*Japan, the Global Novel, and the Question of Responsibility*

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**Abstract**
Recent years have seen the arrival of a number of novels, which, while they thematically touch on Japan to some degree, are best situated in a global rather than a national framework. This paper takes four of these novels—Kazuo Ishiguro's An Artist of the Floating World (1986), David Mitchell's Ghostwritten (1999), Murakami Haruki's Umibe no Kafuka (Kafka on the Shore, 2002), and Ruth Ozeki's A Tale for the Time Being (2013)—and looks at the way they deal with the question of responsibility. Naturally, the Pacific War provides an important backdrop to the examination of this question, most overtly in Ishiguro's novel, but also less directly in the novels of Murakami and Ozeki. Mitchell's novel, while orientated more to the present and future than the past, deals with related themes, trying to imagine in literary form a world of unintended global cause and effect. The notion of the global novel is highly contested and all four novelists dealt with in this paper have been implicated in these debates. While each touches on the question of Japan and responsibility in a global age, they also offer different visions of what a global novel might look like.

Keywords: The global novel, Kazuo Ishiguro, Haruki Murakami, Ruth Ozeki, David Mitchell

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**Introduction**

Though the adjectives offered to mark this new kind of narrative differ—"global, planetary, international, or simply 'world'" (Irr, 2011, p. 660)—in recent years both critics and writers alike have begun talking about the emergence of a new holy grail in writing that transcends older, arguably equally impossible aspirations locked within national frameworks (perhaps the most famous earlier case being the Great American Novel). Naturally, not everyone is excited about this development. The author and translator Tim Parks, for example, worries about what is lost in literature when authors eye up, not national readerships, but international ones: "From the moment an author perceives his ultimate audience as international rather than national, the nature of his writing is bound to change. In particular one notes a tendency to remove obstacles to international comprehension" (Parks, 2010, para. 7).

Two of the authors considered in this paper are clear targets of Parks' critique (Ishiguro and Murakami); yet the notion of the global novel is not limited to questions of audience and translatability alone. David Mitchell, for example, another "global author" considered in this paper, moves in the opposite direction; rather than reducing what Parks calls "culture-specific clutter", he increases it to the point where it sometimes threatens to bog his narratives down, and the novel examined in this paper by Ruth Ozeki goes as far as including footnotes to explain the numerous Japanese terms she employs. Clearly then the notion of an emerging global novel is a complex one and points to many different trends at the same time.

One way of making sense of the directions in which a phrase like the global novel pulls is offered by Rebecca Walkowitz (2015) in her preface to the book *Kazuo Ishiguro in a Global Context*. Walkowitz proposes three ways an author's status as a global writer—what she calls their "worldliness"—might be evaluated. First, we can look at their biography, at the way their personal story crosses borders and resists inclusion in a single national framework. Second, we can look at what they write, at the topics that interest them and the themes that flow through their works calling for a global interpretation. And third, we can look at issues of "global circulation and reception," at the way issues of language and translation and the locations of readers and critics influence the way a work is received.

This paper touches briefly on four novels—Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* (1999), Murakami Haruki's *Umibe no Kafuka* (*Kafka on the Shore,* 2002), and Ruth Ozeki's A Tale *for the Time Being* (2013)—and tries to understand their position as global novels that all include Japanese settings. Of course, there is some irony in examining the way four so-called, or at least aspiring "global novels" are dealing with one particular country—in this case Japan—but this only points to the way national frameworks remain relevant in our global age, even in creative works that are seeking to overcome them. In trying to focus my topic, I will leave aside Walkowitz's first and third criteria for evaluating "worldliness", as interesting as questions of biography and reception might be, and focus instead on her second criteria, and the way one theme in particular—responsibility—links these novels together.

What this theme of responsibility highlights is the way questions of the past, and particularly Japan's role in the Pacific War, continue to haunt the country and hinder

its integration into global systems. This can easily be seen in the field of diplomacy—the ways China and South Korea, for example, continue to point to Japan's past historical wrongdoings in ways both sincere and cynical and the way Japan's leaders continue to both apologize for and embrace this same past. Similar contradictions appear in these narratives, and while the war is most clearly the backdrop to Ishiguro's novel, it plays some part in the novels of Murakami and Ozeki. An equally important consideration in these four novels, however, is the way questions of responsibility are complicated by increasingly complex global networks. This is most apparent in Mitchell's novel, but again it is a theme that can be seen, to some degree, in the other novels as well. The theme of responsibility, of course, is not the only element linking these four novels together, but it at least offers a starting point for considering what might be thought of as an emerging sub-genre: global novels dealing with Japan. The discussion that follows is far from exhaustive, but it is hoped that it can at least be suggestive of a trend that is deserving of further critical attention.

## Unconscious Barriers to Responsibility in Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* and Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*

This paper groups the four novels under discussion into two sets, starting with Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* and Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*. These first two novels offer an interesting comparison in the way they deal with the theme of the effect of unconscious barriers on our ability to take responsibility. The basic trick of Ishiguro's novel is that while most of the time the reader is led to believe that it is a story about the way psychological defenses make it difficult for a person to accept responsibility for their actions, in the end it turns out to be less the narrator's fear of responsibility that hinders him—the painter Ono Masuji's inability to take ownership of his turn during the war from artist to propagandist—than it is his fear of insignificance: he's not afraid of admitting what he did during the war; rather, he's afraid that his life's work may have turned out to be something of little lasting value. This message is driven home in a number of encounters near the end of the novel, including forcibly by Ono's eldest daughter, Setsuko:

> Forgive me, but it is perhaps important to see things in a proper perspective. Father painted some splendid pictures, and was no doubt most influential amongst other such painters. But Father's work had hardly to do with these larger matters of which we are speaking. Father was simply a painter. He must stop believing he has done some great wrong (Ishiguro, 1986, p.106).

Setsuko is concerned about her father's overestimation of his role during the war; she wants to reassure him that he doesn't belong in the same category as recent figures who found it necessary to commit suicide to accept responsibility for their actions. Both of Ono's daughters are particularly troubled by his actions during the marriage negotiations (*omiai*) for the youngest daughter, Noriko. After an earlier failed marriage negotiation, Ono comes to believe that the cause for this setback may be the new cultural milieu ushered in by the postwar American occupation, and so he quietly goes about meeting with old acquaintances and trying to smooth the way for the present negotiations (the concern being that detectives employed in the marriage negotiations will uncover unsavory aspects of his past). Of particular importance, it turns out that during the war Ono turned on one his star pupils, a young man named Kuroda, tipping him off to the authorities for what he saw as his unpatriotic activities. Yet while there is clearly shame and guilt hidden in Ono's past, the narrative's

fixation on these issues blindsides us when the issue of pride is finally revealed as the true underlying cause of his misrepresentations. As is common in Ishiguro's stories, our narrator has turned out to be unreliable, just not in the way we first expected.

Cheng (2010) has highlighted the defenses Ono employs in his narrative to suppress feelings of shame and guilt. The first of these defenses is projection, such as when Ono speaks harshly of a teacher who cut him off and destroyed his paintings after he, as a young man, broke ranks and moved onto the propagandist stage of his career, noting that this teacher's actions were a sign of "arrogance and possessiveness" (Ishiguro, 1986, p.175). Of course, the irony is that Ono has done exactly the same thing to his own student, Kuroda, though he is hesitant to admit it. As Margaret Scanlan explains, "[W]hen [Ono] talks about other people, he frequently appears to be talking about himself" (as cited in Chen, 2010, p.43).

Another defense employed by Ono, as noted by Chen, is the collapse of the personal 'I' into a collective 'we' that allows the individual to dissolve their personal sense of guilt into the group. This can be seen, for example, at the end of the narrative where Ono recalls the words of Matsuda, the man who encouraged him to take his nationalistic turn during the war. As Matsuda justifies:

> We at least acted on what we believed and did our utmost. It's just that in the end we turned out to be ordinary men. Ordinary men with no special gifts of insight. It was simply our misfortune to have been ordinary men during such times (Ishiguro, 1986, p.194).

The problem for Ono is that to accept Matsuda's argument, he has to accept its supporting premise—that he was just an ordinary man—and this is what he struggles with. Ono's story drops a number of subtle clues, often made to look like digressions from the main narrative, that suggest he was once a person of some influence in the broader community. He is thus stuck between his desire to lessen his guilt for his actions during the war and his desire to hold onto an overdeveloped sense of self-importance. This tension is never entirely resolved in the narrative, though partial recognition does occur.

Ishiguro's interest in the psychological defenses of individuals and the ways this shapes their narratives is connected to his similar interest in how nations come to terms with their past, Japan being one example he took up early in his career, but by no means the only country he is interested in. Ishiguro explains,

> [I] *am* interested in storytelling in the sense of what a community or a nation tells itself about its past and by implication therefore where it is at the moment and what it should be doing next. If you want to draw a parallel between how individuals come to terms with their past and decide what to do next, and how a nation or community approaches such things, then the issue of storytelling is an important one (Matthews and Groes, 2009, p.117).

Of course, Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* cannot be conflated in any simple way with Japan and its national narrative. Ishiguro is not saying that Japan can get over its war guilt if it simply admits that it's just another ordinary nation. And yet there is a more general lesson here about the way all narratives are shaped by self-interest.

While Ishiguro's novel is interested in examining those psychological defenses that complicate stories of self and nation, the next novel I wish to briefly examine by Murakami seems more interested in sidestepping these defenses all together and going straight to the more chaotic material of the unconscious mind. What Murakami doesn't wish to sidestep through this move, however, is the question of responsibility, a theme he confronts directly in *Kafka on the Shore* through a quote attributed to the poet Yeats: "In dreams begin responsibility" (Murakami, 2005, p. 122).

Murakami's long fiction since 1995 often employs a similar strategy. At some point in the story a taboo will be traversed, often a sexual one, but the reality of this act in the context of the narrative will remain uncertain. Perhaps it really happened, or perhaps it occurred in some other metaphysical realm, and so the question of responsibility remains murky. The effect is something like asking someone how responsible they are for a dream in which they did something terrible. The dramatic claim of Murakami's post-1995 fiction, and particularly *Kafka on the Shore*, is that this is where responsibility begins.

The central protagonist of *Kafka on the Shore*, Tamura Kafka, is a fifteen-year-old boy who is struggling under the weight of an oedipal prophesy. Running away from home, he meets a woman in a library who he comes to believe or at least fantasizes might be his mother, and eventually he engages in sexual activity with here—first in a dream-like state and later in reality. He also becomes an object of police interest when his biological father is murdered in Tokyo. Kafka has an alibi; he is in Shikoku at the time of the murder, but this does not completely answer the question of his guilt, for on the night of the murder he blacks out in a Shinto shrine and later wakes up covered in blood. The novel is playing here with ideas of spirit projection such as are found in *The Tale of Genji*.

This short synopsis of the story hardly does it justice (in fact, it misses half the novel in that alternating with the chapters on Kafka are chapters dealing with an old man named Nakata and his dealings with a mysterious figure called Johnnie Walker). What I wish to focus on here, however, is the way Kafka decides to accept responsibility for his fantasies and dark impulses, regardless of their relationship to reality. Kafka's alter ego in the novel, the boy named Crow, expresses his determination in this way:

> If there's a curse in all this, you mean to grab it by the horns and fulfill the program that's been laid out for you. Lift the burden from your shoulders and *live*—not caught up in someone else's schemes, but as *you*. That's what you want (Murakami, 2005, p.343).

This instinct to embrace his oedipal taboo rather to run from it might be seen as an engagement with Freud's ideas in the essay *Totem and Taboo* (1918). In this essay, Freud offers an alternative mythology to the oedipal one for understanding the relationship between fathers and sons. He goes into a pseudo-anthropological mode, positing a male from the historical past who monopolized access to a harem of females, thus forcing his sons to eventually revolt against him and murder him. The collective guilt that ensued from this act provided the foundations for a new moral order and a proto-religion upon which later religions have subsequently borrowed.

This idea of taboos as the foundation of moral order and religion becomes important when one recognizes the way Murakami has been responding in his post-1995 fiction to the Aum Shinrikyō cult and its leader Asahara Shōkō who was behind the infamous sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system in March of 1995. When the young Kafka deliberately decides to embrace his curse, to accept responsibility for killing his father and sleeping with his mother, despite the ambiguity of these acts and despite the novels constant reminder that "everything is a metaphor", he can thus be seen as trying to confront the very forces that from a Freudian perspective are the foundation of religion. The idea that literature might be capable of acting as an antidote to religion is a major theme in Murakami's recent fiction, particularly in his large three-part novel *1Q84*, but even here in *Kafka on the Shore* one can see him wrestling with the question of how to confront a cult like Aum, his central argument being that responsibility begins in dreams.

**Global Connections and New Forms of Responsibility**

The next two novels I wish to briefly examine, Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* and Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*, both provide metaphors for the global flow of people and ideas in today's world and examine the ways new forms of agency and responsibility can potentially flower in such conditions. A central metaphor in Ozeki's novel is gyres—what the novel explains are "a string of [ocean] currents" like a "ring of snakes, each biting the tail of the one ahead of it" (p. 13). These gyres become important to explain the way a diary written by a young girl in Japan could wash up on the shores of a small island off the coast of British Columbia and fall into the hands of a novelist named Ruth who chooses to believe that it is part of the leading drift from the 2011 tsunami. Reading this young girl's diary, Ruth learns about Nao, a young Japanese female who is a victim of bullying and the daughter of a suicidal father. While Nao's situation seems dire, and while her fate in the tsunami remains unknown, the narrative she shares includes stories of agency and responsibility that counteract this feeling of powerlessness, most clearly in the stories of the two Harukis.

The first Haruki in the novel is Nao's great uncle who was a kamikaze pilot during the war. This first Haruki had been reluctant to fight in the war, but when forced to do so, ultimately made a decision not to fly his aircraft into the American ship that was his assigned target, instead ploughing it straight into the ocean. The second Haruki is Nao's suicidal father, and while he is initially portrayed as a weak and emotionally fragile character, it is later revealed that the reason he lost his lucrative job in Silicon Valley that started him on his downward spiral was his objections to the way the interfaces he was designing for computer games were going to be put to military use. These interfaces would make it easier for American soldiers to hunt their enemy and perhaps in some way reduce it to the experience of playing a video game. Nao's father believed that this would only heighten the guilt and the difficulties these young soldiers would face upon their return from war. When he later learns of the action of his Uncle, the first Haruki, Nao's father links their stories together and tries to offer an apology of sorts to his daughter:

> [S]o that's why I cried today, when I read Uncle Haruki's diary. I understood how he felt, you see? Haruki Number One made his decision. He steered his airplane into a wave. He knew it was a stupid, useless gesture, but what else could he do? I made a similar decision, so stupid and useless, only my plane

was carrying our whole family. I felt so sorry for you, and for Mom, and for everyone on account of my actions (Ozeki, 2013, p.388).

While making no promises about outcomes, Ozeki's novel celebrates these small moments of bravery and shows the way positive choices can continue to ripple over space and time. The last novel in this discussion, Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*, deals with a similar theme.

The Japanese setting in Ghostwritten is found in the first two chapters of the novel and in the epilogue-like final chapter. Chapter One begins in Okinawa, where a man has come to escape following his participation in a religiously-inspired attack on the Tokyo subway system that is clearly modeled after the Aum attack. Chapter Two focuses on the story of a young man working in Tokyo at a record store and his falling in love with a young girl who he later moves to Hong Kong with. Like many of the chapters in the novel, there is no direct narrative link between the two chapters except that a coded message the first man in Okinawa tries to send to his cult by telephone is mistakenly relayed to the young boy in Tokyo who has no idea what to make of the strange, cryptic message. This has little other significance for the story except that it delays the young man who is closing up the record store, allowing him to meet the young girl again who has become his love interest. Lives are thus interlinked in the novel in strange and not always predictable ways.

The novel moves chapter by chapter to different locations around the world, but clearly more than any single place, it is the feeling of the global present that links the chapters together. The man in the Okinawa chapter, for example, is mildly disgusted by the global uniformity he sees in Naha: "The same shops as anywhere else … Burger King, Benetton, Nike … High streets are becoming the same all over the world, I suppose" (Mitchell, 1999, p.11). This description is echoed in a later chapter, this time set in Petersburg, Russia, where a female narrator offers a similar observation: "All these new shops, Benetton, The Häagen-Daz shop, Nike, Burger King … High streets are becoming the same all over the world, I suppose (Mitchell, 1999, p.211). Globalization is not an entirely attractive force within the novel, and yet is it an important part of what binds different characters together.

While Ozeki's novel has its gyres as a metaphor of global interconnection, Mitchell's novel includes transmigrating souls who travel between different characters in the story and travel over different places and times. Very similar to Ozeki's novel, the story also features a scientist who makes a conscientious decision to stop her technology getting into military hands to be used for purposes of which she can't approve. It is a complex novel, tracing over nine chapters different stories set in different global locales, all asking questions about chance and connection in modern life. While it's consequently a difficult novel to summarize, I believe Caroline Edwards' (2011) assertion that is a novel searching for the "continuation of some form of utopian alternative to our globalized neoliberal present," is a fair assessment of its intent (p. 179). There is a sense of the grand sweep of history in *Ghostwritten* and the example of many utopian dreams that turn out to be nightmares. In more modest ways, however, the novel asks the question of what new forms of belonging and hope could emerge instead, with Japan providing just one of the locales where such questions are asked.

**Conclusion**

The four novels I have briefly examined in this paper all offer Japan as a setting upon which questions of responsibility are then explored. They show the way Japan's role in the Pacific War still plays a dominate role in global discourses on Japan, but also the way the country is sometimes employed in contemporary literature as a more neutral site where global questions of connection and responsibility can be examined.

Schoene (2009), in his book *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, has argued for the emergence of a sub-genre in British fiction that the blurb for his book describes as particularly "adept at imagining global community". Writing about David Mitchell in this same book, Schoene writes that he articulates "a cosmopolitan vision [that] never deteriorates into facile utopianism" (p. 102). My argument in this paper has been that a similar sub-genre is emerging out of Japanese fiction, but its main difference with the British form Schoene identifies is that it is not limited to writers living in Japan and writing in Japanese. Of the four authors examined, only Murakami writes in Japanese, and while all four authors have lived in Japan at different periods, they have also lived long periods in other locations. The second difference in the Japanese case is the way historical questions continue to dominate the discourse.

As mentioned in the introduction, my argument is not that responsibility is the only theme linking these emerging global novels focused on Japan together; there are clearly many other equally important themes that deserve examination: the themes of growing up and demarcation with the other are two that come to mind. This study has merely offered a preliminary examination that picks one central theme in this emerging sub-genre and examines it in a limited way. A more comprehensive examination of this sub-genre is going to require the examination of other works and themes, as well as the other criterion Walkowitz identifies: biography and reception. It is my belief that there is enough convergence occurring between these four authors to make this a worthwhile endeavor.

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