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INTERIOR LANDSCAPES: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *THE BURIED GIANT*

PAISAJES INTERIORES: UNA LECTURA ECOCRÍTICA DE EL GIGANTE ENTERRADO*, DE KAZUO ISHIGURO*

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Abstract

Given the ecocritical potential of many of Ishiguro's novels, more ecocritical analyses should be carried out on his works. This paper aims at reading *The Buried Giant* (2015) through an ecocritical lens and show how the setting of the novel exemplifies and adds new aspects to ecocritical concepts, such as the disappearance of the landscape, the undermining of anthropocentrism and the silence of nature. The first section will focus on the concept of the 'embodied landscape' and will be concerned with ways in which landscape undercuts notions of man's superiority through the memories of past events it is able to retain, unlike the characters, who are utterly deprived of their memory. The second section will examine the symbolism of trees and greenery so as to show how they seem to be linked to memories and contribute to filtering them, thus letting some memories re-emerge from the collective forgetfulness.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*, landscape, ecocriticism, intertextuality, vegetation.

Resumen

Dado el potencial ecocrítico de muchas de las novelas de Ishiguro, se deberían llevar a cabo más análisis ecocríticos sobre su producción literaria.

Este ensayo tiene como objetivo leer *El gigante enterrado* (2015) a través de un prisma ecocrítico y mostrar cómo el escenario de la novela ejemplifica y añade otros aspectos a conceptos ecocríticos como la desaparición del paisaje, el debilitamiento del antropocentrismo y el silencio de la naturaleza. La primera sección se centrará en el concepto de «paisaje encarnado» e incluirá las formas en que el paisaje socava las nociones de superioridad del hombre a través de los recuerdos de acontecimientos pasados que él es capaz de conservar, a diferencia de los personajes, que están privados de su memoria. La segunda sección analizará el simbolismo de los árboles y la vegetación para mostrar cómo parecen estar vinculados a los recuerdos y ayudar a filtrarlos, haciendo que algunos de ellos emerjan del olvido colectivo.

Palabras clave: Kazuo Ishiguro, *El gigante enterrado*, paisaje, ecocrítica, intertextualidad, vegetación.

1. Introduction

An ecocritical analysis of Ishiguro's works would find plenty of nourishment in the green lymph of some of his novels. In an interview with Allan Vorda and Kim Herzinger (1991), Kazuo Ishiguro commented on the connection between Stevens, a butler who plays the role of protagonist in *The Remains of the Day*, and the English countryside. He feels affinity for the latter by virtue of the shared concept of 'dignity': "beauty and greatness lie in being able to be this kind of cold, frozen, butler who isn't demonstrative and who hides emotions in much the way he's saying that the British landscape does with its surface calm: the ability to actually keep down turmoil and emotion" (Ishiguro "An Interview with" 141–142). In the passage in question, the butler manages to indirectly say something about himself by talking about the landscape of the "rolling English countryside" (Ishiguro *The Remains* 28), where the concept of dignity, albeit described in its environmental exteriority, is shown to be at Stevens's core. Although already present in *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and, to a certain extent, in Ishiguro's latest novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021), the dialectic relationship between landscape and man, alongside that between exterior and interior, is magnified in *The Buried Giant* (2015) and will be studied in this paper so as to shed light on the ecocritical reflections prompted by this novel.

The Buried Giant explores the theme of memory, which is dealt with in various ways in Ishiguro's literary production. The characters in the story—the Britons Axl and Beatrice, the Saxon warrior Wistan, a young Saxon boy called Edwin and the Arthurian knight Sir Gawain—embark on a journey

through the landscape of England that eventually leads them to the lair of a dragon in an attempt to recover their memories –these have been inexplicably erased from the minds of people. The revelation that awaits them is not only that this collective forgetfulness is caused by the breath of the dragon, but also that the mist of forgetfulness was but a thin veneer covering a history of hatred and violence buried in the landscape.

Before examining the specific ecocritical themes the paper will touch upon, it is necessary to briefly frame the image of the landscape of *The Buried Giant* within the ecocritical theory of landscape. Indeed, the portrayal of this provided from the very first pages of the novel underpin ecocritical tenets, foreshadowing further ecocritical implications in the story. In *The Buried Giant*, the landscape is not only a powerful setting, but it is also central to the conception of the novel. While reading a passage from the medieval romance "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" describing the moment when the knight rides from one castle to another through lands fraught with danger (Wood), Ishiguro suddenly had the "vision of a landscape" (A. Clark) which intrigued him. It has been pointed out that crimes against nature are often present in Ishiguro's fiction, including *The Buried Giant*, where the "initial retreat into a seemingly pastoral idyll is undercut through political intricacy, bloodshed and betrayal" (Groes and Dean 1022). The phrase 'seemingly pastoral idyll' referring to the landscape is particularly fitting. As a matter of fact, it should be clearly pointed out that the novel categorically rejects a pastoral view of landscape, such as the one evoked by the works of Thoreau or Wordsworth. Their poetry highlighted the importance of a place when it comes to its representation of nature as a remedy to the issues of modernity (Filipova 1) and has been indicated as a reading that characterised first-wave ecocritics (Buell 89).

Interestingly, the narrator alerts readers to the fact that the landscape in the story is extremely different from that which can be gazed at in present-day England:

> You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated. There were instead miles of desolate, uncultivated land; here and there rough-hewn paths over craggy hills or bleak moorland. Most of the roads left by the Romans would by then have become broken or overgrown, often fading into wilderness. (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 3)

Rather than giving precise information on the local flora and fauna, this bird's-eye view over the setting of the novel seems to place particular emphasis on the absence of paths, roads, meadows, lanes and other man-made operations involving sectioning and parting the land. Later on in the story, the narrator again repeats that no hedgerows mark the landscape and neither do any other artificial and order-inducing barriers, thereby applying Frost's idea that "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" (Frost 47) to nature.

The descriptions of the landscape provided by Ishiguro perfectly exemplify the conception of landscape discussed by Serenella Iovino in *Ecologia letteraria*. Unlike 17th-century paintings, she contends, the representation of contemporary landscape cannot be what it used to, namely a depiction of nature (Iovino 29). A contemporary representation of landscape would be dotted with machines, buildings, highways and other unmistakeable signs of human presence (Iovino 29). Her considerations can be paired with Stern's, who observed the polluted Mexican landscape in Laureles where the locals garden in cans and tires, and trees are planted to hold the earth (G26). In line with this, although wild and untamed, the landscape of *The Buried Giant* is far from pristine or untainted by human presence. As the story unfolds, villages dug inside the sides of cliffs, Saxon villages, bridges and a monastery appear as elements of a hybridisation brought about by the coexistence of humans, nature and even other fantastic creatures such as ogres and pixies. Through these hybrid landmarks, the environment of *The Buried Giant* embraces ecocritical reflections on the disappearance of pristine landscapes.

Yet, discussing the disappearance of the canonical perception of landscape might seem immediate; as Timothy Clark underlines "To read now green criticism from the early 1990s, with its solemn reminders that humans are 'part of nature' ... seems like listening to assertions of the obvious" (29). Enquiring into the agency of the landscape and tracing its expressions would be a further, more complex step, which *The Buried Giant* forces readers to take, in that it depicts a landscape endowed with agency which reverses anthropocentric assumptions, with far-reaching implications. In a passage from the novel, Sir Gawain reflects on how the misdeeds of the past are covered by the landscape and that "bones lie sheltered beneath a pleasant green carpet" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 327). Nevertheless, while reading the novel the reader may wonder whether the traces of past violence are just buried or rather lie scattered across the landscape, barely concealed.

This paper aims to read *The Buried Giant* through an ecocritical lens and show the extent to which landscape acquires agency and undermines

anthropocentric notions, in line with the ambiguity of the two-pronged term Anthropocene. It will be divided into two sections: the first one is concerned with the representation of landscape and its knowledge; the second, zooms in on the meanings of a specific landscape feature, namely trees and greenery, whose potentially intertextual symbology in pivotal scenes spurs fruitful reflections and engages readers in the process of interpreting the story and deconstructing anthropocentrism. By showing the higher knowledge retained by the landscape and its superiority deriving from the possession of historical memory, the landscape of Ishiguro's novel will be read not merely as another case in which humans inscribe their self-image and actions on nature, but rather as the key element which leads to correct interpretation and truth.

2. Collective Amnesia and the Enduring Memory of the Landscape

The landscape of *The Buried Giant* becomes an 'embodied' landscape that forces characters to acknowledge as internal to them what they thought was just external and belonging to the landscape, an ostensible 'other.' The term 'embodied landscape' draws on Serenella Iovino's of landscape as the material and cognitive context of memory which becomes a place where knowledge becomes embodied (*Paesaggio* 35). This ecocritical analysis will show that the embodied landscape does not entail an assimilation of the landscape to humans and its subsequent subservience to characters; rather, it enables the landscape to move from the condition of background to that of figure and reverse anthropocentric frames of reference which endow humans with exclusive agency, superior knowledge and exemplary moral values.

When discussing the concept of embodied landscape, the mist of forgetfulness which hovers over the entire setting of the novel is a key aspect which prompts (con)fusion among characters and the surrounding environment. Both functioning element and figuration (Stacy 117) in its double meaning of weather phenomenon and forgetfulness, the mist indissolubly links together the characters with the landscape, thus becoming a liminal, floating element which veils a land run through with traces of a violent past and shields people's minds from remembering past atrocities. At the end of the novel, the hybrid nature of the mist is further revealed by its twofold cause: it is indeed produced by the breath of the she-dragon Querig, but only because of the enduring magic wrought by Merlin decades before. The mist not only erases the awareness of past events, but also negates

the accumulation of knowledge gained throughout the story, as much as the mental image of England readers had formed (Vernon and Miller 80). Although Beatrice and Axl, as Britons, have bonded with the Saxons Edwin and Wistan, this is of no help in the face of the incipient war and will prove useless to prevent it. Thus, the mist succeeds in obliterating men's knowledge at multiple levels, substituting that for the heavy knowledge of past deeds, which may also prove empowering, though.

In the misty setting of *The Buried Giant*, knowledge of past events is transferred from humans to the landscape, which deals a strong blow to the concept of Anthropocene, in an ecocritically reflective way. There are many clear examples where the knowledge is retained by the landscape. Perhaps, the most noticeable one involves the old monastery which, after close inspection by Wistan, turns out to have been a Saxon hillfort fraught with deadly traps: "This is today a place of peace and prayer, yet you needn't gaze so deep to find blood and terror" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 161). While humans are used to projecting themselves and their actions on the land, in the novel it is the characters who are changed by what they see and are affected by the journey through the landscape which awakens disturbing memories. As the narrator specifies (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 31), no hedgerows, paths, roads or meadows divide the wild setting of Ishiguro's novel. Therefore, there seem to be "epistemic gaps that are revealed between narratives of sovereignty and the landscapes upon which they are acted" (Vernon and Miller 72). The image of a landscape that gains power and becomes active in the presence of collective amnesia sounds almost familiar when coupled with the concept of "ecological amnesia" (Parker M161). This notion portrays humankind as blindfolded in front of catastrophe and environmental alteration.

The mysteriousness of nature in Ishiguro's novel could be said to be very different from that characterising other representations of nature, such as the wilderness of the American frontier. Wilderness was still something to be 'conquered' and mapped by the colonists who pushed the frontier westwards, whereas in *The Buried Giant* there are elements which clearly indicate that the geography of the place is known to people; therefore, it is at least partly mapped. When setting out on their journey, Beatrice guides Axl to the Saxon village; she mentions the moment of the day when it is dangerous for them to enter the Great Plain and knows the precise location of the Buried Giant. Although formal maps are never shown to the couple, the people's oral instructions successfully guide them in their quest. Like the wilderness, the landscape is unknown to them from another perspective, and

the mist hides traces of events and facts which took place in those exact areas decades before. Despite rough coordinates and landmarks, the landscape is obscure to them in its layers of history.[1]

While talking to Sir Gawain, Wistan asks how Arthur succeeded in cancelling the scars of past battles from the land: "By what strange skill did your great king heal the scars of war in these lands that a traveller can see barely a mark or shadow left on them today?" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 127). The fact is precisely that he could not and that the layers of recent and remote violence are scattered across the land and threaten to emerge. Through the embodiment of memories in the landscape, it can be observed how the environment becomes not only linked to characters, but even their extension. Numerous examples can be made, one of the most effective being the Roman villa where Axl and Beatrice seek shelter from the incipient rain on their journey. Appropriately termed a site-specific "memory space" (Teo 7), the villa is the place where Axl begins to vaguely remember about past turmoil through the words of the boatman, who describes the days of war witnessed by the walls of his childhood house: "When the man speaks of wars and burning houses, it's almost as if something comes back to me" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 48). It is indeed true that landscapes in Ishiguro's novels "beckon us to look beneath their surfaces to find the troubles of the recent and long-ago past" (Russell 301).

I deem it important to underline that the concept of embodied landscape and the attribution of enlightening knowledge to the environment are an interesting trait which links together Ishiguro's novel with Seamus Heaney's bog poems, published in his collections *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975). Ishiguro himself stated that the story in *The Buried Giant* can be applied to many situations and that he reflected on Bosnia, Kosovo and Rwanda (Ahearn). This could add another meaning to the term "geography of the book," which Walkowitz employed to discuss Ishiguro's fiction and its translation and publication in numerous languages (219). As for Heaney's oeuvre, some papers have highlighted the theme of water in his poetry (N. Allen) and his contribution to environmental poetics in the form of his

1 The reference to a mapped land which retains an aura of mystery can be intertextually linked with an excerpt from *Heart of Darkness*. Here, the more colonisers cover the map of Africa in landmarks of rivers and mountains, the more it ceases to be a blank space on the map and becomes 'dark.' In Marlow's words: "It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. ... It had become a place of darkness" (Conrad 9).

poems "Electric Light" and "District and Circle" (Carruth 233). It is clearly beyond the scope of this article to trace green threads in Heaney's poetry; yet, I will briefly shed light on the way his bog poems depict the knowledge of the landscape and become another intriguing example of embodied landscape.

Referring to *The Buried Giant*, Wong's observation that "older layers of England slowly reveal themselves and grow as the characters' memories gain more clarity" (139) bring to mind the Danish bog in Heaney's poems, which "going down and down" (Heaney "Digging") then brings to the surface the preserved bodies of victims who were sacrificed for rites of fertility in the Iron Age. In "Bogland," the bog becomes similar to a collective book furrowed with history and relics from the past, which are sometimes brought to the surface, like the skeleton of the Great Irish Elk, sunken butter still "salty and white" (Heaney "Bogland") and also human corpses, which the poet must "confront as aspects of his own mind" (Hufstader 73). More specifically, it has been observed numerous times that Heaney draws a parallel between the victims of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland and ritual victims sacrificed for good harvests and fertility in the Iron Age (Reece 95, Pratt 263, among others). Thus, the layers of the landscape and its relics from the past not only show remote violence, but also help to contextualise other, more contemporary acts of violence which might seem wholly unconnected with events in other eras. Therefore, it can be said that both the imaginary landscape of England in *The Buried Giant* and Heaney's Danish bog are embodied landscapes which possess higher awareness of historical memory and reveal it to people.

Having highlighted the superior knowledge possessed by the embodied landscape and its reversal of anthropocentric notions, I now would like to consider a particularly important scene both because it practically shows the layers of memory retained by the environment and because it will lead us smoothly to the next object of enquiry, namely the impact of the embodied landscape on characters. At the Saxon village, Wistan falls into conversation with Axl and relates to him that the day before he had ridden through a valley and felt a strange sense of familiarity:

> my mare with hardly any prompting set into a gallop as though for sheer joy. We raced across fields, past lake and river, and my spirit soared. A strange thing, as if I were returning to scenes from an early life, though to my knowledge I've never before visited this country. (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 91)

This passage shows the opposite situation to that in *Sir Gawain*, in that in the romance, names of familiar places do not yield knowledge to the knight (Vernon and Miller 75). In addition, in this excerpt, the condition of forgetfulness empowers the land and allows it to convey meanings and feelings to Wistan, although that specific place is unnamed and unknown to him. Reading Sanora Babb's novel *An Owl on Every Post*, Weik von Mossner states that characters can make the environment "emotionally salient for readers" (135). In this excerpt, the landscape 'makes characters emotionally salient,' insomuch as it opens new, forgotten scenarios regarding Wistan's past and awakens questions which make the hero more complex to readers. However, the fact that the knowledge retained by the landscape is barred from both, Wistan and readers, leaves those questions unanswered.

While characters become more and more reliant on the landscape to delve into their past, the landscape can be said to become a character ever-present in the narration in a way that is noticeable and involves action rather than language, thus giving a new dimension to the notion of "embodied landscape" and opposing the recurring argument of the "silence of nature" (Vogel). Take for instance the water that runs beneath the bridge where Axl and Beatrice, who are travelling with Wistan and Edwin, come across three soldiers who closely question them about their journey. The atmosphere is tense with danger, given that Edwin and Wistan are being sought after and have to disguise their identity to the soldiers' prying gaze. In this situation, the noise of rushing water sounds "ominous" to Axl (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 109) and "seemed only to add to the tense mood" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 112).

Like water, wind often intrudes in the narrative and sometimes blows so strongly that it carries away the words of characters in pivotal scenes. This becomes more evident in the end of the novel, to the point that it hampers communication, as if it foreshadowed the divisions and feuds which will soon afflict Britons and Saxons. When Gawain, Beatrice and Axl quarrel before Wistan and Edwin's arrival at the giant's cairn, the wind is "a fourth voice against theirs" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 314). After Querig's death, Edwin asks Beatrice whether Wistan is still alive and struggles to hear Beatrice through the wind. The wind blows unruly also during the exchange between Axl and the boatman. It is as if the hindrances to communication posed by the gusts of wind anticipated Axl's imminent separation from Beatrice. However, an even more evident case of embodied landscape and articulation of nature occurs in the scene where the light fails to illumine the bottom of

a ditch where an ogre is dying: "The sun, now shining almost directly into it, should have made it easier to discern what was before him, but instead created confusing shadows, and where there was puddle and ice, a myriad of dazzling surfaces" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 288). Thus, it is clear that numerous elements of the landscape—water, wind and light—step forward from the background and take their place alongside the human characters.

Weik von Mossner stated that landscape is not only fundamental for readers' understanding of narrative, but also paramount for characters and plot development (130), which proves true in Ishiguro's novels as well, where it has interesting implications for characters in terms of truth and interpretation. As a matter of fact, their memories spill over the landscape and a part of their essence is therefore transported outside them. This entails the consequence that what is external turns out to be internal, in a "metaphoric association between the topography of Britain and the topography of human psyche," as exemplified by the 'buried giant' of the title, which is both part of the landscape and a metaphor for buried traumas (Valančiūnas 216). Given that knowledge is subtracted from humans and projected on the land, interpretation of landscape is paramount for characters to reach truth, which implies another interesting reversal of the Cartesian, anthropocentric notions. In numerous 16th- and 17th-century works, emphasis is placed on the importance of Truth and the necessity to unveil it. Just to name a few examples from the canon, in the first book of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, the inexperienced knight Redcrosse is unable to figure out who to trust. When he chances upon Fradubio and is told of his misadventure, the knight does not realise that the beautiful woman who transformed the man into a tree is in fact Fidessa. In Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian visits an Interpreter before travelling to the Celestial City, in order to learn what to make of the world.

The issue of correct interpretation is central to *The Buried Giant* and is put forward from the very beginning in Axl and Beatrice's journey. The Roman villa becomes the scenario where the characters of a mysterious boatman and an old rabbit-skinning woman are placed. The story of the widow and the boatman "*feels* like a fable, and it is supposed to function as such" (Wong 144). It can look like a scene from *The Faerie Queene*, where ambiguous characters are encountered: the old woman mercilessly skins rabbits and the boatman, at first, does not face Axl and Beatrice but keeps looking at a wall. Upon entering the half-collapsed room of the villa and settling next to the two strange figures, Axl and Beatrice almost step into an

allegory: "It was almost as if, coming across a picture and stepping inside it, they had been compelled to become painted figures in their turn" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 39). This revelation takes place while a flash of lightning "illuminated the shelter" (Ibid.). Interestingly, it is the observation of the surrounding environment that allows Axl to understand that the woman has slaughtered many rabbits before the one she holds tightly in her hands: "Axl realised that the dark patches beneath their feet, and elsewhere all over the ruined floor, were old bloodstains, and that mingled with the smell of ivy and damp mouldering stone was another faint but lingering one of slaughter" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 40). In hindsight, this passage could function as the perfect example of how landscape covers past atrocities and the possibility for characters to catch glimpses of it by gazing at their surroundings.

In relation to the interpretation of the monastery as an old Saxon hillfort in disguise, Brent remarks on how "committed to reading the world for what it is" (338) Wistan is. Reading the world also entails the redefinition of the notion of Truth, which becomes accessible through the landscape and, particularly, through the she-dragon Querig. As implied, Querig becomes a material object which offers a "more digestible explanation than genocide of innocent people as a contract of provisional peace" (Vernon and Miller 84). Once again, though, nature refuses to conform to the discourses and logic imposed by humans and effectively unveils the truth silently. Generally, in romances and epic poems—from Beowulf and Grendel to Redcrosse and the Dragon—the slaughter of the monster means the coronation for the hero, the feat which proves his value and prowess to the community. In particular, the dragon is often connected to the hero archetype (Valančiūnas 224), yet Wistan's confrontation with Querig is hardly an honourable fight. This is anticipated by Beatrice's observations on the dragon's emaciated and forlorn appearance: "Can this really be her, Axl? ... This poor creature no more than a fleshy thread?" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 326). The creature never wakes, but remains peacefully asleep until her death which is wielded by Wistan in a very anti-heroic fashion, since his enemy is asleep and cannot defend herself. When he eventually slays the dragon, Wistan's assault is nothing more than a brisk walk: "He did not run, but walked briskly, stepping over the dragon's body without breaking stride" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 337).

The creature dies without a sound, so readers never hear Querig's voice. However, in this case the silence of nature is particularly loud and shows how an ecocritical narrative can transform an ostensible climax into a forlorn anti-climax, which leads readers to focus on other aspects than the slaying

of the monster. As a matter of fact, the real climax follows Querig's death and may involve a realisation that the real 'monsters' of the story were King Arthur and the Britons who mercilessly slaughtered the Saxon women, the children and the elderly. The 'holy treasure' of the novel is not only the collective memory of war (Yiping 231), but also the ability to reframe truth accordingly.

Before concluding this section, it seems important to turn our gaze back to the landscape. Indeed, as empowering for the landscape the knowledge of the past can be, shouldering the weight of such an unstable balance among peoples weighs heavily on the environment. As perfect example of a character whose "license … to keep inventing versions of what happened in the past is rapidly beginning to run out" (Ishiguro "Kazuo Ishiguro" 23) in Ishiguro's prose, Gawain wonders about the heaviness of the landscape when gazing at falling leaves: "I rose and observed the leaves around me. Why so many fallen and the summer not yet old? Do these trees ail, even as they shelter us?" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 232). Although he is among those characters who "willingly neglect their personal responsibilities for the good of 'civilization' as they construe it" (Shaffer 4), like many in Ishiguro's works, the old knight is well aware of his guilt and responsibility. In his first reverie, he recalls an interesting fact which might help demonstrate that the landscape has become so neck-deep in violence that battles replace the concept of landscape to the point where they become a new version of it. While Gawain was fighting in a battle against the Saxons decades before, he suddenly saw Axl walking on the battlefield, absolutely unfazed by the danger surrounding him. The passage deserves to be quoted at length to account for how the war scenario is presented as the new landscape:

> he [Axl] keeps *a faraway look*, as if he stands in *a meadow of daisies on a fragrant morning*. 'If God chooses to direct an arrow this way,' he says, 'I'll not impede it. Sir Gawain, I'm pleased to see you well. Are you lately arrived, or have you been here from the start?'
>
> This as if we meet at *some summer fair*, and I am obliged to cry again, 'Cover yourself, sir! …' And when he continues to survey the *scenery*, I say, remembering his question to me: 'I was here at the battle's start.' (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 241, emphasis mine)

During the battle, innocents were massacred at Arthur's behest, which in turn breached the treaty Axl had negotiated. Jaded, utterly disenchanted and dejected by what he sees, Axl calmly strolls through the battlefield

without thinking to take shelter or even a shield to protect himself. He looks at the 'scenery' as if he were walking across fields or in nature. The battle has replaced the natural landscape of England and will do so again after Querig's death.

3. Intertextual Landscapes: The Role of Trees and Greenery

It has been pointed out that, in Ishiguro's novels, readers often have to do interpretive work and some degree of construction (Shaffer 5, G. Mason 342). This falls perfectly in line with the conception of a text as a 'lazy mechanism' and Barthes's distinction between 'writerly' texts—whose readers are producers of the text—and 'readerly texts'—whose readers are consumers of a text (Barthes 4). In *The Buried Giant*, interpretive activity can be applied to the symbolism of trees and the relationship they have with memories. Therefore, this section aims at studying some arboreal instances in Ishiguro's novel and analyse them within the scope of tree symbolism from an intertextual standpoint.

At Querig's lair, Axl is surprised to spot beside the dragon "a solitary hawthorn bush sprouting incongruously through the stone near the centre of the pit's belly" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 325). The presence of the bush may be suggestive of a small plant which could have been placed there as a companion to Querig. The dragon producer of the mist is therefore represented alongside a bush. Trees are often portrayed as the guardians of memories, deciding when to let them out and into the world of the people. The wood from the door in Beatrice and Axl's room is described as follows:

> a large wooden frame criss-crossed with small branches, vines and thistles which someone going in and out would each time have to lift to one side, but which shut out the chilly draughts. Axl would happily have done without this door, but it had over time become an object of considerable pride to Beatrice. He had often returned to find his wife pulling off withered pieces from the construct and replacing them with fresh cuttings she had gathered during the day. (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 6)

The air manages to pass through the branches of this strange "door". It could be argued that building a real door would be less complicated than using small branches which would have to be regularly replaced as well as parted upon entering. Thus, it might be that the branched door holds more symbolic meaning than it lets on.

In this light, the arboreal door could be the visual representation of a filter of memories and could therefore allow some reminiscences to pass through the branches and reach the couple, who, despite the older age, seem to have a stronger memory than other people at the village. While the people are distracted by insignificant stories, Axl is the only one aware of a missing child. Working as a memory-filter, the branched door may hold intertextual relation with Homer's *Odyssey*. In book 19, the characteristics of the two gates of dreams are illustrated by Penelope:

> Two gates there are for our evanescent dreams,
> one is made of ivory, the other made of horn.
> Those that pass through the ivory cleanly carved
> are will-o'-the-wisps, their message bears no fruit.
> The dreams that pass through the gates of polished horn
> are fraught with truth, for the dreamer who can see them. (Homer 408, v. 633–638)

As an instance of ecocritical intertextuality, the possibility that Ishiguro read *The Odyssey* would account for the author's in-depth knowledge of and familiarity with the potential hypotext. Jessica Mason would regard this as 'purposeful intertextuality' (124). Furthermore, these door-branches may not only filter the characters' memories but also their unconscious knowledge of the past, in a way that is opposite to Homer's doors that foreshadow the future. After all, upon crossing through the branched entrance, Axl and Beatrice set out on their journey to find their son as a possible coping mechanism for mourning.

Lastly, I would like to examine the big oak in a clearing where a soldier will be killed. A serpent heads toward Axl and Beatrice:

> Axl saw that a serpent, disturbed in the grass by the soldier's fall, was now sliding out from under the body. Though dark, the creature was mottled with yellows and whites … He instinctively stepped to one side, moving Beatrice with him, in case the creature should come searching for their feet. Still it kept coming their way, parting in two around a rock, before becoming one again and continuing ever closer. (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 140)

Here, the serpent may function as another symbol, especially because it divides into two. Ishiguro uses the word 'serpent' rather than 'snake,' which

can be seen as allusive to the Bible. A symbolical reading of the serpent could link it to the oak of the clearing and inscribe it in the biblical image of the Tree of Knowledge. The biblical episode has been intertextually dealt with numerous times, perhaps the best-known being *Paradise Lost* by Milton. Given that the serpent slides out from under the dead soldier's body and that at its approach Axl smells the "powerful odour of a man's insides" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 140), the serpent can be taken to represent violence and murder. Similarly, it could hint at how sin is not caused by a tempting snake, but rather entirely by human actions --in this case the duel of Wistan and the soldier. Although placed on a lower scale than the collective violence which is still hidden from the characters' awareness, the murder of the soldier has sullied the peacefulness of the clearing and does not bode well for the continuation of the story, which unveils further violence committed by humans, rather than dragons or snakes. In addition, since nature retains knowledge of past violence, the deaths continue to weigh down on the landscape and tarnish it. In Gawain's words, the clearing becomes a Garden of Eden of sorts, which humans have wrecked: "It's a great sadness this tranquil spot, surely a gift from God to all weary travellers, is now polluted by blood" (Ishiguro *The Buried Giant* 142).

4. Conclusion

This paper has attempted an ecocritical reading of *The Buried Giant* by showing how the concept of embodied landscape works alongside the characters and affects the concepts of interpretation and truth. Surpassing its status as book-setting, a misty environment retains the knowledge of a gory and sombre past, and the characters must work ways around uncovering it.

Ishiguro's novel shows an interesting change in literature, exemplified not just by the fact that nature and natural elements are paramount for the story and equal to characters. In the novel, characters wander through the landscape with no fixed references, be they physical or mental, while knowledge is written on the surrounding environment and it is inaccessible to people because of the collective forgetfulness. Aside from being particularly promising, this interesting situation holds potential to keep reflecting on ecocriticism and investigating new relationships between man and nature.

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