

# EKPHRASTIC SELF AND THE DREAM HOUSE OF (RE)COLLECTION: ISHIGURO'S 'ARTIST' IN A 'FLOATING WORLD'

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## I. Introduction: Selfhood in Space and Time

In Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*, the novel's fickle narrator, elderly Masuji Ono, reflects on his past as a painter and national propagandist in World War II-era Japan. The text's central tension, however, lies in this slippery act of retelling: just as Ono attempts to piece together events of the past exactly as they were, he simultaneously resists this recollection and its totality, professing again and again, in aesthetic digression, to "recall almost nothing" from the "great complexity" (Ishiguro 328). As the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that *An Artist of the Floating World* is a novel concerned, both broadly and particularly, with the concurrent construction of individual and collective realities, positing an interchangeable relation between the two. The novel, in many ways, deconstructs a traditional ideal of the self as a solid, intrinsic thing or perceptible entity. Instead, as Ono struggles to recollect the fleeting memories of 'himself' and the people who surround him, the novel depicts the self *as* the collective, or at least offers the possibility that 'self' and 'collective' are only ideas constructed and perpetuated in tandem. In conversation with this prominent supposition of a self/collective instability, *An Artist of the Floating World*—at the very least in its titular invocation of the artist's realm as a "floating world"—rigorously contemplates both space and art-making practices.<sup>1</sup> The novel presents its reader with a transitory, soluble, immanent space: one that is able to be dissolved yet is also continually present in its material particularity, in the physical scrawl of words on the page.

I therefore argue that the novel's self-conscious meditation on the exact memorial and art-making act that wrought it into existence is, in fact, intertwined with and inseparable from its consideration of selfhood and space; the novel questions what it means to find or locate meaning within a text, within a material and

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<sup>1</sup> The titular 'Floating World' is first and foremost an English translation of the Japanese *Ukiyo-e* or 浮世, meaning "floating, fleeting, or transient world" and referring to the urban lifestyle of Edo-period Japan (1600-1867) specifically in the red-light (or 'pleasure') districts. I'm suggesting, however, that the term, in its English iteration at least, connects art-making practices to considerations of space. Which is not to deny the significance of the term's particular social, historic, and economic context, but to simultaneously examine its wealth of meanings and their implications.

ideological textual space. The very supposition that one might find or locate meaning within a given textual body constructs the work as a spatial and archival terrain, a temporal landscape discrete from all other conceptions of space and time in its own particularity. As evidenced in *An Artist of the Floating World*, the body of a text, in its consumption (or animation) by a perceiving, reading individual, is itself confined by space and time. In this way, the experience of a text becomes a fleeting one. It is with this understanding of the text as perpetually deconstructing and reconstructing itself as spatial-temporal chimera, and aligning with Walter Benjamin's understanding of communal architectures as "dream houses of the collective," that I intend to explore *An Artist of the Floating World* over the course of this paper (Benjamin 405).<sup>2</sup>

Considering for a moment Benjamin's architectural theory, the aforementioned "dream houses of the collective," I would like to clarify my reading of the phrase as a consideration of communal places and spaces of contested ground, where the perhaps-insular individual encounters the multitudinous collective: these are places and spaces in which it becomes nearly impossible to separate the self, in its dubious construction, from the collective. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Masuji Ono, the novel's wandering narrator, sifts and dithers and floats through a mercurial space-time of recollection, and—even in the word, "recollection," itself—we see this initial tension (for Ono an incongruence) between recollection and the collective.<sup>3</sup> Recollection for Ono is notably personal; it stems from the individual material source that is his body, his eyes, his mind. This recollection, however, also deals inherently with all that which exists beyond the confines of Ono's corporeality—with, that is, the bodies and minds of others. In the space-time of recollection that becomes the novel's narrative fabric, that which is labeled 'present' is actively inseparable from the moments of 'past' that enter into and alter it, often in the form of markings or impressions. We begin, accordingly, to notice an intriguing conflation between art and memory. Like Benjamin asserts with his "dream houses," the past tempers interminably and materially in the present; delineations between what is 'past' and what is 'present' become less definitive, often inextricable, and sometimes even null.

As Ono recounts in *AFW*, he and his fellow painters, while employed by Master Takeda and working furiously to keep up with the demands of foreign import, share a common feeling that "we were all battling together against time" (Ishiguro 69). For these producing painters, time becomes a common enemy, an antagonistic entity, a thing to be fought or "battled" against. While time is often categorized and relayed to us by Ono in this straightforward, objectified sort of way, we simultaneously witness throughout the narrative the ways in which time becomes

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<sup>2</sup> "Dream houses of the collective: arcades, winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax museums, casinos, railroad stations" (Benjamin 405).

<sup>3</sup> The novel will be referred to as *AFW* going forward.

animate—inconsistent, inconclusive, and shadowy. For example, the details of Ono’s past are perpetually present “turning over in [his] mind,” influencing his experiences of the present (189, 197). The distinct linearity of time as a capitalistic common enemy—the ever-looming 24-hour day—is thus toppled, or at least troubled, due to the ‘past’s’ insistent recurrence in the narrative’s ‘present.’ Subsequently, the individual body or mind as the site of both recollection *and* production (physical, optical, cerebral) engenders a kind of reflective space (pictorial, mental, and memorial) bound equally with the past, in acts of recollection, as with the present, in acts of production. In this vein, there persists throughout the novel a sense that distinctions between self/collective and past/present are constructed in and through language; the novel’s expression of selfhood thrives in the dialectical lacuna between linguistic de- and re-construction. The contested ground of language, as Benjamin’s “collective dream house,” becomes the novel’s textual fabric, just as the gaping inconsistency of any discrete ‘self’ occasions its own kind of teeming selfhood.

In the words of architect and visual theorist Juhani Pallasmaa, art “takes place at the threshold of language,” and its task is to “reconstruct the experience of an undifferentiated interior world ... to which we inseparably belong” (25). Pallasmaa’s interrogation of what he calls the “hegemony of the eye” strives to reconnect artistic representation with the “oral and enveloping world.” While Pallasmaa acknowledges the way art-making aesthetics fabricate the humanistic “world” for what it is, he also advocates for an experience of art that *is* this “being-in-the-world” (25-6). Can we understand the capricious life of *An Artist of the Floating World* as a similar process of representation, as a breathy process of being, that, in its memorial and mimetic endeavor, creates something like an ‘ekphrastic self?’ In using the term ‘ekphrastic self,’ I refer specifically to the “momentaneous” artistry of words populating space, the potential collapse between ‘being’ and art-making.<sup>4</sup> Traditional *ekphrasis*, at the root of this term, is Greek for ‘description.’ It is a rhetorical exercise typically defined as the literary description of visual art—a lucid, detailed, and precise portrait. The proposed ‘ekphrasis of self,’ however, is an experience of subjectivity defined less by vivid diction and more by the words’ resulting echoes and indeterminacies—their superabundant suggestions and reflexive gestures.

## II. Processes of Inheritance and Reminiscence as Ekphrastic Occasions

One of the central ways in which *AFW* tethers questions of self to questions of space and time is through the idea of inheritance, or, more specifically, familial and artistic inheritance. Hereditary familial traits are crystalized in the relationship

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<sup>4</sup> I echo Paul Ricoeur’s use of the word “momentaneous” on page 103 of “Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics.”

between Ono and grandson Ichiro, while hereditary artistic traits can be understood through the teacher-student relationship between Ono and his teacher Moriyama and between Ono and his student Kuroda. What remains intriguing about these constructions is their similar treatment throughout the novel. Ono oscillates back and forth between the ‘personal,’ his familial life, and the ‘professional,’ his artistic career, once again demonstrating the ongoing conversation, and perpetual murkiness, between the two categorizations.

Early in the novel, Ono encourages his tireless, cowboy-obsessed grandson, Ichiro, to draw—and, indeed, the moment bears the weight of artistic inheritance, the knowledge that somehow with the crayons and sketchpad Ichiro will engage in a hereditary act. Convincing Ichiro to make images on the paper with the colorful wax, Ono asks him to draw from memory, to “remember all sorts of things” and translate them from mental to material image (Ishiguro 32). As Ono observes Ichiro sketching, he details the progressing moment:

Using a dark brown crayon, he drew on the lower part of the sheet a row of boxes—which soon became a skyline of city buildings. And then there emerged, looming above the city, a huge lizard-like creature up on its hind legs. At this point my grandson exchanged his brown crayon for a red one and began to make bright streaks all around the lizard. (Ishiguro 33)

One of the early overt examples of ekphrasis in the novel, Ono’s recounting of Ichiro’s picture-making seems less concerned with precisely depicting the image itself and more interested in revealing or constructing Ichiro’s bodily process of creation. In other words, the artist’s own subjectivity very much informs the ekphrastic moment. This self-referential art-making is, of course, not atypical; in Renaissance literature, the idea of “character,” or one’s moral virtue, is determined by how an individual might paint “verbal tributes,” as Elizabeth Bearden suggests (12). Bearden’s assertion that the act of ekphrasis, or an individual’s engaging in it, generates this nebulous notion of ‘identity’ is critical here, though perhaps reversed. Ono’s ekphrasis is not only constitutive of his selfhood but also degenerative of it. The Ichiro seen through Ono’s eyes pervades the moment of identity formation; familial relation, in this way, complicates the supposition of a discrete self, instead imbuing ‘selfhood’ (either and/or both Ichiro’s and Ono’s) with characteristic uncertainty, with an extra set of eyes, with copious space and a double body.

Ono’s attention to his grandson’s changing of crayon colors, to the color and quality of the marks, the “bright red streaks” that Ichiro draws around the monster from memory, is indicative of a visual relation between himself, observing, and his grandson, situated before him drawing. Ono, as the ‘teller’ of this moment, constructs a seemingly double translation, or a double art-act: grandson-making-art, grandfather-making-art-of-his-grandson-making-art. It is a dizzying mirroring feat. Meanwhile, the ‘truth’ of this moment is merely a clamoring of language; its ‘telling’

is Ono's 'creating.' The ekphrastic occasion becomes, therefore, just that: an *occasion* of contemplation. An occasion of attention. An attentive moment of care rather than surveillance. The moment is a relation, a spatial-temporal experience, and not, as it initially seems, a thing or the telling of a thing.

In a psychological reading of this ekphrastic moment, Timothy Wright finds it to be "an echo of the other historical repressions of the novel," a moment in which Ichiro's rendering of the monster as "part of the city itself" reveals "in a displaced form the historical violence that has been erased from public discourse" (80). Wright's point, while undoubtedly valuable, takes for granted the ekphrastic nature of this moment. We cannot overlook, as I argue, the significance of Ono's detailing *of* the moment in the first place—especially given the focus on Ichiro's bodily process of artistic creation and Ono's fascination with it. Through art-making acts of inheritance and reminiscence, the individual cannot be completely discerned from the collective. Just as Wright's understanding of the ekphrastic moment resists the dislodging of historical violence from public discourse, the mere inclusion of this description resists the dislodging of individual authorship from collective discourse. For *AFW*, moments of supposed material objectivity instead become sites of heightened subjectivity—a paradoxical subjectivity simultaneously degenerative *and* constitutive of the modern 'individual.'

A page later, as Ono continues to attend to his grandson—and vibrantly color a picture of Ichiro for the reader—he details the boy's creation of the monster image. As Ono observes Ichiro's chaotic process, he is undoubtedly more concerned with the physical effects of the image-making act on a body. Ono notes that:

Ichiro rolled back over and returned to his picture. His earlier concentration, though, seemed to have deserted him; he began to add more and more fleeing figures at the bottom of his sketch until the shapes merged and became meaningless. Eventually abandoning any sense of care, he started to scribble wildly all over the lower section of the sheet. (Ishiguro 34)

This idea of "shapes merging" so that all "becomes meaningless" (in Ono's eyes at least) reflects a trajectory of the novel itself, whereby the *effects* of recollection on a singular mind/body become the very art-act, if there is one. Ichiro's image of the monster becomes notably indiscernible, indecipherable, and, even further, "meaningless." The "wild scribble" that obscures all distinct figures on the paper not only mimics a certain ravaging development of memory over time, but also radically changes the art space, collapsing it to a sole circuitous scribble and eviscerating the deceptively three-dimensional and precisely-delineated space of the image-world until only the flat surface of the paper remains, described with two-dimensional language

as “sections” of the “sheet.”<sup>5</sup> When the art-product is relinquished—Ono sees shapes merge and believes meaning is forfeited—the experience of engaging with picture-making constitutes a “collective dream house,” an experiential space in which Ono describes, relates, and attends to his grandson, where the act of ‘description’ becomes an act of ‘relation.’ Recalling Benjamin’s line, we might say that Ono’s ekphrastic occasion speaks more of his care for Ichiro, his desire to watch Ichiro and share with him this moment of art-making, than of any desire to relay a coherent written description of a visual picture. The “meaninglessness” of Ono’s ‘failed’ ekphrasis instead both troubles and reveals a tenebrous outline of its writer. Traditional ekphrasis—the *legible* literary description of a visual art piece—fails, and yet narrative material is produced nonetheless.

These ekphrastic occasions mirror not only the act of writing (Ishiguro’s) but also the act of reading (ours). Whether it be Ichiro’s “adding more and more fleeing figures,” “scribbling wildly,” “making bright streaks,” or “drawing with a brown crayon,” Ono’s narration focuses on the physical assertion of hand-moving-drawing-implement-to-mark-surface. While this description may seem to be only a rudimentary notion of picture-making, it dually informs Ono’s understanding of ‘inheritance’ throughout the text. In a later description of Ichiro—again we see Ichiro pressuring Ono’s understanding of himself—this idea of “traces,” or markings impressed upon and retained by a surface, becomes three-dimensional. The traces are no longer static but instead maintained by and manifest in the individual body, which functions as animated surface:

In fact, as I watched Ichiro that day, pressing his face against the glass to see the street below, I could see how much he was coming to resemble his father. There were traces of Setsuko too, but these were to be found mainly in his mannerisms and little facial habits. And of course, I was struck yet again by the similarity Ichiro bore to how my own son, Kenji, had been at that age. I confess I take a strange comfort from observing children inherit these resemblances from other members of the family, and it is my hope that my grandson will retain them into his adult years. (Ishiguro 136)

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<sup>5</sup> In terms of the ravaging and creating effect of time on memory—that idea that, as time progresses, memories are both eroded and constructed anew—Mary Carruthers notes in *The Book of Memory* that in Ancient Greece there was “no verb meaning ‘to read;’” instead the verb used was “to know again” or “to recollect” (34). Similarly, Carruthers finds that the Latin verb used for “to read” means literally “to collect” or “to cull, pluck,” referring to memory procedure as “the re-collection or gathering up of material” (34). These primordial connections between text, memory, and material suggest, as *AFW* does, that the act of reading—to proceed forward textually—is equally invested in peering backward as it is in generating anew. *Reading, remembering, fabricating*: these verbs blend together for Ono and are irreducible to differentiated actions.

Ono does not hesitate to call attention to his own subjectivity throughout the description of one who is distinctly *not* himself; in fact, the “watching” gesture is the very material of this descriptive moment, and its focus on Ichiro is enlivened by its simultaneous attention to Ono, the perceiving subject. As Ono notes, he “could see” how Ichiro “was coming to” resemble his father, injecting the moment with mobility, with insecurity and unsettled potential. Ichiro’s resemblance to Suichi, Setsuko, and also Kenji—in transfiguring amalgam—is a contemporaneous process that becomes faintly discernible, familiar, and recognizable for a moment. The “traces” that crystallize as the ekphrastic occasion progresses, unearthed within mannerisms and facial habits, speak to a familial movement, a recognizable process of inheritance: a way that Kenji had *been*, as animated being, rather than how he had *looked*, as static surface. The emphasis rests on Ichiro’s mannerisms and facial habits; they are protean, ephemeral, and embodied tendencies that exist in space, that persist over time, that flicker visually for a moment before transforming, waning, or vanishing.

The “strange comfort” that Ono takes in “observing these resemblances” speaks perhaps to his fascination with art-making, with mark-making, with the visual certainty of seeing a movement, trait, or mannerism reflected—or mirrored—years later in an inheriting body. Here, we might understand inheritance as a way in which the bounds of a body or self are extended, limited neither by space nor time nor corporeal form but instead consistently attended to and reanimated. Ono’s ekphrastic attentions recalibrate ‘inheritance’ as a narrative act, as a careful and generative process of reading. This ekphrastic self is productive in the word’s most basic sense: energetic, vertiginous, and multitudinous. As Ono reflects, only moments later, on artistic inheritance:

Of course, it is not only when we are children that we are open to these small inheritances; a teacher or mentor whom one admires greatly in early adulthood will leave his mark, and indeed, long after one has come to re-evaluate, perhaps even reject, the bulk of that man’s teachings, certain traits will tend to survive, like some shadow of that influence, to remain with one throughout one’s life. I am aware, for instance, that certain of my mannerisms—the way I poise my hand when I am explaining something, certain inflections in my voice when I am trying to convey irony or impatience, even whole phrases I am fond of using that people have come to think of as my own—I am aware these are all traits I originally acquired from Mori-san, my former teacher. And perhaps I will not be flattering myself unduly were I to suppose many of my own pupils will in turn have gained such small inheritances from me. (Ishiguro 136-7)

Honing in on these “small inheritances” or the “mark” of foreignness—the preceding filial collective—within the self, it seems that Ono’s idea of inheritance is itself an act of marking, art-making, *and* procreational reading. This generative endeavor is a reading *of* or *into* a foreign body that thus constructs the familiar body

as itself—or merely displaces the barrier between bodily foreignness and familiarity. Ono’s idea of inheritance is also an instance of impression, with both physical and ideological implications. Inheritance, or the “survival of certain traits ... like some shadow of that influence,” is situated alongside art (both visual and textual). Inheritance is the very art-making act of marking, of leaving traces, of impressing upon a surface, of denoting a presence in a particular moment—something inconclusive and volatile inundating the known, static, inheriting body. Aligning inheritance with art and art-making, Ono somewhat diminishes its empirical, genetic aspects in favor of an inheritance that is wholeheartedly constructed, produced, and perpetuated, and then *re*-constructed, *re*-produced, continually-perpetuated in the very material etchings of a work: text as *textile*, art as material body. *AFW* configures narrative as fabric in that its prose is ideologically and texturally susceptible to a kind of cyclic self-contradiction or aberration; all the while, the text tumbles on materially. *AFW*’s individual, in this way, becomes hybrid, mythic, and chimeric; they inherit the destabilizing collective. As readers, we too assume this narrative instability, attempting to piece together contradictory fragments of memory and text whose coherence, by traditional standards, remains dubious.

So then what can we make of Ono’s idea that certain traits “survive” or persist, particles of the foreign dispersed within the familiar, like Benjamin’s understanding of the flash of history? Like, in Ono’s words, “some shadow of that influence”? Ono is a man living with and within these dizzying shadows—the echoes of his past as a national propagandist—that perpetually temper his experience of the current moment. So the idea of inheritance—that the past might recur perpetually, that history might flash momentarily as an inherited trait in a new body—is especially fascinating to him because it denies the hope for a detached and unburdened present. In a sense, Ono constantly surveys his past while simultaneously remaining embroiled within it, within his recollections *of* it. We see Ono attempt to assert a present-focused subjectivity over and over again throughout *AFW* with self-affirming prepositions like “I suppose,” “I realize,” “I believe,” “I recall,” “I remember,” “I confess” (Ishiguro 159, 79, 184, 106, 194, 114). Nonetheless, the narrative’s genuine uncertainty and aesthetic solubility—the way Ono’s words seem to dissolve, implicate, and cannot uphold themselves—erode any rigid bounds of subjectivity and time.

Ono’s forgetfulness, while, yes, destabilizing, is also the substance of the text. As he fumbles over his memories they become inseparable from the settled time-place in which the narrative unfolds. He even admits so. Thinking back on an old conversation with Jiro Miyake, the man who rescinds his marriage offer to Noriko before the novel begins, Ono confesses to being confused: “so then I am obliged to think back yet again to that encounter with Miyake, to turn it over from yet another perspective. But as I have just said, I could barely recall what had taken place just one week afterwards, and now more than a year has passed” (Ishiguro 54). Only a



few pages later, still ruminating on the Miyake incident, Ono asks himself (or perhaps the reader), “Did Miyake really say all this to me that afternoon?” (56). Ono is certain that the disgrace of his old position as a government propagandist and police informer causes Miyake to reject his daughter, and he performs and probes at the memory of the encounter for pages, “searching it for significance” (53). Yet it is this very act of inconclusive rumination—what I have termed Ono’s ‘narrative dithering’—that creates an image of Ono himself. These lines of text, like small shadowy inheritances, impulses, or mannerisms, fabricate new narrative material even as they attempt to fully resurrect past events. In other words, Ono’s dithering is *productive*. It is attentive. It is work, breath, and effort. It suggests narrative as corporeal byproduct. And it offers narration as an animating, art-making, inheriting encounter.

### III. (Re)Animating the Ruins: On Ono’s Aesthetics

The novel is partitioned into four sections—October 1948, April 1949, November 1949, and June 1950—to allow for this narrative ‘dithering.’ Nonetheless, *AFW* also facilitates mobility or mercuriality in the particularity and texture of its prose, as mentioned above, which I am describing as ‘artfully uncertain’ or ‘vividly forgetful.’<sup>6</sup> In using these terms, I refer to memory as both instance of inheritance and art-making act, susceptible to fluctuation and equally embroiled with past as with present. *AFW*’s vividly forgetful prose style not only troubles boundaries between *self* and *collective* and *past* and *present*, but simultaneously offers text as *textile*, a kind of narrative fabric susceptible to alteration, aberration, and inconsistency—to its own ‘doing’ and ‘un-doing.’

In understating *AFW* as both “dream house” and textile, I emphasize the novel’s mercurial materiality. Thinking in spatial terms, this animation can also be considered a revivifying of ruins, a breathing of life into places of stasis where the novel’s potency stems from its fluctuant uncertainty, its considerations of humanity—what it means to be a breathing, pulsing, thinking being—as spatial/temporal chimera, too. Ultimately, I argue, *AFW* paints a delicate picture of what it means to reckon with ‘self,’ to produce ‘selfhood’ as process, concept, and object. The status of subjectivity throughout the novel is precarious for this very reason. At the thematic level, the reader witnesses Ono’s active performance of self, yet at the linguistic level, Ono’s words are degenerative of the very subjectivity he seems to profess. In fact, Ono’s self-creating and self-effacing performance espouses a kind of humanity that posthuman theorist and feminist scholar Donna Haraway finds to be emblematic of the late twentieth century, of “our time,” a “mythic” time

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<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, A. Harris Fairbanks and Pierre François title this narrative subversion “oneiric realism” (François in Fairbanks 604, 611).

(150). The dreaminess, so to speak, of this mythic time recognizes the narrative fervor yet ephemerality of an industrial, post-war era in which we are “all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” (150). If we believe that narrative, in the ways *AFW* utilizes it, operates at this boundary between machine and organism—as both material production and human exertion—then the novel’s paradox gains transgressive nuance. Yes, Ono seems egotistical. Yes, this supposed egotism seemingly interferes with the ‘telling’ of any reliable narrative. Yet the text proceeds nonetheless. It records. It functions as material archive. It ‘tells’ despite Ono’s calculated dithering. *AFW*’s hybrid sentience, like Haraway’s chimeric mythos and Benjamin’s collective dream house, is itself an art-act, the ekphrastic “play of writing and reading the world” (Haraway 152).

Much of this process of configuring one’s own humanity within the novel involves the perception of another’s image. As Ono engages with the ravaging and creating effects of time on his own memory, he also details the same temporal effects on the images and bodies of those he cares about. In an account he claims to almost forget to include, Ono recalls bumping into his beloved former student Kuroda after the war, while wandering the ruins of the “old pleasure district,” walking “somewhere, making my way through what was left ... looking from under my umbrella at those skeletal remains” (Ishiguro 77). Indeed, as Ono describes Kuroda’s appearance, the former student’s face mimics the “skeletal remains” of the old city; “Kuroda’s face, which had been quite round before the war, had hollowed out around the cheekbones, and what looked like heavy lines had appeared towards the chin and the throat. And I thought to myself as I stood there: ‘He’s not young any more’” (78). In this somewhat-ekphrastic rendering of Kuroda’s face and its transfiguration, Ono focuses again on the “heavy lines” that compose and structure Kuroda’s transformation, on the “hollowing out” of Kuroda’s once-round cheeks. Notably, these descriptors used to paint Kuroda’s change enact the language of art-making and marking, the very language used to chronicle inheritance. While it may seem relatively simple to declare that Ono, a once-prolific artist (or so he claims), obviously understands the world around him in ‘artistic’ terms, it seems more pressing to note that this language of making and marking occurs specifically when Ono describes other people and their selfhoods. Struggling to determine and explain the difference in Kuroda’s appearance, Ono constructs his face as a canvas upon which to create, both visually and linguistically. The ruinous terrain of the old pleasure district is suddenly enlivened not only by Kuroda’s unexpected presence—and his and Ono’s reciprocal act of “walking,” and “watching,” and “looking”—but also by Ono’s illustrating of Kuroda’s altered face.

If we consider illustration, whether it be visual or linguistic, as an attentive act of animation—a process in which a space fluctuates, changes, is marked in some way over time—then perhaps we may gain an understanding of Ono’s art-making and self-making practices as critically intertwined. It is not simply that Ono

encounters figures or apparitions from his past in ekphrastic occasion imbued with the language of mark-making, but more so that he translates his present in similar terms. Ono creates his present momentarily for the reader in punctilious aesthetic consideration. Take, for example, Ono's understanding of the human "face" (here, Kuroda's) as a site, surface, or canvas. In likening Kuroda's appearance to his surrounding environment and proceeding to detail, with artistic precision, the physicality of his face, Ono formulates an image of Kuroda focused solely in the moment of its creation. This mercuriality—the art-act's *momentary-ness*, so to speak—revivifies, on the one hand, a spatial terrain that has been termed "skeletal remains," while overlooking, on the other hand, the history of these ruins. In other words, Ono's art-making as reanimation is an act less concerned with the historical particulars of a site, here a *face*, and more interested in its aesthetic present. Resultantly, Ono's creative instinct is often forgetful of the distinct ideological weight of a place's past, though eerily cognizant of its physical transformation, of its transient aesthetics.

Ono's awareness of the fluctuating imagery associated with memory, with "reminiscing" about "the old days," is indeed a sensitivity to the visual, to the optics of wavering light (Ishiguro 75). His haziness is less heedless than it perhaps initially appears. When speaking of Mrs Kawakami, the owner of the bar he frequents, Ono comments on the power of the visual, spatial, and atmospheric to conjure communal conversation, and we witness the bar's sensory power: its site-specific ability to inculcate memory. Prompted by place, Ono proclaims a "nostalgic mood:"

Quite often these days, in the evenings down at Mrs Kawakami's, I find myself reminiscing about the Migi-Hidari and the old days. For there is something about Mrs Kawakami's place when Shintaro and I are the only customers there, something about sitting together up at the bar under those low-hung lights, that puts us in a nostalgic mood. We may start discussing someone from the past, about how much he could drink perhaps, or some funny mannerism he had. Then before long we will be trying to get Mrs Kawakami to recall the man, and in our attempts to jog her memory, we will find ourselves remembering more and more amusing things about him. The other night, after we had been laughing over just such a set of reminiscences, Mrs Kawakami said, as she often will do on these occasions: 'Well, I don't recall the name, but I'm sure I'd recognize his face.' (Ishiguro 75)

Mrs Kawakami's citing of the "face" as a metonymy for the 'individual' is more complex than it initially appears. In this communal attempt to "recall the man," to "laugh," and "discuss," and "jog her memory," the trio stumbles upon face *not* as a site or surface that archives memory, but as the product of a collective process. Ono's calculations of the past from the position of the present are less *forgetful*, or effacing of information, than they are overly-*reminiscent*, producing an abundance of information. They are creative, and artfully so. Mrs Kawakami's re-collected 'face'

thus emerges as a product of communal engagement. Ono's interest in facial expressions and bodily mannerisms—in the face as canvas—marks his desire to forge anew, to reanimate with others: “see[ing] ... an old face” and “rebuilding the old days” (76).<sup>7</sup>

Ono's attempts at artful reanimation are both stabilizing and unsettling, constructing, as Modernist literary scholar Rebecca Walkowitz argues, an “aberrant grammar” that “disorients systems of meaning and patterns of reference” (Barthes in Walkowitz 112). Ono's dedication to linguistic and memorial instability is sparked by his consistent proclamations *of* uncertainty: “I believe I was recalling the events of that day last month when ...” and he continues on (Ishiguro 184). In other words, by calling attention to Ono's self-substantiating and self-effacing acts of creation—his narrative dithering—the novel offers *itself* as fertile undertaking, as animating endeavor, revealing its artifices while also presenting them as acts of humanization. It's almost as if the novel breathes, attempting, “like the Deleuzian stammer,” as Walkowitz notes, “to make the process of representation both more vexed and more visible” (112). What, then, we might ask, are the implications of this destabilizing aesthetic?

#### IV. Conclusion: Art in the Face of (De/Re)Construction

The reanimation of Kuroda, Mrs Kawakami, and Shintaro's faces are only a few examples of Ono's insistence on detached and descriptive artistry. While he engages with the past in individualistic and humanistic terms, the novel's prose works to reveal his pitfalls. Or, at the very least, to destabilize all that he has just relayed. Ono's detached, descriptive virtuosity is artfully subversive in that it troubles the idea of a discrete individual while still revealing Ono's stubborn ahistorical obsession with individualism. Literary scholar Natalie Reitano writes about the focus on the ahistorical individual in Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*, though many key points of her argument apply to *AFW* as well. She believes that the central character's “amnesiac relation to his own past” and the novel's “abolition of space” are realistic responses to “the acceleration of history by which the past is increasingly abandoned, forgotten or lost” (363). We can consider Ono's similar reaction to the weight of his past—his desire to forget or re-create it—along these lines. The “acceleration” of history, its objectification and commodification, precipitates Ono's adversity to it. He longs to escape this history's condemning gaze, so he does. Ono tumbles into the ephemeral instant of art and art-making as a method of corralling the present, the momentary, and the transitory. Ono's “amnesia,” however, unlike Ryder's in *The Unconsoled* (the novel's central character), bears its own negative; it consistently hints

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<sup>7</sup> It is a paradoxical desire to forge anew because it is simultaneously a desire to remember and reconstruct structures, processes, and places as they existed in the past.

at the circumstances that spawned it. For Ono, the perpetual urge to efface the past is equally a desire to recollect it, fragment by fragment.

This inescapable duality, Ono's amnesiac artistry, both answers and troubles the prominent postmodern question of art after Auschwitz, that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," as Theodor Adorno poses (34). How can art, if it is at all possible to totalize the idea, persist without recognizing its own violence, its own inconsequence, its own "degenera[tion] into idle chatter"? (Adorno 34) Ono's "civility," or his animating humanity, operates alongside his "barbarity," or his simultaneous effacement, to again use Benjamin's terms (Benjamin 265). In effect, Ono's amnesiac tendencies and aesthetic proclivities create *AFW*'s narrative web. When he insists, at the end of the novel, that he "was a man of some influence, who used that influence towards a disastrous end," that "it is impossible that Dr Saito could have been ignorant of [his] reputation as a painter for all those years," Ono's abstracting hint at cruelty, the "disastrous ends," is mobilized by his own memory of it (Ishiguro 192, 194). The art-making and reminiscing acts that allow Ono sentience cannot and do not exist in *AFW* without these simultaneous indications of their ravaging effects. They do not persist without poking slyly at Ono's fabled past. This layered depiction of history—as an experience spiraling beyond the individual and yet utterly enmeshed within them—informs *AFW*'s complex and protean aesthetics.

If we believe that the "very aesthetic practices Adorno denounced as barbaric still [harbor] the potential to be salvaged and recuperated as possible spaces of resistance," then perhaps we can account for *AFW*'s subversive presence (Wright 59). The text, despite its subjective vacillations, the 'forgetfulness' burbling at its surface, acts as memorial repository; Ishiguro flips W.G. Sebald's justification for literature post-World War II on its head. Where Sebald finds the "ideal" of "unpretentious objectivity" over "long passages" to be the "only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction," Ishiguro presents a narrative in which material description, over long passages, becomes instead a nuanced site of heightened subjectivity (Sebald 53). The novel, however, loses none of its legitimacy, none of its archival potential or potency. In fact, it is possible that *AFW* and Sebald's "Air War and Literature," published within ten years of one another, are engaged in retroactive conversation. Take, for example, Ono's musing that "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" (Ishiguro 25). Emphasis on the failure of precise recollection creates instead an ekphrastic archive of "truth," to use Sebald's language, that is complicated by its own irreducibility to "unpretentious objectivity."

*AFW* instead presents "sounds," "images," and "passages" of great complexity that consistently *resist* re-collection. This raucous resistance chronicles the vexed complexities of artistic processes like selfhood and memory. Ishiguro destabilizes Sebald's factual understanding of the primacy of material remnants by

offering narrative memory as a tangible remnant itself—by making ‘failed’ memory the fecund site of narrative production, self-awareness, sentience, and nuance. *AFW*’s ‘ruins,’ or the text’s constant (re)animation of them like the painters’ “collective endeavor to capture the fragile lantern light of the pleasure world,” render literature not only valid but also vivid: artistic, sentient, and unsettling (Ishiguro 174). The novel, put simply, is telling. It speaks, so to say, despite Ono’s seemingly self-motivated silence.

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