of the complex myth growing out of the British war effort 1939-45:

Graham Swift writes from the core of England and Britain in this fiction about the modest but sadly shattered dreams of loyal British citizens and the harsh realities of post-war and post-imperial Britain. Although this is more generally a novel about the vanity of human wishes, the five men suffer from a common failure to feel themselves part of a consensus culture. The new money in the shape of Hussein, for whose condescending and after all not very munificent custom Vince suddenly realises with self-disgust that he has compromised himself and his daughter, is a reminder of the way intercultural Britain is constituted. But a much more forceful impression of the sense of an 'other' is left by the burial party paying their visit to the monument to dead navy servicemen at Chatham. Set up to commemorate the ultimate sacrifice for King and Country, a sacrifice not demanded of the four older men although they were at constant risk during the war, they approach it as tourists, with only Vic for a moment responding to it in different terms. With World War Two having long ago in Britain assumed the shape, status and function of a myth in

extension of the home-front propaganda offered during the war, the discrepancy between the realities of war, as experienced by the four men, and its subsequent representations, among which of course a war memorial is one of the more conventional items, has widened to become indeed unbridgeable. As the destination of this updated Chaucerian pilgrimage is not of the grandeur its name seems to signify, notions and expectations have to be revalued to fit in with a world that has overtaken the men and left them as anachronisms, just as the ending of the novel reads like the pathetic anachronism of fiction belonging to an age given to unity and consensus. (Sauerberg, 2001: 124-125)

When we turn to literature in English not originating in the USA or Great Britain, we witness a similar tendency. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000), Peter Carey's *The Kelly Gang* (2001), Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist* (2002), all serve as central examples of fiction in English by writers loosely, and therefore somewhat imprecisely, known as "postcolonial."<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to decide in what cases this kind of recuperative fictional narrative becomes historical novel proper, but the key seems to be fiction as generic fiction, and of applying retrospection with a bearing on, indeed sometimes even a more or less corrective view on, the present. In that perspective, a novel set during the Boer War like Giles Foden's *Ladysmith* (1999) is, typically, not so much a historical novel as a work of factually based fiction aiming to reassess the past which treads the line between fact and myth.

Professional historians have always viewed the historical novel with suspicion. At best, it is often claimed, historical novels may be used as source documents addressing the periods in which they were written rather than their subject matter. At worst, historical novels divert attention from the real nature and function of sources,

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<sup>2</sup> In the last chapter of Sauerberg 2001 I have criticized the notion of "postcolonial" as a term too comprehensive and vague to be really useful.

cp. the vociferously anti-constructionist British historian Arthur Marwick:

The Dutch historian Gustav Renier believed that feelings for the past were akin to instincts aroused on those autumnal days when there is wood smoke on the air and a strange disordered nostalgia pervades the mind. We have to be careful: it may be that the poetic desires being talked of here are best catered to through historical novels; and, of course, amateur historians sometimes prefer to tempt this audience with books which are colourful and romantic, and unreliable, not rigorous and analytical, and firmly based in the sources, as genuine historical works should be. (Marwick, 2001: 35)

Whereas historical novels aim to reconstruct as accurately as possible the various periods of the past, and by so doing foreground the radical differences between the past of the fictional and the present,<sup>3</sup> the titles mentioned above foreground the connections between past and present.

Discussions between empirically oriented historians like Arthur Marwick and theoretically oriented ones like Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra about the nature of historiography, interesting though it is, need not concern us here. The works I am dealing with are not works of historiography but rather works of fiction. As works of fiction, they are not historical novels proper, although Mo's *An Insular Possession* at a cursory glance may seem so. Clearly, Mo's objective is not to recreate a historically correct setting, but rather to draw on various fictional traditions, including that of the historical novel, so as to set up an investigative

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<sup>3</sup> Even generically "pure" historical novels have, however, a tendency to apply present-day standards and views to the past. It may be suggested that this tendency stands in direct proportion to the popularity of such fiction, cp. the success of such authors as Jean Auel and Ken Follett. An example of a historical novel attempting consistently to reflect a state of setting-contemporary—language-related—perception would be William Golding's *The Inheritors* (1955).

framework which destabilizes any pretence of the historical *truth* of historiography in favour of the historical *truths* of fiction.

The Canadian literary and cultural theorist Linda Hutcheon has coined the phrase “historiographic metafiction” which, in her 1989 modern critical classic *The Politics of Postmodernism*, she defines as a kind of fiction “obsessed with the question of how we can come to know the past today” (Hutcheon, 2002: 44). Hutcheon seems to take it for granted that the status and nature of traditional historiography has been definitively upset by the efforts of poststructuralist theory; she therefore privileges fiction with the power of initiative in a debate involving basic ontological and epistemological assumptions: “for the question of historiography’s representational powers is a matter of current concern in a number of discourses but most obviously, perhaps, in historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon, 2002: 45). However, whether fiction helps out in a crisis of historiography or whether historiography helps out in a crisis of fiction is, indeed, a moot point. Historians like Arthur Marwick quoted above are not in any doubt. To Marwick, the whole problem is a matter of categorization: a historian simply does not set out to do what the novelist sets out to do, and *vice versa*. In this light Hutcheon may be seen as acting on a view which is biased by too much attention to the work of those she mobilises to support her position—R. G. Collingwood, Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, Raymond Williams, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard<sup>4</sup> —and too little on empirical historians like Arthur Marwick.

In Kazuo Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and Timothy Mo’s *An Insular Possession* (1986) the emphasis is on the structure and themes on the dynamics of recuperation in the fictional narrative.<sup>5</sup> In Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World* it

<sup>4</sup> The ones named in Hutcheon, 2002, 54.

<sup>5</sup> I shall not in the present paper enter into a discussion of other works by the two authors, but just point out that they both have proved impressively versatile with regard to setting as well as to intellectual scope.

is left for the reader to produce a complete and coherent text out of and in between the flawed information and involuntary hints provided by the apparently seamless and fluent discourse. If there is understatement in relation to the past in Ishiguro's fictional universe, the opposite is the case in Mo's *An Insular Possession*. Here we find a text which presses on its reader a discourse saturated with factual details, with the apparent aim of rendering the past as accurately and authentically as possible, but at the same time with a disrupting ironic lightness. In both works of fiction the very nature of the past is made hazy, in the one by lack of certainties, in the other by the saturation of detail, so that in the end both works leave impressions not so much of the past as such, but of demonstrations of the past as configurations designed to extend beyond the concrete *data* of history and the concrete *universals* of fiction, in a manner and function similar to the workings of memory. In relation to Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction with its focus mainly on matters of ontology and epistemology, I find it helpful, indeed necessary, to add the element of ethics, since these works, and others of their kind, are centrally concerned with our role in history as individuals subject to the existential choices of wide-ranging moral import. In other words, I suggest that works of fiction like the two under scrutiny here are neither historical novels proper, since they are not meant to re-enact the past, nor are they examples of historiographic metafiction, since they are not meant, generally speaking, to probe into ontological and epistemological problems concerning the nature of historiography. It is my contention that they are in a class of their own as works of fiction which derive their rationale by exploring the effects of a past whose representation is not made into a problem in terms of ontology or epistemology, but in terms of ethics and morals. in accordance with F. R. Leavis's broadly moral emphasis in his notion of the Great Tradition of the novel.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cp. my application of Leavis's notion to contemporary British fiction in

In the contemporary fiction of the past twenty years we find, as I have argued above, that a conspicuous number of fictional works have squeezed themselves in between the present-day concerns of fiction, realist or metafictional, and historical novels. The cognitive probing characteristic of fiction prefers the mode of memory, a faculty of the mind which emphasized process rather than product and is much more in line with the individual-subject-development orientation of fiction—individual author, individual narrator, individual protagonist—than with the static source orientation of historiography.

This emphasis on memory is an emphasis on recuperation. It is an issue of the mind becoming aware of its own set-up as a product for past accumulation. But the mind is not just a receptacle; it is also a sorting mechanism which leaves the elements of the past as more or less distinct memories: a diachrony in terms of a synchrony with many gaps in it. Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* thematizes the dynamics of memory from the vantage point of the mind's adaptive mechanism, whereas Mo furnishes us with the raw materials of a memory which is constituted as such in what appears to be a paratextual element of the novel—Appendix II—but is actually an integrated part of it, although this is not projected as straightforwardly as Ishiguro's novel.

Kazuo Ishiguro and Timothy Mo are Asian British Writers by virtue of parentage, place of birth and early childhood. Both moved to Great Britain, received their education there, and chose Britain as their permanent country of residence, although in the manner of most internationally acclaimed writers, have long since lived a cosmopolitan lifestyle. In their literary work they have both drawn on this dual cultural heritage. Both have shown themselves capable of writing fiction set in mixed Asian and British environments, and of sticking completely to either a completely Asian environment or a completely non-Asian one. The two novels

selected for attention in this paper share an identical year of publication (1986) and an identical thematic interest in traumatic events of the past. These events take place in the Westernly designated “Far East,” and relate to what amounts to what may be described as clashes between civilizations committed to mutually incommensurable ideologies, clashes whose consequences have a distinct bearing on today’s world-political situation. Last, but certainly not least, both writers in their respective novels have fore-grounded problems of verbal re-presentation as crucially significant in their relation to ontology, epistemology, and, first and foremost, ethics. It is striking that for this purpose both novels resort by way of symbol to graphic rather than verbal re-presentation (theories of painting and photography), and both integrate in the discourse explicit aesthetic theories with a meta-textual as well as an intra-textual function. The most obvious differences between the two novels are differences related to the presence of the West, and a difference in narrative dynamics, which to apply Bakhtinian concepts in Ishiguro’s case is monological but in Mo dialogical.<sup>7</sup>

The action of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World* spans twenty months, from October 1948 to June 1950, which is witnessed through the eyes of the retired painter Masuji Ono, whose memory of the past functions as a counterpoint throughout the entire work. With his mind filtering all information, as is revealed in the dramatic monologue, the reader is gradually and implicitly invited to extrapolate the painter’s role in events of the recent past, a role that explains certain otherwise somewhat enigmatic occurrences over the twenty months.

What gradually dawns on the reader by piecing together hints and interpreting silences in the painter’s flow of thoughts is the

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<sup>7</sup> The dialogic characteristic only emerges fully when discounting the presence of the olympic narrator. This is, indeed, a general problem of Bakhtinian poetics, since all texts can be shown to have an implied author, who willy-nilly guarantees the unity—the monologic—of the text.

history of a man who contributes to the propaganda apparatus for Imperial Japan's war effort as both an artist and dedicated civil servant, and his retirement from official life after the surrender of the defeated nation. With the traumatic impact of the war present everywhere in contemporary Japanese society, the reader might have expected either a contrite or an embittered voice. But this is not the case, however, as Masuji Ono takes defeat in his stride. However, a game of meaning-generation is played as the implied reader challenges the actual reader. The very likely first reaction of the actual reader getting his bearings by degrees is to draw the conclusion that Ono comes to terms with the post-war reality by repressing a political and ideological commitment which is generally denounced. There is however, no textual evidence for such a reading. The implied reader, though, is a fellow sufferer from whom the facts of the past are passed over not because of any sense of ignominy on the part of Ono, but because he, like the painter, is assumed to have drawn identical conclusions of a very pragmatic sort. To the actual reader who very likely is becoming increasingly annoyed with Ono's apparent beating about the bush, it comes as something of a relief when at a wedding-arrangement party for his daughter in April 1949 the painter quite readily admits his errors:

'There are some, Mrs Saito,' I said, perhaps a little loudly, 'who believe my career to have been a negative influence. An influence now best erased and forgotten. I am not unaware of this viewpoint.... 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 that 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... My paintings. My teachings. As you see, Dr Saito, I admit this quite readily. 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.' (Ishiguro, 1987: 123-124)

After having made this public admission, Ono reflects on what he did, both in the short term perspective of the party and in the long perspective of the war:

Of course, I do not pretend certain moments of that evening were not painful for me; nor do I claim I would so easily have made that sort of declaration I did concerning the past had circumstances not impressed upon me the prudence of doing so. Having said this, I must say I find it hard to understand how any man who values his self-respect would wish for long to avoid responsibility for his past deeds; 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. (Ishiguro, 1987: 124-125)

From this point on the actual reader has to modify his hypothesis of repression and instead side with the implied reader's knowledge about the life and times in Japan in the pre-war and war years, by listening as the painter recounts his activities in the propaganda and security services of his then belligerent country.

Even after having been taken by the hand of the narrator-sympathetic implied reader, there is still good reason for the actual reader to worry. The reason, however, is to be looked for in the implied reader's stoic frame of mind rather than dismay at the repression of memories. But after the last words of Ono, the actual and implied readers are ready to part ways, since the events of the recent past seem too momentous to be bracketed in the way suggested by the retired painter:

I smiled to myself as I watched these young office workers from my bench. Of course, at times, when I remember

those brightly-lit bars and all those people gathered beneath the lamps, laughing a little more boisterously perhaps than those young men yesterday, but with much the same good-heartedness, I feel a certain nostalgia for the part and the district as it used to be. But to see how our city has been rebuilt, how things have recovered so rapidly over these years, fills me with genuine gladness. Our nation, it seems, whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things. One can only wish these young people well. (Ishiguro, 1987: 206)

It is the retired painter's stoicism and equanimity bordering on complacency that lures the actual reader into the belief that Ono is trying to conceal something. However, a close study of the painter's reflections on his life bears out that from a very early point he has been quite candid about his immediately pre-war and war-time loyalties. From a passage only a third of the way into the text, when Ono reminisces on his and his colleagues' "work unflinchingly loyal to his Imperial Majesty the Emperor" (1987: 64) over the culmination at the wedding-arrangement party to the spelling out in the last third of the narrative his wholehearted commitment to the national cause by producing propaganda and acting as a kind of aesthetics-security officer during the war. However, the forces acting against a full realization of the momentousness of his role are both personal-psychological on the part of Ono and public-psychological on the part of those close to him.

The painter's career started as an apprentice in a kind of painting factory producing hack paintings in the classical Japanese style for export. This gave him the necessary skills. However, he yearned for artistic fulfilment, which he experienced in Seiji Moriyama's—Mori-san's—academy with its high and progressive artistic aims. But the price of aesthetic insight was a lack of rapport with the real world, in that the favoured subjects of the master painter "are put together of a night and vanish with the morning. What people call the floating world," (1987: 150). From pure

aesthetics Ono then turned to the pure didactics of propaganda. No doubt the distance from reality inculcated during the first two stages in the artist's training have such a deep impact so as to have molded his mind permanently. Stoical distance rather than repression of the painful facts of the past, in consequence, are characteristic of the retired painter's attitude. Still, Ono's stoical honesty has not much of a chance in an environment traditionally given to saving face. Ono sees himself, very conveniently, treated as mildly senile once the wedding negotiations for his unmarried daughter are successfully concluded. Not he, but polite society favours repression to admission of responsibility, no matter how stoically accepted.

To Ishiguro's painter, the past is retrieved in terms of memory. It is not as if the memory is traitorous to history as such. As we have seen, Ono's memory does not resort to convenient repression. It works perfectly well when the situation requires it. Rather, it is the implied author's specific quality of smoothing things over that produces the feeling of disgust and revulsion. Memory lends a high degree of unity to the past, because it is a past processed by an individual. If the memory is of a shell-shock victim like Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1927) the quality of the discourse shares with nightmare the emphases on the horrors experienced by this one individual. If the memory is of a rationally minded individual not, perhaps, subject to experiences similar to those of Septimus, like, for instance, George Sherston's in Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), it will communicate a very different quality. Still, individual uniqueness is the shared ground, whether factual (as in the case of Sassoon/Sherston) or fictional (as in the case of Septimus Warren Smith or of Ono.)

Timothy Mo's *An Insular Possession* does not put on immediate display the *now—then* dialectic of memory, but instead displaces it into the area of the material and immaterial elements from which both memory and fiction are generated. However, the addition of the apparently paratextual Appendix II, purporting to

be “Edited passages from *The Morning of my Days*, the unfinished and unpublished autobiography of Professor G. H. Chase” (Mo 1986: 586), casts the events dealt with in the bulk of the narrative in terms of memory, although, of, course, in a highly dramatized form.

Set at the time of the Opium War (1839-42), Moe’s fiction combines the conventions and tone of early nineteenth-century novels in the style of Jane Austen with its documentation which furnishes the historian with written sources, such as newspaper reports (including eye-witness reporting), and official documents and letters. Needing very critical scrutiny and comparisons with other sources, in a context of traditional realism they nevertheless supposedly lend an even higher degree of authenticity to the discourse, which in the postmodernist rear-view mirror is just another indication of the very constructedness of fiction as a cultural product. That we are grappling with fictionalised authentication is obvious when we begin to look critically at the first appendix, which ostentatiously contains entries from *A Gazetteer of Place Names and Biographies Relative to the Early China Coast* by An Old Hand (William Brown), Kelly and Walsh, Shanghai, 1935, a publication, however, not listed by the British Library nor the Library of Congress. Checking the entirely plausible-looking entries of Appendix I against historical data obtainable turns out to be quite a disappointing task. The entrepreneurial Walter Eastman, in the course of the years accounted for within the time span of the novel, turns from trade, for which he seems quite unenthusiastic, to the running of a newspaper, and, finally, to the pursuit of the mysteries of the camera obscura and the daguerreotype; although he shares his surname with George Eastman, the later American inventor that facilitated the techniques of photography, no further relationship may be established. In other words, the diligent building up of a framework inviting attention in historiographical terms turns out to be a hoax, but indeed a hoax in the sense that all fiction employs fact for virtual purposes. So the larger stage, with the

British-Chinese confrontation, is historically authentic, whereas the *dramatis personae* in the forefront of the work will not be found in histories of the Opium War.

With the well-made nineteenth-century novel as the framework, filled as it is with “authentic” documents—newspaper reports, letters, advertisements, even the occasional essay—the narrative pursues several plots. But unlike the traditional novel there is no particular concern for tying up loose plot ends. What would have been the plot backbone in a Jane Austen novel, the love story between Walter Eastman and Alice Barclay Remington, who was brought out to the trading stations of Canton and Macao for prospective nuptial purposes, fizzles out as other issues take up centre-stage. Instead of a single plot engaging all the characters in various functions, each individual character has his or her own plot, fighting for the olympic narrator’s attention. Also, the attentive reader hardly fails to notice such intertextual innuendo as the grand, descriptive opening, generally in the manner of the nineteenth-century, naturalist novel, and specifically reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling’s great novel of empire *Kim* (1901), which itself presents a vista of another important means of communication, the Grand Trunk Road of the Indian subcontinent: “And truly the Grand Trunk Road is a wonderful spectacle. It runs straight, bearing without crowding India’s traffic for fifteen hundred miles – such a river of life as nowhere else exists in the world” (Kipling 1949:81).<sup>8</sup> In both novels, the shifting of goods and people are made emblematic of the exchange of values, primarily between West and East.

But even if *An Insular Possession* is a cornucopia of Bakhtinian heteroglossia and a carnival with its multiple plot structures,

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<sup>8</sup> If the introductory pages of Mo’s novel are reminiscent of this part of Kipling’s narrative, the opening words of Ishiguro’s novel carries a—deliberately?—distinct, intertextual echo of William Wordsworth’s “Michael,” with the pastoral of Wordsworth’s sub-title being the common ground in terms of the evocation of a deceptively carefree atmosphere.

several levels of discourse and general delight in stylistic-register changes, the olympic narrator of the story has his designs on the narrative in terms of implicit valorisation. Most striking is the deployment of an American angle invested in the two protagonists Walter Eastman and Gideon Chase, an angle offering a convenient position from which the British-Chinese hostilities may be watched with neutrality, and, of course, giving the Americans a role anticipating their present-day prominence. It soon emerges, however, that such a neutrality offers an opportunity for sympathy with the Chinese position of having her internal affairs interfered with simply for profit's sake. In the commitment of historiographic metafiction to ethical interests, the novel explores the motives of opening up China to trade as well as the terms in which sense-making functions.

The American vantage point lends a certain disinterestedness to Walter Eastman and Gideon Chase, who along with the Irish painter O'Rourke and Father Ribeiro, the Portuguese Jesuit priest, likewise serve as mere observers of the imperial dynamics. What they observe with cool neutrality, which is only gradually tempered in the mind of Chase as he is drawn into philological and sinological studies, is the British opium grown in India upon the Chinese so that traders can buy tea for profitable export, as Walter Eastman comments at the early point in the novel during which the historical framework is being established for the benefit of the reader:

I make no claims for myself, nor do I advance myself as a model of right conduct. I simply assert what is truth and has an existence independent of its advocate. The Company and the Free Traders, both, connive in the corruption of an empire's morals and the destruction of the health and vital forces of His Celestial Majesty's servants. (Mo 1986:8)

The monopoly of trade exercised by the British East India Company was dismantled in China in 1834 by the pressure of the

Free Traders. The interests of both however were in the vast market of China, and the ignominious Opium War, which was really an extended punitive expedition, and had the possibilities of legal as well as illegal (opium) trade as its object. To appreciate the climate that made possible what most observers today would consider an obvious case of trespassing upon national sovereignty, it may be enlightening to cast a glance at James Thomson's celebrations in his four-part poem *Liberty* (1736), which extolls colonisation and imperialism generally and Britain specifically for the sake of trade:

. . . Theirs the Triumph be,  
 By deep *Invention's* keen pervading Eye,  
 The Heart of *Courage*, and the Hand of *Toil*,  
 Each conquer'd Ocean staining with their Blood,  
 Instead of Treasure robb'd by ruffian War,  
 Round social Earth to circle fair Exchange,  
 And bind the Nations in a golden Chain. (Thomson, 1908:  
 369-370)<sup>9</sup>

This notion is indeed echoed when Jasper Corrigan, one of the senior partners of the American trading company, pontifically lectures his junior staff on the moral imperative of trade:

It is our duty through the instrumentality of trade, to bring China into the family of nations and, indeed, into a free and unimpeded intercourse with not only the rest of mankind but our Maker. Trade will bring civilisation to the half-civilised Chinese and, as naturally, the great truths of Christianity will follow in the wake of trade. I labour in the firmest of convictions that our efforts are hallowed work. (Mo, 1986: 17)

This being the official programme to which both Britain and the USA are committed, the economic realities are as powerful as they are unsavoury; all of this is explained by the olympic narrator in

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<sup>9</sup> Thomson's upper-case and italics.

his careful explanation of Britain's cultivation of the two trade triangles, the one across the Atlantic based on slaves, and the other across the Indian Ocean on opium, the latter maintained through consistent connivance by all involved:

Remote Emperor, wily mandarin, pompous Company official, swaggering secret-society smuggler, and opium-growing Bengal *ryot* are linked by a devious web of dependence and repulsion, necessary cooperation and mutual hostility and, curiously enough, without the tension inherent in the confrontation of opposites, the system would probably not have held together for so long. (Mo, 1986:21)

The olympic narrator creates an overall tension between the past by lending voices to the various agents from their limited positions only partially aware of the whole picture and the present by displaying all the benefits of the wisdom of hindsight. Or, to be more precise, between the state of prejudice then and the state of prejudice now, a question of relativity, for which problematics of representation or configuration are of obvious symbolic importance. Hence, there is a general preoccupation in the narrative with visual representation as a symbol twice removed from its objective, the nature of the recuperation of the past.

Mo's novel is set at a time when the first experiments with photography were under way. Coinciding with his energetic venture into the newspaper business, Walter Eastman is taking an interest in the new way of making visual impacts permanent. Eastman is an amateur of painting and sketching, but there is a difference between the amateur and his friend, the Irish painter Harry O'Rourke:

Old Harry O'Rourke has invested his work with emotion and the bare lines are instinct with life. His figures will be incomparable with Eastman's because, though, to say the least, he's an imperfect man, jealous, conceited, and bad-tempered, he possesses that magnanimity without

which any creative artist's view of the world, never mind how perfected in the techniques of its time, will never go beyond an imperfect imitation of the visible. Whereas what O'Rourke offers at his very best is a perfected alternative world, which at the same time is no distortion of the real, for if he changes by leaving out all that is inessential to the illusion, at least he imparts nothing that is false. He tends to see things as they are, not as they are supposed, though, paradoxically, it is his view which seems willed. (Mo, 1986: 31-32)

Sharing a preoccupation with the past, both *An Artist of the Floating World* and *An Insular Possession* also share a preoccupation with the modes available for representing it. Both novels put on display protagonists acting in as well as reporting on their worlds, reports which problematize not only relations between the "reality" signified but also the various guises of the signifiers. The first kind of relationship is illustrated well by the difference of emphases and style in the vociferously pro-British *Canton Monitor* and the attempt at distance and neutrality by the newly established competitor the *Lin Tin Bulletin and River Bee*. A comparison of the two papers' coverage of identical events shows the importance of angle and bias. Perhaps more interestingly in this examination of the imaginative dynamics of fiction and history is the contrast of traditional, representative painting and the then innovative technique of photography.

The positivist view of photography as a more truthful, less subjective rendition of phenomena has, of course, long since been abandoned, but no doubt to its pioneers photography was considered superior in terms of veracity and time consumption. This is also Walter Eastman's triumphant position when he discovers the daguerreotype facilities. Himself an amateur painter, and rather good at catching a scenery in a quick sketch, he is admirably positioned to embrace photography as a natural extension sketching and painting. Here he finds himself to be at odds with Harry O'Rourke, portrait and landscape painter of the

old, that is, Sir Joshua Reynolds school. Still, both agree on a mimetic rather than an expressive aim. In *An Artist of the Floating World* we also find a traditional—aesthetically inclined—view of art set up against—didactic/propagandist—innovation. Although this exists within the medium of painting, the argument is identical: that the new technique is more truthful than the older traditional one.<sup>10</sup>

The two novels by Ishiguro and Mo thus share not only an interest in specific periods and locales of the Far East, but do so in terms of discourses which are simultaneously very different but also very similar. The differences, though, being symptomatic of a recognition of a shared problem—how to come to terms with and relate to the past—amount to a common concern.

It seems to this reader, at any rate, that Kazuo Ishiguro and Timothy Mo in their two “Asian” novels combine a genuine and sympathetic insight into highly charged historical moments which are rarely encountered in Western literature. This implies an acceptance and dramatization, as it were, of Edward Said’s notion of orientalism, which may be acted out, with almost didactic effects, in historical settings and for which we have not only the benefit of hindsight but also, and perhaps more significantly, a reflection on the nature of that hindsight. In this respect a shared characteristic of the two novels is striking: they employ with startling effect the technique of what the Russian formalists called “ostranenie,” that is de-familiarization of the familiar. “compound voice.”<sup>11</sup> But not only are we witnesses to momentous historical events from positions startlingly different from those we are used to in

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<sup>10</sup> It is worthy of note, however, that Eastman is quick to see the possibilities of photographic manipulation, as in the scene in which he tries to arrange for a snapshot of an man already dead made to be heroically dying when firing a cannon (Mo, 1986: 442-443).

<sup>11</sup> Cp. “a writerly position emerging thematically in the literary text in the form of divided national/ethnic loyalties or otherwise foregrounded problematisations of British-ness in relation to writer and text” (Sauerberg, 2001: 9 and *passim*).

Ishiguro's employment of a minor war criminal and in Mo's employment of neutral Americans, we also witness these events in terms of their narrative strategies. However different from one another they may be, in terms of Ishiguro's subtle staging of a dramatic monologue in the Robert Browning tradition and in Mo's choice of unity-resisting Bakhtinian carnivalesque dialogism they are quite alike in their shared concern for making the discourse into a probe of our historical sensibility as a necessary and organic part of mankind's existential commitment and responsibility.

If we consider the two texts' attempts to devise different discourse patterns for shared existential concerns, using history as the context, we have to address patterns that reflect both integrative and disintegrative urges. These are urges well known to historiography, because they represent the respective efforts towards, on the one hand, all-embracing hermeneutics, and, on the other, towards letting the sources themselves speak and allowing the reader to draw individual conclusions from those sources. But in both cases we see deconstructive dynamics at work which are trying to upset the manifestations of these urges. In Ishiguro, it is the narrator protagonist himself that turns out to have an ambivalent attitude toward what is expected of him, and toward what he partly himself, by his emphatically stoical attitude, seems to invite. In Mo it is the constant shift between different discursive forms and modes that, paradoxically, lends unity to the novel which has its olympic narrator straddling the gathering point of memory.

The two novels are not historiographical discourses. From the very beginning they signal fictionality. They are not historiographical metafiction either, since that mode is characterized by an effort to dismantle assumptions about the differences between historiographical and fictional texts and to underscore the assumption of total intertextuality as an ontological condition. At the same time, however, they are texts that make use of both historiographical and fictional elements within a decidedly fictional framework and which use the integration of the discussion of aesthetics as a central

tool for discussing modes of representation relevant in our attempts to come to terms with the past. In Ishiguro's novel, aesthetics, as thought of by Ono, are made to appear in terms of absolute aspirations: either you embrace this or that way, but after the choice there must be consistency. This chimes in well with the impression of organic wholeness achieved by the dramatic monologue. In Mo's novel, the discussion is in terms of the co-existence of several modes, with the discussion about painting and photography pointing to the strengths and weaknesses of both modes.

In the cases of Ishiguro's and Mo's negotiations of the past we are addressing writers are steeped in trans-national and trans-historical cultural contexts, both in relation to their personal histories and in relation to their chosen subjects.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, they have both chosen historical subjects, and have preferred the fictional to the historiographical mode. For narrative perspective both have chosen memory, which is made clear from the very start of Ishiguro's novel, but the unreliability of memory only emerges in the spuriously paratextual Appendix II in Mo's work. As memory, there is necessarily a distance between the time of remembering and the time remembered. In both cases the time of remembering is far removed from the time of actual writing; in Ishiguro it is 1950, in Mo the time of writing the unpublished autobiography of Chase, according to textual clues offered in Appendix I, can be no later than 1908, the year of his death. The link with the present is made by the implied author, who is an

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<sup>12</sup> Whereas Ishiguro in this particular case stays within a completely Japanese framework, in his other fiction he has chosen both non-Asian and mixed Asian-European settings. Mo in the work here deals a mixed Asian-European-American fictional universe, but he has also offered works dealing exclusively with Asian or non-Asian settings. Mo's *An Insular Possession* even includes a complete essay "On the literary modes of the Chinese," which is a comparative discussion of novelistic concepts and the techniques of European and Chinese forms of narrative fiction (Mo, 1986: 315-319).

implied author in Ishiguro and the olympic narrator in *Mo*. Finally, both have chosen to discuss their poetics about the past in terms of the aesthetics of the visual arts—painting and photography. In other words, the past is made to signify by a complex system of refraction which underlines the relativity—and indeed relatedness—of facts and value assumptions.

If Ishiguro's text appears to present history in terms of absolutist dynamics and Mo's text history in terms of relativist dynamics, both are simultaneously being subtly undermined from within by adverse dynamics. What this paradoxical implication might seem to indicate in either case is the insufficiency of aesthetics to deal with the past as a relevant issue for the ever now of existence. This lays the ground work for a shift from aesthetics into ethics, an ethics directed at unification rather than separation. To me, the strongest impression from Ishiguro's novel is the painter's troublesome insistence, personally and publicly, to stand by his past actions, taking responsibility for having erred, despite the attractive convenience of private stoicism and public oblivion. In the case of *Mo*, I believe the denunciation of British cynicism in trade does not linger in the reader's mind as forcefully as the clandestine efforts of the young Gideon Chase to learn to understand, speak and write Chinese, a trans-cultural act not in line with the British-American presence during that time period.

The past can never be approached, but is instead only addressed by way of representative negotiation. Inevitably, such negotiation takes place in the now of writing, no matter how much the subject is the then of the past; ultimately, it takes place through intermedial recourse, which implies a choice of representative options, of medium, of genre, etc. The negotiation of the past in the two novels by Kazuo Ishiguro and Timothy Mo is not a question of creating the neat microcosms of historical novels, nor of attempting to compromise any tacit assumptions of historiography generally. Instead, it is the question of offering, in the manner traditionally provided by the novel at large, an imagined environment for imagined characters to act in the

context of the historically given. Ultimately, however their actions have a definite bearing on the universals of human thought, emotion, and behaviour not only relating to the now of writing, which becomes history, but in the ever now of reading, which is where we must hold ourselves responsible for history-in-the-making.

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## 達成協議——過去的文學形貌

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### 摘 要

石黑一雄的《浮世畫家》(1986) 與毛翔青的《島民所有權》(1986) 是虛構的作品，其結構與主題強調描繪往昔變遷的動力，其中一部作品訴諸個人記憶，另一部作品則引用殖民歷史。石黑一雄的小說凸顯主要角色不願意面對公開、嚴重後果的過去的行爲—或匱乏的行動—也不願意被認為須負道義上的責任。在石黑一雄的案例中，往昔具有威脅的意涵，必須以強制性的失憶與替換心理遏止。假如石黑一雄的小說世界中關於過去皆輕描淡寫，毛翔青的《島民所有權》則是不同的案例。在此文本中逼迫讀者的是：充滿事實細節的論述，其目的在於儘量精確並真實地摹繪過去，卻有斷裂與反諷式的優雅。在這兩部作品中，過去的形貌顯得模糊不清，其中一部作品欠缺確定感，另一部作品則浸潤於細節中。這兩部作品清楚地顯示，虛構化、與時俱變的協商，以及持續的整理，是構成恢復私密與公共領域失落的時間的途徑。

**關鍵詞：**石黑一雄、毛翔青、小說建構、小說與歷史學、後設小說