

A Dance of Vanity: The Motivation Behind Ono's Ruminations in Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*

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In *An Artist of the Floating World* the narrator, Masuji Ono, a former painter and war-time propagandist, reminisces about his life and career. Set in post-war Japan, Ono finds himself surrounded by the attitude that much about the militaristic war effort was wrong and those who assisted it, like Ono, are somehow guilty. Ishiguro has said that the story "is an exploration of somebody trying to come to terms with the fact that he has somehow misused his talents unknowingly, simply because he didn't have any extraordinary power of insight into the world he lived in." (Mason, 339) Ono wanders in and out of recollections of the past, spurred on by events of the present, and slowly a picture of his psyche emerges, which in many ways is clearer to the reader than to the teller. As Cynthia Wong has pointed out "At the same time he proclaims to be telling the truth, he calls attention to his own distortions; Ono's slips may be read as accidental, or as moments when his façade shows through." (39) Then in a subtle twist, Ishiguro shows us that Ono is not as concerned with repenting for his past as he is in garnering from it some amount of pride for his life and career. These two themes create a tension; Peter Wain said, "as well as his desire to conceal this past of his, there is a pressing vanity that makes him want to be known—to be a celebrity." (191) In other words, Ono is not only motivated by guilt, but also by vanity.

The narrative begins with the impression that Ono is in search of reconciliation between the person he was in the past and the present circumstances. Though this is an important theme in the book, this is not Ono's major concern. There are indications from the outset that Ono is already embarrassed by his former career. When his grandson Ichiro repeatedly asks to see his paintings, he refuses, saying "they're tidied away for the moment." (32) Also, Ono's public confession of his culpability comes too early in the book, barely half way through, to be the definitive event of the story, and in addition, it fails to settle his conscience. The second half of the book carries us to another more significant climax and this sheds light on the deeper journey that Masuji Ono has been on.

The book is divided into four sections, named by dates between October 1948 and June 1950. The first two sections of the book concern Ono's coming to grips with his war-time role as an artist

painting propaganda posters to support the war effort and his more sinister role as an official advisor to the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities. His efforts to face up to his responsibilities are stirred up by the visit of his elder daughter, Setsuko, and her concerns about impediments to her younger sister Noriko's current wedding negotiations with Taro Saito's family. We learn she was in negotiations the year before to marry Jiro Miyake that appeared to be going smoothly until the other party suddenly backed out. Worried about his daughter's prospects this time around and egged on by the insinuations of Setsuko and her husband, a former soldier embittered against those he feels were responsible for the war yet have not faced up to their responsibility, to "take appropriate precautions," Ono becomes more and more convinced that the cause of the failure of the previous negotiations was his lingering reputation as a propagandist and his unwillingness to repent for his former role.

Ono attempts to contact those most closely associated with his war-time career to gain their cooperation in down-playing his culpability if they are to be contacted by the Saito's investigators. He is able to reach an understanding with Chishu Matsuda, his cohort in the propaganda society Shingen, and someone more culpable than Ono. He fails, however, to even be met by Mr. Kuroda, Ono's former pupil and someone Ono betrayed to the militant war-time police. Knowing that Kuroda is someone Dr. Saito knows of, and that he is a teacher at Dr. Saito's son's college, Ono is backed into a corner and comes out with a confession in front of the Saitos at the wedding negotiation meeting.

To make such a public confession represents progress on Ono's part, but we are to find that he has a far larger and more painful step to make, and that is to realize that the public confession was not even necessary because nobody cared about his past. The entire third section of the book leads up to Setsuko's revelation that everyone at the *miai* was surprised and puzzled by Ono's confession, not relieved as he thought they were. There is a sense of suspense that builds as Ono refers to "some of the things she tried to imply," (132) "certain of her remarks—whose significance I did not fully grasp until I reflected on them some time later," (134) "that annoying conversation with Setsuko," (151) "the sort of insinuations Setsuko had been making," (158) to admitting to be "irritated by Setsuko's words." (189) First she claims that she did not ask him to cover up or atone for his war-time activities, then she claims that no one was anticipating, let alone expecting, Ono's confession.

"Noriko told me she was extremely puzzled by Father's behaviour that night. It

seems the Saitos were equally puzzled. No one was at all sure what Father meant by it all. Indeed, Suichi also expressed his bewilderment when I read him Noriko's letter." (191)

Ono is shocked. "This is extraordinary," he repeats twice. What does this show us about Ono? Why did he think he had to cover up his past? Why did he think he had to make a public apology? The answer to these questions will lead us to what it is that Ono is really searching for in his ruminations, and that is a position of respect and authority when both have all but vanished.

Searching for admiration is a matter of vanity and Ono again and again shows himself to be an extremely vain person. This is evident from the very first pages when he tells of how he came to own his house, one that "would stand out from all the others nearby," (7) and one that was "a house keeping with our status." (8) The former owner, Akira Sugimura, a wealthy businessman, passed away and his daughters didn't want to sell the house, but were forced by circumstances, so they decided "to conduct an auction of prestige" (9) which he won "purely on grounds of good character and achievement." (8) Even Ono's statements of modesty are thinly veiled boasts. He admits "I am not, nor have I ever been, a wealthy man," (7) but then "wonders why things are not settled more often by such means. How so much more honourable is such a contest, in which one's moral conduct and achievement are brought as witness rather than the size of one's purse." (10) His explanation of why the Miyakes backed out of the marriage negotiations the year before is "My feeling is that it was simply a matter of family status. The Miyakes, from what I saw of them, were just the proud, honest sort who would feel uncomfortable at the thought of their son marrying above his station." This is followed by the feigned humility "I have never at any point in my life been very aware of my own social standing, and even now, I am often surprised afresh when some event, or something someone may say, reminds me of the rather high esteem in which I am held." (19) Ono tells us his "reputation in this city had grown to a certain extent" (63) and that he "is struck by the realization that one is held in rather higher esteem than one supposed." (64) "I command considerable respect amongst my colleagues," (69) and to emphasize such he recalls the praise of his colleague the Tortoise, "'But truly, Ono-san, men like you are all too rare. It is an honour to be a colleague of such a man.' . . . I recall having to listen for several more moments to his praise of my courage and integrity." (70-1)

Vanity has also played a large role in the key decisions in his life. The young Ono felt himself better than his money-groveling father. Although he had developed an artistic inclination on his

own, his father's opposition to his becoming an artist only "succeeded in kindling [his] ambition," to "rise above such a life." (47) After a few years of painting in Master Takeda's sweatshop, Ono had caught the interest of the master painter Seiji Moriyama and was invited to become his pupil. However, there was more than ordinary flattery at work as he recalls "Of course, Mr. Moriyama is absolutely correct. It's all very well for the rest of those working-horses to toil under Master Takeda to earn their living. But those of us with serious ambitions must look elsewhere." (71) Then Chishu Matsuda was able to persuade him to leave Mr. Moriyama's villa and join the Okada-Shingen Society with the pry of vanity. After Ono had refused the initial invitation to join an exhibition, Mastuda calls on Ono to tell him that "it seems to me you are foregoing an important opportunity to enhance your reputation." (88) Then Mastuda takes it a step further, saying that he really came there to meet Ono because he "wished to say that I am very struck by what I have seen of your work. I believe you have much talent." (89) Ono takes the bait and continues to meet Mastuda who tells him he is "someone of immense talent" (173) who could "produce work of genuine value" (172) to help Japan "forge an empire as powerful and wealthy as those of the British and the French." (174) Ono's first work for the Society was philanthropic, as he describes his painting "Complacency," but it soon changed to pure propaganda for the military in the picture's reworking called "Eyes to the Horizon," presumably because this type of work was smiled upon by the Society and helped him "achieve a certain fame and influence throughout the city." (168)

Fame did follow this last move. There were awards and honors and the necessity to move to a house keeping with his status. This period was the pinnacle of his success, and more importantly for him, his hay day for attention and esteem. Nowhere was Ono more in heaven than at his favorite table, "reserved for my sole use" (65) at the Migi-Hidari bar. Many times he fondly recalls conversations with his pupils at the bar, invariably focused on Ono the teacher. "My pupils seemed to share a fascination for hearing about this early part of my career." (72)

This was the way things would go at the Migi-Hidari. I could be having a conversation with someone, the rest of them talking amongst themselves, and as soon as an interesting question had been asked of me, they would all break off their own conversations and I would have a circle of faces awaiting my reply. It was as though they never talked amongst themselves without having an ear open for another piece of knowledge I might impart." (73)

The war and the surrender brought down Ono's perfect world. The Migi-Hidari was demolished to

make way for business development; the Okada-Shingen Society was a victim of the occupation, and along with it all the awards and prestige of its members; Ono's career evaporated; his former pupils distanced themselves from him, his wife and son were killed. Ono may have reasons to reconcile his past misdeeds, but much more urgently he needs to recapture some self esteem.

Ono proves himself willing to go to great lengths to regain that esteem. Mike Petry has observed, "He is vain and would personally, setting aside his cover for his daughter, rather be famous than unknown." (76) His ruminations are filled with accounts of his former status, as outlined before. Ono is attempting to bolster his ego of the present by recalling his position in the past. That he is truly convinced by this is evident in the *miai* episode. Ono interprets his daughter's insinuations to mean that his reputation is a hindrance to Noriko's chances of marrying. He believes that Dr. Saito has known well of his career even though they were only neighbors who spoke briefly a few times. He gets Matsuda's cooperation and tries to get Kuroda's. Then there is his confession.

"There are some who would say it is people like myself who are responsible for the terrible things that happened to this nation of ours. As far as I am concerned, I freely admit I made many mistakes. I accept that much of what I did was ultimately harmful to our nation, that mine was part of an influence that resulted in untold suffering for our own people. I admit this. You see, Dr Saito, I admit this quite readily." (123)

However, Setsuko reveals that that his entire concern over his reputation standing in the way of Noriko's marriage was a fabrication.

"It is some mystery to me why Father's career should have been of any particular relevance to the negotiations. The Saitos, it would seem, were certainly not concerned and, as we have said, they were very puzzled by father's behaviour at the *miai*."

"This is quite astonishing, Setsuko. The situation was that Dr Saito and I had been acquainted for a long time. As one of the city's most eminent art critics, he would have followed my career over the years. . . ."

". . .Taro-san has said that Dr Saito was never so familiar with Father's career. Of course, he always knew Father as a neighbour. But it would seem he was unaware that Father was connected with the art world at all until last year when the negotiations began." (193)

And to piece together two other comments by Setsuko on the same point:

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 were speaking. Father was simply a painter. He must stop believing he has done some great wrong. (192-3)

But it is nevertheless important to stress that no one has ever considered Father's past something to view with recrimination. (193)

Ono continues to insist that Sestuko "was in error over much of what she asserted that morning," (194) but "Ono's sense of self-worth" has been shown to have been "massively inflated, that his reputation during he war years was actually less high than he lets on." (Shaffer, 60).

Ono's shock at the revelation is underlined by the fact that he fell seriously ill soon afterwards. After he recovered he paid a last visit to Matsuda just before he died. Matsuda patronizes him, "you wanted so badly to make a grand contribution," but "it seems in the end neither of us had a broad enough view." (199) Having reached much the same conclusion over which Ono is now struggling to accept, Matsuda confides

'Army officers, politicians, businessmen,' Matsuda said. 'They've all been blamed for what happened to this country. But for the likes of us, Ono, our contribution was always marginal. No one cares now what the likes of you and me once did. They look at us and see only two old men with their sticks.' He smiled at me, then went on feeding the fish. 'We're the only ones who care now. The likes of you and me, Ono, when we look back over our lives and see the were flawed, we're the only ones who care now.' (201)

What is left for Ono now, his career disgraced and his reputation all but forgotten? He may have failed, but at least he held convictions and "strove to rise above the mediocre." (204) What he tells us in response to Matsuda's words above can be applied as much to himself as to his former colleague.

Even as he uttered such words, there remained something in Matsuda's manner that afternoon to suggest he was anything but a disillusioned man. And surely there was no reason for him to have died disillusioned. He may indeed have looked back over this life and seen certain flaws, but surely he would have recognized also those aspects he could feel proud of. For, as he pointed out himself, the likes of him and me, we have the satisfaction of knowing that whatever we did, we did at the time in the best of faith. Of course, we took some bold steps and often did things with much single-mindedness; but this is surely preferable to never putting one's convictions to the test, for lack of will or courage. When one holds convictions deeply enough,

there surely comes a point when it is despicable to prevaricate further. I feel confident Matsuda would have thought along these same lines when looking back over his life. (201-2)

It is significant that the end of the book shows Ono trying to locate anything left of his former stature, not his reputation, but the position of sensei. He recalls that after he received the Shegeta Foundation Award he set out to visit his old mentor Mori-san. He did not have the courage to meet him, but he recalls that in preparing for the visit, he “would not, I resolved, revert to old habits and address him as ‘Sensei’; instead, I would simply address him as though he were a colleague.” (203) Then Ono finds himself in the location of the old pleasure district, now rebuilt with office buildings, at the site of the Migi-Hidari bar. He sits on a bench that “occupies a spot very close to where our old table in the Migi-Hidari would have been situated.” (206) It is only at this point that Ono can comfortably reconcile his past with the present and future. “Our nation, it seems, whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things. One can only wish these young people well.” (206)

Ono now realizes a characteristic of the floating world that he has tragically not understood. When he was back in Mori-san’s villa the wandering minstrel, Gisaburo, occasionally visited. His situation parallels Ono’s now:

“Gisaburo is an unhappy man. He’s had a sad life. His talent has gone to ruin. Those he once loved have long since died or deserted him . . . But then sometimes we used to drink and enjoy ourselves with the women of the pleasure quarters, and Gisaburo would become happy. Those women would tell him all the things he wanted to hear, and for the night anyway, he’d be able to believe them. Once the morning came, of course, he was too intelligent a man to go on believing such things. But Gisaburo didn’t value those nights any the less for that. The best things, he always used to say, are put together of a night and vanish with the morning. What people call the floating world, Ono, was a world Gisaburo knew how to value.” (150)

As Ono sits on the bench in the end it is if he is Gisaburo, the morning after a night in the pleasure district, shorn of his hang over, realizing that though the illusory night of his glory is gone, there was still value in it. The floating world cannot be held onto forever; indeed it is the fleeting nature of it that gives it its value. Ono left the artistic-centered, pleasure-seeking life in Mori-san’s villa where the “artist’s concern is to capture beauty wherever he finds it” in order to “produce works of genuine value,” (172) but in the bargain he was intoxicated with the fame and stature he

achieved. He lost sight that these are fleeting qualities, or perhaps never fully comprehended the nature of notoriety, and consequently he has been through a long and painful ordeal. The painter is back to painting now, after a long break, "A few watercolours to pass the time. Plants and flowers mostly, just for my own amusement." (199) The artist of the floating world has come home.

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