Aesthetic Historiography: Allegory, Monument, and Oblivion in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*

Bernadette Meyler*

Abstract

This essay turns to Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2015 book *The Buried Giant* for insights into the moral and political implications of the kinds of historiography chosen in the aftermath of atrocity. *The Buried Giant* foregrounds monument, oblivion, and its own form, allegory, as historiographical strategies. If monuments aspire to bring the past into an eternal present, functioning as a kind of symbol, the novel indicates the impossibility of this goal. At the same time, it rejects oblivion’s efforts to entirely remove the traces of prior atrocities. *The Buried Giant* instead presents a version of allegory as an alternative mechanism for engaging with and negotiating a troubled inheritance. The allegory in question neither involves a one-to-one correspondence between events of the novel and national or international struggle, nor does it simply bring the reader from its particulars to a universal truth. It rather suggests a reciprocal reading of particulars through the windows they furnish upon each other, looking at medieval Britain as though through the lens of post-WWII Japan or examining England’s imperial past from the perspective of its prehistory in a time out of memory. This variety of allegory bears a family resemblance to that extolled by Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, both of whom contrasted allegory with the symbol, and to Christopher Tomlins’s efforts to produce a Benjaminian historiography.

I. Introduction

On its publication in 2015, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* was greeted by puzzled and somewhat mixed reviews. In the intervening years, it has not garnered as much attention as his earlier *Never Let Me Go* or *The Remains of the Day*. Nevertheless, the novel has much to tell us about the dynamics of both transitional justice and constitutional settlement. The

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book takes up the relationship between personal and political memories on the one hand, and a present socio-legal order on the other, exploring the erection of monuments and the encouragement of oblivion as two contrasting strategies for coping with past conflict. The form of the novel itself—that of allegory—suggests a third mechanism for working through, this conflict, one that it presents as potentially more desirable than the other alternatives. It is this allegorical form, however, that most troubled and perplexed the book’s reviewers, and to which our contemporary sensibility has the least access.3

Several discrete disciplines have connected history with monuments, oblivion, and allegory. Scholars of memory have juxtaposed the narratives derived from collective memory with the kind of history produced by historians and demonstrated the ideological significance of memory for political action.4 Their work has sometimes overlapped with theories of transitional justice, which have frequently foregrounded the respective values of memory and forgetting in reconstructing societies in the aftermath of civil war or atrocity.5

3 James Wood, for example, deemed the deployment of allegory one of the impediments to the novel’s success. Wood, supra note 1.

4 See, for example, among historians, David W. Blight, Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War (2002); David W. Blight, Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory (2001); see also sociologist Jeffrey K. Olick’s The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility (2007) (drawing on the work of Maurice Halbwachs and others to construct a new account of the significance of collective memory). Philosopher Paul Ricoeur also treated the dynamics of collective memory at length in his Memory, History, Forgetting (Kathleen Blamey & David Pellauer trans., 2004).

5 In the wake of the Holocaust, remembrance became imperative, both for survivors and for the German polity. See, e.g., Elie Wiesel, Night 34 (Marion Wiesel trans., 2006) (“Never shall I forget . . . . Never shall I forget . . . . Never shall I forget . . . ”); Primo Levi, If This Is a Man and The Truce (Stuart Woolf trans, 2003) (1947) (testifying to the year Levi spent at Auschwitz); Jürgen Habermas, Defusing the Past: A Politico-Cultural Tract, in Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective 43, 44 (Geoffrey H. Hartman ed., 2000) (“There is the obligation we in Germany have—even if no one else is prepared to take it upon themselves any longer—to keep alive the memory of the suffering of those murdered at the hands of Germans, and we must keep this memory alive quite openly and not just in our own minds.”); see also Dominick LaCapra, Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma (1994) (treating the historiographical debates surrounding accounts of the Holocaust); Siitna Löytömäki, Law and the Politics of Memory: Confronting the Past 24-25 (2014) (discussing the unique status of the Holocaust as an object of memory, as well as the delay in bringing remembrance to the fore in Germany, while the Holocaust has simultaneously served as a paradigm for “how memories of other traumatic events express themselves”).

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission has often been viewed as continuing the emphasis on memory while adding the element of impunity for offenses committed. Scholars of transitional justice have often lauded the TRC’s strategy of seeking truth while also enabling forgiveness. See Martha Minow, Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History After Genocide and Mass Violence 52-91 (1999). As Adam Sitze, however, has elaborated, critiquing the transitional justice approach, what has been forgotten is the colonial origin of parliamentary impositions of impunity. This origin was strategically erased at the very moment when the new South African state was in the process of establishing itself. See generally Adam Sitze, The Impossible Machine: A Genealogy of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2013).

The emphasis on memory in transitional justice seems to have waned slightly, as several recent writings are ranged largely on the side of forgetting. See, e.g., David Rieff, In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies (2016); Bradford Vivian, Public Forgetting: The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again 7 (2010) (asserting that “the central purposes of this study are to provide: (1) an updated conceptual framework devoted to analyzing forgetting as an organized public practice; and (2) a series of case studies that reveal, by implementing that framework, how one may argue for and enact such forgetting in the political and moral languages of public life”); Adriaan Lanni, Transitional Justice in Ancient Athens: A Case Study, 32 U. Pa. J. Int’l L. 551, 551 (2010) (contending that the Athenian amnesty in the wake of the reign of the Thirty
The significance of memorials and monuments has often stood at the heart of such analyses. At the same time, literary scholars have vigorously debated the role of political allegory and allegorical reading in the context of the postcolonial novel.

Drawing upon these various approaches, this essay foregrounds the disparate implications of monument, oblivion, and allegory for the observer and reader of the novel and, ultimately, for legal historiography. If monuments aspire to bring the past into an eternal present, functioning as a kind of symbol, the novel indicates the impossibility of this goal. At the same time, it rejects oblivion’s efforts to entirely remove the traces of prior atrocities. *The Buried Giant* instead presents a version of allegory as an alternative mechanism for engaging with and negotiating a troubled inheritance. The allegory in question neither involves a one-to-one correspondence between events of the novel and national or international struggle, nor does it simply bring the reader from its particulars to a universal truth. It rather suggests a reciprocal reading of particulars through the windows they furnish upon each other, looking at medieval Britain as though through the lens of post-WWII Japan or examining England’s imperial past from the perspective of its prehistory in a time out of memory. This variety of allegory bears a family resemblance to that extolled by Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, both of whom contrasted allegory with the symbol, and to Christopher Tomlins’s efforts to produce a Benjaminian historiography.

The remainder of this essay will furnish an overview of *The Buried Giant* in Part II, then turn to the poles of monument and oblivion, which the book seems to set in opposition to each other, in Part III. Part IV then elaborates upon the vision of allegory presented by the novel and demonstrates how it furnishes its own legal historiography.

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II. The Buried Giant

Although it was less than enthusiastically received, *The Buried Giant* reprised a number of themes circulating through Ishiguro’s other novels, such as memory, loss, and trauma. In an interview following the book’s publication, Ishiguro confirmed the connection between *The Buried Giant* and his earlier novels, observing, “I find that my themes remain very similar, but I like to change the periods in which they are set, and the genre.” He furthermore invoked the problem of collective memory, explaining that *The Buried Giant* considers “how whole societies remember or forget and how individuals suppress memory and struggle with remembering or forgetting.” He furthermore cited the events of the twentieth century as reference points: “[E]very time I thought about somewhere I wanted the novel to be set I started thinking about Yugoslavia as it broke up and descended into civil war in the 1990s, or France immediately after the Second World War.” The decision to avoid those particular contexts in order to produce a work that “could be applied to all kinds of settings” was perhaps the initial step toward the novel’s allegorical form.

The plot of *The Buried Giant* focuses on an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice, Britons in post-Arthurian Britain. We hear gradually of a great battle between Britons and Saxons—the battle of Mount Badon—that took place in distant memory; although the history of this period is murky and based on unreliable accounts, this event was said to have been a decisive and final victory for the Britons, led by Arthur, in the late fifth or early sixth century.

It was purportedly followed by a long peace, after which further Saxon conquest ensued.

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9 Two books from 2014 each proclaim themselves the first study of Ishiguro and memory. See Wojciech Drag, Revisiting Loss: Memory, Trauma, and Nostalgia in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro (2014); Yugin Teo, Kazuo Ishiguro and Memory (2014). Neither, of course, dealt with *The Buried Dragon*, which appeared the following year. Several other secondary sources touch upon these topics as well. See, e.g., Justine Baillie & Sean Matthews, History, Memory, and the Construction of Gender in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of the Hills*, in Kazuo Ishiguro: Contemporary Critical Perspectives 45 (Sean Matthews & Sebastian Groes eds., 2010).


11 Id.

12 Id.

13 Id.


15 Gildas claimed a peace of forty-four years between the defeat of the Saxons at the Battle of Badon and the moment of his composition. Clare Stancliffe, Christianity Among the Britons, Daldrian Irish and Picts, in 1 The New Cambridge Medieval History 426, 436 (Paul Fouracre ed., 2005). While Wikipedia would not be a good source if historical accuracy were the aim, it may well have furnished a resource for the literary imagination, so it is worth noting that the Wikipedia entry on the Battle of Badon observes that “[s]eparate sources . . . would place *The Ruin of Britain* and Bede’s account of the battle around the year 491. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is completely silent about this battle but does seem to document a gap of almost 70 years between two major Anglo-Saxon leaders in the 5th and 6th centuries.” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Badon). This period exceeds any estimations of a peace following Badon, but it may furnish another temporal marker of interest in the context of *The Buried Giant*.
Axl and Beatrice live in a village of Britons, but there are Saxon villages around, including one they visit. They, like their compatriots, are beset by a mist of forgetfulness that obscures their memories and even the face of their son, who, we learn, lives in a distant village. Soon after the novel begins, Axl and Beatrice set out to visit this son. Along the way, they meet a Saxon warrior from the fens, Wistan, who speaks their language fluently since he was raised by Britons; a boy, Edwin, who is shunned by his community because he has been bitten (they think by an ogre, but in actuality by a dragon); and Sir Gawain, of Arthurian legend, who is now a very old knight.

We learn more and more about the mist and its origins, eventually discovering that it emanates from the breath of the dragon Querig; although Gawain is purportedly on a quest to slay Querig, he actually serves as her protector. He and four companions had helped to subdue her (with the aid of a spell from the magician Merlin) in the aftermath of the Battle of Badon so as to ensure that Querig’s breath would cast over the countryside forgetfulness of the atrocities that Arthur’s army had committed. Wistan, in turn, has committed to his king to kill the dragon in anticipation of a coming Saxon conquest of the country and out of the realization that it would be easier to turn the Saxon villages in their favor once history could be remembered.

The character Axl straddles the personal and the political; his wife Beatrice desperately desires that the dragon be slain for her own reasons. The couple has heard about an island to which a boatman ferries people. Almost everyone must walk about the island on his or her own, but couples who have loved each other for a whole life are sometimes granted an exception. This exception can be made only on the basis of the boatman’s questions. Many widows are now wandering the countryside either alone or in groups who feel the boatmen have tricked them. These women were asked to wait behind while their husbands were ferried to the island and only later informed that they could not go and join their spouses. Beatrice wishes to recover the memories of her life with Axl so that the two of them can remain together.

At the same time, Axl is just as happy to forget the role that he played in the prelude to the Battle of Badon and what occurred during the battle itself. As we discover first from a meditation of Gawain and then from Axl himself as well as Wistan, Axl had brokered an agreement between Britons and Saxons called—by either Axl or Arthur himself—“The Law of the Innocents.” This law mandated that non-combatants—including women and children—be spared slaughter. It was this very law that the soldiers of Arthur violated at the time of the Battle of Badon, leaving Axl to feel he had betrayed the trust of all those with whom he had once negotiated.

Once Wistan succeeds in slaying Querig, however, it turns out that Axl’s betrayal of his family has perhaps exceeded his political betrayal. Whereas he never anticipated the use to which Arthur and his followers would put the Law of the Innocents, he took revenge on Beatrice for a brief infidelity by refusing to let her visit their son’s grave after he left on

16 Ishiguro, supra note 1, at 214.
account of a related dispute. Here we get a sense of the punitive ends to which the avoidance of monuments, or enforced forgetting, can be put. When Beatrice is ferried away alone by a boatman who has, nevertheless, reassured Axl that he would be back for him, the reader is left with the impression that Axl will instead soon be wandering the countryside on his own, along with the troops of widows tricked by the boatmen. The conclusion nevertheless resists straightforward interpretation. Rather than confirming that the boatman has lied in telling Axl he would be back for him, it leaves open the question of whether Axl and Beatrice have been separated because of the failure of their love or simply contingently and temporarily since Beatrice is dying first.

III. Monument or Oblivion?

*The Buried Giant* specifically figures two techniques for addressing the past, monument and oblivion. The novel resists the desire for monuments to possess a natural and enduring meaning self-evident to the person who encounters them. Instead, monuments take on a fundamentally ambivalent character, devoid of any inevitable signification and dependent on the viewers’ construction. Oblivion is not, however, figured as the solution. Instead, the novel presents forgetting as allowing injustices to go unpunished, and the effort required to enforce forgetting as itself occasioning additional suffering. The impression *The Buried Giant* furnishes of critiquing both monument and oblivion happens to coincide with Ishiguro’s own sense that “I don’t come down on one side or the other about remembering or forgetting.” 17 Indeed, the novel seems to go further in demonstrating that the dichotomy between remembering and forgetting is a false one.

A. Monuments

Monuments are specifically referenced at a number of points in *The Buried Giant* and the logic of the monument is even more widespread. The title itself points to the principal monument of the novel, an otherwise innocuous-looking mound that lies over the putative buried giant and which travelers avoid walking upon lest some ill befall them. Axl and Beatrice are obliged to pass by this monument on their journey and Beatrice remarks, “To one who doesn’t know it, it’s an ordinary hill, but I’ll signal to you and when you see me you’re to follow off the path and round the edge of the hill till we meet the same path on its way down.” 18 But what is this buried giant? Wistan casts light on its nature at the conclusion of the book when he says, after slaying Querig, that “[t]he giant, once well buried, now stirs. When soon he rises, as surely he will, the friendly bonds between us will prove as knots young girls make with the stems of small flowers.” 19 From his statement and its context, it appears that the giant embodies the animosities caused by past slaughter and the grievances that had been put in abeyance by forgetting. Although the monument to the buried giant

17 Ishiguro, Interview, supra note 10.
18 Ishiguro, supra note 1, at 34-35.
19 Id. at 340.
seemed a permanent part of the landscape, his burial was only temporary, and the landscape will be altered by his awakening from slumber. Past atrocity appears to have been naturalized and rendered harmless—like the Furies of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* who were eventually tamed and buried underground as the Eumenides—but the scenery turns out to be transient.

Monuments’ role in memorializing acts of outrage or horror finds itself reiterated and reinforced at the beginning of Part IV of the book, which returns to the voice of the opening, and directly invokes the vantage point of the reader. As it states:

> Some of you will have fine monuments by which the living may remember the evil done to you. Some of you will have only crude wooden crosses or painted rocks, while yet others of you must remain hidden in the shadows of history. You are in any case part of an ancient procession, and so it is always possible the giant’s cairn was erected to mark the site of some such tragedy long ago when young innocents were slaughtered in war. This aside, it is not easy to think of reasons for its standing. One can see why on lower ground our ancestors might have wished to commemorate a victory or a king. But why stack heavy stones to above a man’s height in so high and remote a place as this?

It was a question, I am sure, equally to baffle Axl as he came wearily up the mountainslope.20

This giant’s cairn—near the home of Querig herself and not to be confused with the hill marking the buried giant—seems at first glance both to the modern viewer and the ancient to index a past act of ignominy; even the gravestone of the reader, referenced at the beginning of the passage, records what has been done to him rather than his accomplishments.

At the same time, this passage demonstrates another feature of monuments—their underdetermined signification—which requires the observer to complete their meaning. Rather than confirming why the cairn was erected, the narrator simply proposes a possibility, one that he sticks with for lack of others immediately occurring to his, ours, or even Axl’s mind. Yet the reader of *The Buried Giant* has already been trained to recognize that first impressions of such elements of the landscape are not always reliable, and that an interpretation based on what seems most plausible to us may be blind to the actual contexts of creation, which were entirely different than we suppose.

When Axl, Beatrice and their travelling companions come upon a hilltop monastery of monks, Wistan explains that what might seem a holy monument to a Christian god he interprets as an old Saxon fort rife with slaughter. Axl responds to this claim, “You read it well, Master Wistan, and I shudder at what you show me.”21 In the monastery is a tower, open at the top, which Wistan tells Edwin was once used to incinerate invading forces. He then imagines how differently the monks must see it: “And the way the light comes from on high. It must remind them of their god’s grace... Perhaps they pray standing, guessing little how this was once a place of slaughter and burning.”22 The monks’ perspective as

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20 Id. at 305.
21 Id. at 161.
22 Id. at 221.
imagined by Wistan is perhaps the closest the novel comes to the vision of monument as symbol, cemented by an identification between the viewer and the object—one that brings the viewer into immediate relation with a greater totality. It is significant, however, that this vantage point is never articulated directly in *The Buried Giant*; the relation of person to symbol is only hypothesized from the outside, rather than experienced within the text.

In the novel, monuments can be viewed from disparate angles, from inside as well as outside. When Axl, Beatrice and Edwin are making their escape from the monastery through an underground tunnel, they come upon the evidence of slaughter that Wistan had seen in the architecture. The skeletons and old bones upon which they tread seem, however, to be bodies for which Gawain feels guilty, as he responds harshly to Beatrice’s vision of dead babies. Axl proclaims:

“This must be some ancient burial place . . . Yet there are so many buried here.”

“A burial place,” Sir Gawain muttered. “Yes, a burial place. . . . We need not quarrel, Master Axl. Here are the skulls of men, I won’t deny it. There an arm, there a leg, but just bones now. An old burial ground. And so it may be. I dare say, sir, our whole country is this way. A fine green valley. A pleasant copse in the springtime. Dig its soil, and not far beneath the daisies and buttercups come the dead. And I don’t talk, sir, only of those who received Christian burial. Beneath our soil lie the remains of old slaughter.”

These monuments mark ancient resentments; the landscape itself and the ruins upon it become monuments that can be interpreted by the viewer according to the background understanding he or she brings to it.

Critical assessments echo several aspects of *The Buried Giant*’s representation of the logic of monuments. Reinhart Koselleck’s essay “War Memorials” emphasizes the tendency for memorials’ initial impetus and rationale to fade over time. As he explains:

[The] identities that a memorial is intended to evoke melt away—in part because sensory receptivity eludes the formal language presented and in part because the forms, once shaped, begin to speak another language than the one from which they were initially fashioned. Memorials, like all works of art, have a surplus potential to take on a life of their own. For this reason, the original meaning of countless memorials is no longer recognizable without recourse to inscriptions or other empirically comprehensible reference signals.

Under this logic, it is unsurprising that, as Beatrice notes, most do not know the story of the buried giant, and that the dark history of the monks’ dwelling is lost upon them.

Relatedly, the erasure of a monument’s initial signification may conduce to forgetting, or lead to an idealized version of the past. Norman Spaulding expresses the first concern in his essay on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. As Spaulding muses, pondering how the Holocaust Memorial is situated, “[O]ne cannot help but wonder if the location does not invite a certain kind of resistance to memory, a kind of strategic forgetting. Can any proper Holocaust memorial have an exit?"
. . . And even if it must have an exit, . . . isn’t releasing them onto the overwhelmingly triumphalist terrain of the National Mall irresponsible?25

The corresponding historiographic approach tends toward forgetting the ills of the past and instead viewing the monument or memorial as part of an aggrandized national heritage. At the outset of Race and Reunion, historian David Blight quotes William Dean Howells’s letter to Edith Wharton on the failure of the dramatic version of her novel House of Mirth. Howells had attempted to console Wharton with the claim that “[w]hat the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending.”26 Howells’s remark foreshadows the story of post-Civil War reunion that Blight’s book tells, “a story about how in American culture romance triumphed over reality, sentimental remembrance won over ideological memory.”27

It is not only through the passage of years that the meaning of monuments diverges, however; monuments may embed an ambiguity within their initial construction, allowing disparate communities of observers to interpret them in radically different ways. Spaulding directs attention to this aspect of one of the first Holocaust memorials, the Column of Three Eagles, created by prisoners in the German death camp Majdanek. This construction was accepted by camp administrators “because they saw the eagles as a Nazi symbol”; for the prisoners, the “three birds taking to the air” instead “symbolized the ultimate freedom of the three imprisoned groups.”28 Here we might be reminded of the disparity between Wistan’s account of the significance of the monks’ tower and the view of it he attributes to the monks themselves.

B. Oblivion

In The Buried Giant, forgetting furnishes an alternative to monuments (Wistan himself juxtaposes the two at the end of the novel), yet forgetting is not the work of a day but instead requires an ongoing labor of erasure. Oblivion manifests itself in several forms in the novel. The primary mechanism of oblivion is, of course, the mist emanating from Que-rig’s breath. Not everyone is affected equally, however. In particular, Wistan the Warrior was selected to slay the dragon on account of his ability to withstand the effects of such a mist, and although Gawain is Querig’s protector, he himself appears to remain in full command of his memory. Furthermore, memory works in unusual ways due to the mist; rather than the elderly becoming more forgetful than the young, the opposite has occurred. As Axl exclaims, “Though we suffer enough from the mist—for that’s how my wife and I have come to call it—we seem to do so less than the younger ones.”29

25 Spaulding, supra note 6, at 133-34.
26 William Dean Howells, quoted in Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance 147 (1934).
27 Blight, supra note 4, at 4.
28 Spaulding, supra note 6, at 140-41 (quoting Harold Marcuse, Holocaust Memorials, The Emergence of a Genre, 115 Am. Hist. Rev. 55, 56 (2010)).
29 Ishiguro, supra note 1, at 68.
Those who lived through the conflicts under erasure seem unable to succumb entirely to the mist, and snatches of memory plague Axl on occasion, although he is unable to locate them within an overarching narrative. This is, in fact, not entirely fantasy but rather a representation of historical memory—without the transmission of memories from an older to a younger generation, the latter will remain largely ignorant of the past. Indeed, in the final confrontation between Wistan and Sir Gawain, Gawain imagines that the memory of the Battle of Badon will be fully eclipsed in a few years, allowing the peace sustained temporarily by the dragon’s breath to become permanent. As Gawain states,

[I]t’s long past and the bones lie sheltered beneath a pleasant green carpet. The young know nothing of them. I beg you leave this place, and let Querig do her work a while longer. Another season or two, that’s the most she’ll last. Yet even that may be long enough for old wounds to heal for ever, and an eternal peace to hold among us. Look how she clings to life, sir! Be merciful and leave this place. Leave this country to rest in forgetfulness.\(^{30}\)

The hope here is the erasure of all monuments, the effacement of any recognition of the buried giant as a memorial, and the conversion of the hills into mere hills.

The labor of enforcing forgetfulness is made apparent at various points in the novel. Sir Gawain himself reflects during his meditations on the difference between himself and Axl; whereas Gawain devoted his life to maintaining peace by protecting the dragon with constant vigilance, Axl instead declined that kind of work and turned to marriage and the shelter of home. The monks also toil in the background, although ineffectually, to render the oblivion just, sending off one monk after another to an exposed metal cage to be pecked at by birds in order to expiate the crimes of the past and the continuing crime of enforced forgetting. As Wistan asks one of the more sympathetic monks, “How can you describe as penance, sir, the drawing of a veil over the foulest deeds? Is your Christian god one to be bribed so easily with self-inflicted pain and a few prayers? Does he care so little for justice left undone?\(^{31}\)

Another form of forgetting is figured in the allusions to ancient mythology and the river Lethe, which ran through the underworld. Drinking from it made men forget all that had happened in their lives. The mysterious boatmen who crop up in the novel recall Charon, who ferried souls over the river Styx to Hades; there is a discussion of paying the boatman at the end of *The Buried Giant*, and the boatman lies about taking the money owed from the saddle of Beatrice and Axl’s missing horse. Those who could not pay Charon or had not yet been buried were forced to wander the shores for a hundred years, and we might imagine Axl in a similar predicament.\(^{32}\) Towards the end of the novel, Gawain also wonders why men long for rivers when they near death and wish to drink from them, perhaps also recalling the river Lethe for the reader. Hence Axl and Beatrice remember their past only in time for her to again forget it in crossing to an island beyond our world.

\[^{30}\] Id. at 327.
\[^{31}\] Id. at 161.
\[^{32}\] M.A. Dwight, Grecian and Roman Mythology 60 (1849).
Likewise, the memories that couples recount to the boatmen are useful only for the purpose of establishing the existence of an intimacy that will be continued but presumably without the benefit of the memories on which it is based or that undergirded it.

While oblivion is not represented as an unalloyed evil in the novel, it is cast negatively through the labor required to maintain it and the injustice it allows to fester. In this respect, *The Buried Giant* partakes of some of Paul Ricoeur’s resistance to the notion that there might be a “duty of forgetting” along the lines of a duty to remember. Ricoeur dwells at length on the state’s insistence that its citizens put episodes of violence behind them, as was the case in the Athenian amnesty, critiquing it as a mechanism for disavowing founding violence:

The ruses of forgetting are still easy to unmask on the plane where the institutions of forgetting, the paradigm of which is amnesty, provide grist to the abuses of forgetting, counterparts to the abuses of memory. The case of the amnesty of Athens . . . is exemplary in this regard. We saw how the establishment of civil peace was based upon the strategy of the denial of founding violence.33

Similarly, at the heart of the imposition of forgetting that secures the Britons’ rule in *The Buried Giant* lies the slaughter of the innocents that the mist has caused everyone to forget.

Ricoeur likewise insists on the slippage between amnesty and amnesia, expressing the concern that, as a technique of transitional justice, amnesty lies too close to amnesia. Writing of the possibility of a “duty of forgetting,” Ricoeur maintains that, “If this were to happen—and unfortunately nothing stands in the way of crossing the thin line of demarcation separating amnesty from amnesia—private and collective memory would be deprived of the salutary identity crisis that permits a lucid reappropriation of the past and of its traumatic charge.”34 By erasing the gap, and implementing the forgetting linked to amnesty, *The Buried Giant* plays out Ricoeur’s concerns. The buried memories of Ishiguro’s characters lie in wait for the moment when the mist lifts, unresolved and ready to bring their misery back to life.

**IV. An Allegorical Approach to History**

*The Buried Giant*, I would like to argue, presents allegory as a strategy for negotiating past conflict that furnishes an alternative to both monument and oblivion. Not only has allegory fallen out of popular favor, however, but allegorical reading practices have also been subject to critique over the past few decades. Hence I will begin by addressing the skepticism that allegoresis has faced before outlining the novel’s self-presentation as allegorical. I then suggest two sets of historical events that *The Buried Giant* could be seen as allegorizing and conclude by elaborating on allegoresis itself as a mode of historical consciousness.

Analysis of allegory within contemporary literature has been largely confined to the postcolonial novel; partly as a consequence, the treatment of postcolonial fiction as

33 Ricoeur, supra note 4, at 500.

34 Id. at 456.
inevitably allegorical has generated significant resistance from those who consider this stance a simplification and assimilation of the varied and nuanced political, national, and institutional contexts within which the works in question were composed. The debate was inaugurated by Fredric Jameson’s 1986 assertion that

[all third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. . . . Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.]

Postcolonial critics quickly took issue with Jameson’s broad claim. Aijaz Ahmad, for example, lamented Jameson’s “suppression of the multiplicity of significant differences among and within both the advanced capitalist countries and the imperialized formations.”

More recent attempts to redeem allegorical analysis within postcolonial contexts emphasize that earlier descriptions of postcolonial allegory remained too simplistic. The latter insisted upon a direct correspondence between a novel’s narration and a political account of the nation, a connection implemented by an authorial decision. They also emphasized fundamental differences between allegories of what Jameson calls the “third world” and those of the first and second worlds.

Elements of *The Buried Giant* fit with efforts at reviving a modified understanding of allegory. Allegory in *The Buried Giant* points not to a particular national allegory but to a condition of recovery from atrocity that resonates across a number of specific situations. Furthermore, the novel allegorizes not simply politics as such but a set of politico-historical methods for addressing events of significance within collective memory. The allegory of *The Buried Giant* also sits at an oblique angle with respect to postcolonial allegory, as Ishiguro is considered an English novelist, although he has often been placed within a global frame, and his novel delves into the pre-history of England itself.

While on one level the novel reads as an allegory of particular political situations, partaking to some extent of national allegory along the lines that Jameson describes, the plot could map onto a number of different historical moments, and the book does not seem to prioritize one particular referent. Furthermore, *The Buried Giant* allegorizes not simply historical occurrences but historiographic approaches themselves. If Hayden White

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35 Jameson, supra note 7, at 69.


37 As Erin Zivin inquires, for example, “How would our notion of politics change if we entertained different notions of allegory—say, ones based more openly in de Man’s work or in Benjamin’s, which have highly problematical relations to the concept of representation? What would it look like to recuperate the possibility of allegorical reading in light of de Man’s argument that allegory always allegorizes the impossibility of reading?” Zivin, supra note 7, at 159.

38 For further discussion of what it means to think of Ishiguro as a global novelist, see Kazuo Ishiguro in a Global Context (Cynthia F. Wong & Hülya Yıldız eds., 2015).
demonstrated the allegorical content of histories’ narrative form, *The Buried Giant* shows how techniques we associate with fiction could transform historical method. The mode of allegoresis the novel uses is particularly important in this regard; instead of allowing the reader to resolve the analogies it raises, *The Buried Giant* insists that he or she work through the particulars without dictating a normative solution. This resistance to the closure of the allegory connects as well to the irresolution of the book’s ending. Unlike the monuments that allow one to exit and feel that the experience has been put behind, *The Buried Giant* lingers and provokes, denying its reader that happy ending invoked by William Dean Howells.

From the outset, *The Buried Giant* announces its indebtedness to the genre of allegory. The novel is set in an era that celebrated allegory, and in naming Axl’s wife Beatrice, Ishiguro recalls Dante’s Beatrice. Their wanderings further conjure the beginning of the *Inferno*, where Dante finds himself lost in a dark wood; when the narrator dwells at length on the fact that Beatrice walks in front of Axl, calling out periodically to check that he is still there (rather than looking back), the story of Orpheus and Eurydice comes to mind, auguring that perhaps this seemingly inseparable couple will eventually be separated, and that somehow Beatrice may leave Axl behind.

In another gesture characteristic of allegory, the novel explicitly invites the reader in, asking us to find parallels between our present and the world of the Britons and Saxons. As the opening reads, “You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated. . . . I have no wish to give the impression that this was all there was to the Britain of those days; that at a time when magnificent civilisations flourished elsewhere in the world, we were here not much beyond the Iron Age.” In this novel about enforced forgetting, it turns out we have forgotten the contours of an earlier Britain, one that the Britain of empire might be ashamed to acknowledge as its own and which cannot compete with the “magnificent civilisations” elsewhere, about which the reader may know but Axl, Beatrice, Wistan, and Sir Gawain remain ignorant.

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39 As White explains, “[T]he historical discourse directs the reader’s attention to a secondary referent, different in kind from the events that make up the primary referent, namely, the plot structures of the various story types cultivated in a given culture.” Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* 43 (1987). As a consequence, “[w]hen the reader recognizes the story being told in a historical narrative as a specific kind of story—for example, as an epic, romance, tragedy, comedy, or farce,—he can be said to have comprehended the meaning produced by the discourse. This comprehension is nothing other than the recognition of the form of the narrative.” Id. at 43. This mechanism for the production of meaning through the genre of the narrative, rather than its representation of particular events, White considers allegorical. As he concludes, “[R]ather than regard every historical narrative as mythic or ideological in nature, we should regard it as allegorical, that is, as saying one thing and meaning another.” Id. at 45.


42 Ishiguro, supra note 1, at 4.
Discussing the book, Ishiguro cited Vichy France and the conflicts in Yugoslavia in the 1990s as points of reference, but also drew in many other comparisons. One connection he seemed to disclaim pertained to his own background, yet the novel invites speculation on this front. Interviewer Hope Whitmore asked, “You were born in Nagasaki nine years after it was bombed, and I wondered, did this cast a shadow over your writing in any way?” As Ishiguro noted in response:

Well, actually, the odd thing was, I didn’t really understand that Nagasaki was so distinct in having been atom-bombed. It took me some time to realize that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the only places in history to have suffered nuclear attacks. When I was growing up there people didn’t tend to tell us, a four-year-old, a five-year-old, “Did you know what happened?” But I remember people mentioning it and there was no secret about it. So I never associated Nagasaki with the atomic bomb. For me Nagasaki is all kinds of other things. I have all these colorful memories of our house, my toys, my kindergarten. I remember all this stuff, but I still don’t think of it emotionally as connected with the atomic bomb.

Although the answer seems to deny the relevance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to *The Buried Giant*, it stands in a complex relation to the book’s figuration of memory and forgetting. Not dwelling on the traumatic event and the legacy of the atom bomb allowed Ishiguro to associate Nagasaki instead with “colorful memories.” Nevertheless, Ishiguro emphasizes that the events were not secret, and not subject to a mist of forgetfulness. The scenario Ishiguro depicts in the interview raises the question of how memory should be transmitted to a generation born after atrocity and what relation to memory the children of survivors might have.

So, for a moment, imagine that the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II could function as an allegorical referent for *The Buried Giant*. There has been a long and variegated history of efforts to protect non-combatants under international law, but prior to World War II, one of the most thoroughgoing (although incomplete) efforts might have been represented by the Lieber Code, adopted after the casualties of the American Civil War. The targeting of Hiroshima and Nagasaki carried to an extreme the deployment of civilian casualties as a tactic for stopping war. We might see in that example a parallel to Arthur and his followers’ violation of the Law of the Innocents. Indeed, one account of the historical period of peace between the Battle of Badon and the subsequent Saxon onslaught augured by the end of Ishiguro’s novel suggests that it corresponded to a seventy-year gap in Saxon rule, around the same length of time that elapsed between the deployment of atomic bombs on Japan and the publication of *The Buried Giant*. That chronology would not fit with Axl’s and Gawain’s ages at the moment of narration, but the variation in the speculated periods following the Battle of Badon allows a multiplicity of

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43 Ishiguro, Interview, supra note 10.
44 Id.
46 See supra note 16.
potential times to coexist. Under this account, Japan would be the victim of the violation of the laws of war represented in the novel. And yet, in his interview, Ishiguro also referred to how “Japan has decided to forget that the Japanese army invaded China and most of South Asia and committed atrocities.” The instability of the allegorical referent allows the unseating of national myths and the mapping of disparate subject positions—whether victim or perpetrator—onto the same national communities. This is not to say that the details of those identities are erased, but rather that the reader is asked to use his or her allegorical imagination to push the analogy as far as it can hold, and in the points of resistance to recognize the unique character of the episode in question.

Somewhat less directly, the novel also speaks allegorically to the dynamics of constitutional settlement. The jurists of early modern England who developed the “ancient constitution,” of which J.G.A. Pocock and others have written, insisted on this ancient constitution as based in a common law and set of common customs derived from “time out of mind,” which meant for them the time before the Norman conquest of England. This Anglo-Saxon heritage was what for them remained under erasure—not the earlier history of the Britons who had themselves been displaced by the Saxons. But it is the very positing of a past not subject to memory that lends authority to the ancient constitution of early modern England. Were specifics present to hand, they might call into question the certainties claimed by these jurists. In the same way, Axl and Beatrice believe in their marital happiness as produced by a time before they can remember and Beatrice affirms that “[w]hat Axl and I feel today in our hearts for each other tells us the path taken here can hold no danger for us, no matter that the mist hides it now. It’s like a tale with a happy end, when even a child knows not to fear the twists and turns before.” When their memories are ultimately uncovered by the dragon’s death, these introduce complexities into their happiness, complexities that Axl speculates might have impeded their closeness had they been remembered more fully earlier. One might extrapolate from this analogy to other constitutional settlements built on a bloody past that is posited away by the constitutional order. Treating constitutional myth as what it is rather than a realistic narrative then assists in coming to terms with the past that has been suppressed.

Rather than killing the dragon, however, or unburying the giant, the allegorical form of the novel could be seen as attempting to work through the problem of transitional justice in the aftermath of atrocity and the difficulty of ensuring that future generations remember while also maintaining a continued peace. For the novel, allegory furnishes a form of justice through a historiography that emphasizes neither monument nor oblivion but situates the reader in a web of comparisons that require meticulous scrutiny and differentiation. We might, for example, put together the Britain that preceded England—the Britain of The

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47 Ishiguro, Interview, supra note 10.


49 Ishiguro, supra note 1, at 180.
*Buried Giant*—with the Britain of empire, as well as with the England that subsisted in the centuries between the two. Although Britain was buried by the Saxons, it was revived again within the British Empire, and the novel invites us to bring the two moments into dialogue with each other.

This kind of allegory is intimately connected with what Rebecca Walkowitz has, in discussing Ishiguro, called “comparison literature,” critiquing uniqueness and emphasizing “global paradigms such as the network, the tradition, and the scale.”[^50] The allegory also partakes of the reparative dimensions that Wai Chee Dimock has identified with weak networks, describing how the speech of novelist William Faulkner about the conquered South in post-World War II Japan furnished a form of reparation through comparison and identification, the position of victor and vanquished suddenly reversed.[^51] As in Walkowitz’s description of comparison literature or Dimock’s vision of weak networks, stories find themselves activated and juxtaposed across nations and times, inviting the reader to see these narratives as allegorizing each other yet not suppressing the material points of differentiation among them. It is this allegorical historiography that *The Buried Giant* models for us.
