

Chu-chueh Cheng

the margin
without
centre

Kazuo Ishiguro

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Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro, born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954, is among the most celebrated writers in contemporary Britain. He embarked on a writing career with *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), but did not secure a firm foothold in the profession until the publication of *The Remains of the Day* (1989). Winner of the 1989 Booker Prize, *The Remains of the Day* was adapted into a Merchant–Ivory film in 1993, which drew even greater attention to his literary talent. After the huge success of *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro experimented with a style notably different from the compact narrative that characterizes his first three novels. *The Unconsoled* (1995) exhibits dreamlike reality and proceeds in constant digressions. Lengthy and convoluted, the fourth novel received mixed responses from readers and critics. This perhaps explains why *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005) returned to Ishiguro's earlier approach, a relatively realistic rendition of trauma and regret. Like the preceding two novels, his latest work *Nocturnes* (2009) exhibits realism with occasional absurdity.

In addition to the above-mentioned seven books, Ishiguro has written a number of short stories, TV scripts, and screenplays. Most of his short stories were published in the early 1980s. 'A Strange and Sometimes Sadness' (1980) was first printed in a now extinct magazine, *Bananas*, and was collected, with 'Waiting for J' and 'Getting Poisoned', in *Introduction 7: Stories by New Writers* (1981). 'The Summer after the War' and 'October, 1948' respectively appeared in *Granta* in 1983 and 1985 before both pieces were incorporated into *An Artist of the Floating World*. 'A Family Supper' was first published by another now defunct journal, *Quarto*, in 1980 and later anthologized in *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories* (1987) and *Making Contact* (1997). In 2000, Ishiguro brought together 'A Strange and Sometimes Sadness', 'A Family Supper', and 'The Summer after the War' in *Early Japanese Stories*, a collection of short stories in which he could safeguard the Japan of his remembrance. Ishiguro's most recent short story, 'A Village after Dark', appeared in *New Yorker* in 2001.

Ishiguro is not a stranger to the mass media. Earlier in his writing career, he wrote television drama – *A Profile of Arthur J. Mason* (1984) and *The Gourmet* (1987) – for BBC 4. Since attaining international recognition, Ishiguro has written the original script of *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003) and, under the commission of the Merchant–Ivory team, loosely adapted Junichiro Tanizaki’s novel *The Diary of a Mad Old Man* into the film script of *The White Countess* (2005).

The quantity and quality of Ishiguro’s literary production has attracted critical attention and inspired rigorous discussion. Mike Petry, Brian W. Shaffer, Barry Lewis, Cynthia F. Wong, Wai-chew Sim, Ching-chih Wang, and Matthew Beedham have dedicated their books to Ishiguro’s rhetorical styles, thematic concerns, and theoretical frameworks. The primary object of these critics’ studies is Ishiguro’s novels, which are generally analysed in the chronological order of their publication. Except for an overall review in the introduction or intermittent remarks to connect one chapter with another, most of these books treat Ishiguro’s novels as independent units and examine them as such.

Shaffer’s *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* (1998) consists of five chapters; the first chapter introduces the novelist, and the remaining four examine his first four novels sequentially. Petry’s *Narratives of Memory and Identity* (1999) names each of the four chapters according to the narrator’s vocation of the novel in examination. They are respectively entitled ‘A Mother’s Disturbing Memories: *A Pale View of Hills*’, ‘A Painter’s Guilty Conscience: *An Artist of the Floating World*’, ‘A Butler’s Life-Long Illusion: *The Remains of the Day*’, and ‘A Pianist’s Mind-Shattering Confusion: *The Unconsoled*’. While Petry marks each chapter with the narrator’s profession, Wong categorizes her chapters according to the novels’ respective themes. Her *Kazuo Ishiguro* (2000) begins with two chapters introducing Ishiguro and his novels and proceeds to discuss each of these novels in the subsequent chapters. They are respectively entitled ‘Narrative and Memory: *A Pale View of Hills*’, ‘Deflecting Truth in Memory: *An Artist of the Floating World*’, ‘Disclosure and “Unconcealment”: *The Remains of the Day*’, and ‘Seizing Comprehension: *The Unconsoled*’. Lewis organizes *Kazuo Ishiguro* (2000) in a somewhat similar fashion: the book starts with an introduction called ‘Contexts and Intertexts’, proceeds with four chapters on Ishiguro’s first four novels, and then ends with a postscript on the then recently published *When We Were Orphans*.

Sim's *Globalization and Dislocation in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro* (2006) covers six novels by Ishiguro and names each of its chapters according to the title of the novel in discussion. Like the preceding five books on Ishiguro's oeuvre, two recently published guides to Ishiguro's works, Beedham's *The Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro* (2010) and Sim's *Kazuo Ishiguro* (2010), assess the novelist's works individually and chronologically. Wang's *Homeless Strangers in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro* (2008) is by far the only book on Ishiguro that considers his novels a thematic whole. The main body of Wang's argument consists of 'The Unconsoled Stranger's Vision of Home: *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*', 'The Orphaned Stranger's Recollection of Home: *The Unconsoled* and *When We Were Orphans*', and 'The Remaining Stranger's Vanishing Memory of Home: *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*'. The book examines Ishiguro's six novels under the twin concepts of home and estrangement and in each chapter pairs off two of them according to their sub-thematic alliance.

Academic journals, too, have shown immense enthusiasm in Ishiguro's writing. In 1999, *QWERTY* published an issue on *The Remains of the Day*. In summer 2007, *Novel* dedicated to Ishiguro's oeuvre a special issue entitled 'Ishiguro's Unknown Communities'. In addition to the novelist's better-known novels such as *The Remains of the Day*, *A Pale View of Hills*, and *An Artist of the Floating World*, the special issue attends to relatively under-discussed texts such as *The Unconsoled*, *When We Were Orphans*, *Never Let Me Go*, and the film *The White Countess*. By so doing, 'Ishiguro's Unknown Communities' supplements aforementioned books and helps piece together a more complete picture of Ishiguro's oeuvre. Placing Ishiguro's works in the discourse of cosmopolitanism, the special issue of *Novel* also draws critical attention to an array of questions regarding production, translation, and reception in a globalizing literary market.

No research is by itself an autonomous creation. All researches are interconnected and hence interdependent. *The Margin Without Centre* is no exception. While acknowledging its indebtedness to existing studies of Ishiguro, this book endeavours to take an alternative approach. It holds that Ishiguro's works are best viewed as a corpus so as to reveal the essential strands that interlace them. By approaching Ishiguro's writings as a corpus, *The Margin Without Centre* aims to disclose a recurrent constitution of aesthetic preferences, rhetorical tactics, narrative ploys, and generic

alterations that help articulate his thematic preoccupations. The book does not organize its chapters in the sequence of these works' publication; instead, it assembles them according to their topic compatibility so as to illuminate their generic, theoretical, and stylistic affiliations.

The Margin Without Centre avoids presenting Ishiguro's writings separately and sequentially, because the publication sequence of these works do not always correspond to the development of his authorship or the experiment of subject matters. In an interview with Cynthia F. Wong and Grace Crummett, Ishiguro admits that 'although books come out in a certain sequence, it's not necessarily the case that the ideas came in that order'.¹ He cites *Never Let Me Go* as an example: he drafted the novel in 1990 but did not complete and publish it until 2005. If the order of ideas' emergence, as Ishiguro acknowledges, does not match up with the sequence of their materialization in books, then a chronological analysis of Ishiguro's novels is not necessarily the most effective way of approaching his oeuvre.

The title of this book, *The Margin Without Centre*, refers to the equivocation of the margin Jacques Derrida observes: it at once marks a closure and an opening, unity and division, the self and the other, here and beyond.² The title also illustrates that *The Margin Without Centre* revolves around the significance of margins and the instability of demarcation. The six chapters of this book attend to peripheral elements – trivial details, incoherent conversations, hackneyed notions, minor characters, transitional sites, and everyday occurrences – in order to expose what is deliberately obscured or contained within Ishiguro's elliptical narratives. The poststructuralist approach and the structuralist objective of *The Margin Without Centre* may appear incongruous, but the seemingly incompatible pairing in fact articulates a number of paradoxes that Ishiguro's novels manifest: the alterity of the international; the disclosure of the concealed; the innovation of the banal; the significance of the trivial; the harmony of the cacophonous; and the presence of the absent.

- 1 C. F. Wong and G. Crummett, 'A Conversation about Life and Art with Kazuo Ishiguro', in Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong (eds), *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 210.
- 2 J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), x–xxviii.