

# Revisiting Loss



Revisiting Loss:  
Memory, Trauma and Nostalgia  
in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro

By

Wojciech Drąg

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-6057-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-6057-4

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Professor Ewa Kębłowska-Lawniczak from Wrocław University for devoting such a great deal of time and attention to me throughout the entire writing process. Her guidance was invaluable.

I would like to thank the Institute of English Studies at Wrocław University for its continued support. I feel particularly thankful to Dr Anna Cichoń for introducing me to Kazuo Ishiguro ten years ago and for offering me theoretical guidelines for one of the chapters.

I am grateful to Prof. Krystyna Stamirowska from the Jagiellonian University and to Prof. Ewa Borkowska from the University of Silesia for their constructive suggestions.

Thanks to Dr Patrycja Poniatowska and A. S. Byatt, who – in strikingly different ways – pushed me (unwittingly) towards developing this project.

I must thank Elaine Horyza, Steven Brooks, Warren Ostler and Joseph Plowman – my British and Irish friends – for meticulously proofreading parts of my book. A warm thank-you to Aleksandra Matyas and Damian Langosz for their tremendous help with the graphic design and formatting.

I would like to express my gratitude to Kacper Podrygajło and to all the friends who proved incredibly kind, supportive and encouraging during the five years I spent working on this book.

Finally, I wish to extend my gratitude to the editing team at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their highly professional and courteous support during the entire editing process. I owe special thanks to Carol Koulikourdi, Amanda Millar, Sophie Edminson, Adam Terry and Keith Thaxton.



## INTRODUCTION

### REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS LOST

To say that Kazuo Ishiguro is a writer of memory and loss is, I believe, neither a reductive comment, nor an overstatement. Although his fiction is far from monothematic, the themes of remembering and accommodating loss find a way to creep into each of his novels. Even if seemingly absent or merely faintly present on the surface, they invariably make up the emotional core of the narrative. The centrality of these themes is asserted in the British Council's official profile of Kazuo Ishiguro, which opens with the following statement by James Procter, "Ishiguro's novels are preoccupied by memories, their potential to digress and distort, to forget and to silence, and above all to haunt. The protagonists of his fiction seek to overcome loss (the personal loss of family members and lovers; losses resulting from war) by making sense of the past through acts of remembrance." This book is the first critical attempt to investigate the complex relationship between the two essential notions of Ishiguro's work – those of memory and loss – across his entire novelistic output, from *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) to his latest novel to date – *Never Let Me Go* (2005).

In my analysis of Ishiguro's six novels, I will demonstrate that loss constitutes the core experience which determines the narrators' sense of identity and the shape of their subsequent lives. Whether it takes the form of a traumatic ordeal, an act of social degradation, a failed relationship or the loss of a home, the painful event serves as a sharp dividing line between the earlier past, which is constructed in retrospect as a locus of meaning and plenitude, and the subsequent period (continuing until the narrative present), which is infused with a sense of lack, dissatisfaction and nostalgia. The narrators, I will argue, have not been able to confine the loss to the past and remain preoccupied by its legacy, which ranges from suppressed guilt to a keen sense of failure or disappointment. Their immersion in the past finds expression in the narratives which they weave in order to articulate, explain, justify or merely comprehend their experiences. I shall indicate that all of these narratives are informed by a

peculiar dichotomy between a need to advance one's self-knowledge and a protective impulse to suppress unwelcome realisations.

In order to revisit and reassess their past, Ishiguro's narrators must rely on memory. Although they are prepared to concede the inevitable slips and inaccuracies of their recollections, the degree to which the mechanisms of memory influence the shape of their reconstruction goes far beyond minor distortions. Besides merely asserting the prevalence of misremembering, Ishiguro explores, in his own words, "how one uses memory for one's own purposes" (Interview by Mason 14). The acts of remembering in which his narrators engage are represented as attempts to recreate the past in order to make it more palatable, rather than to reproduce the actual course and circumstances of events. They construct a past which, to quote the British anthropologist Henrietta L. Moore, is never "just about the past" but rather about "what makes the present able to live with itself" (261). The elaborate reconstructions, marked by memory's capacity for distortion, could be interpreted as being among the major concerns of Ishiguro's whole literary output. The author explains that his unflinching interest in the issue of remembering springs from the complex way in which memory is bound up with the notions of identity and self-definition:

I've always been interested in memory, because it's the filter through which we read our past. It's always tinted – with self-deception, guilt, pride, nostalgia, whatever. I find memory endlessly fascinating, not so much from a neurological or philosophical viewpoint, but as this tool by which people tell themselves things about the lives they've led and about who they've become. ("Conversation about WWO"<sup>1</sup>)

Ishiguro's narrators revisit their past for different reasons. My book sets out to divide their motivations or personal agendas into three categories: the desire to tell about the loss, the desire to forget (or deny) that experience and, finally, the impossible desire to return to the era preceding the loss. Following this categorisation, I have arranged the literary material into three parts, each of which examines the representation of a particular desire in two chosen novels. The wish to articulate one's experience and, by doing so, to justify one's dubious moral choices will be examined in Part One on the basis of the narratives of Ono and Stevens, the protagonists of *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*. The desire to suppress and forget one's

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<sup>1</sup> The interview entitled "A Conversation with Kazuo Ishiguro about *When We Were Orphans*," which is being referred to here, is non-paginated. Hence this and each subsequent reference to it contains only a shortened version of its title.

traumatic ordeal will be explored with reference to Etsuko and Ryder, the narrators of *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Unconsoled* (Part Two). Finally, in Part Three I will investigate the extent to which Banks and Kathy H. – from *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go* – are motivated by a nostalgic desire to return to a lost home and attempt the restoration of a bygone world. The suggested distinction between different desires does not purport to offer a definitive classification of three separate attitudes towards loss. Indeed, in several of the novels those desires could be said to mingle and interpenetrate. Alongside a depiction of the experience of loss and the adopted approach to its legacy, each chapter will examine the properties of recall which enable or facilitate the fulfilment of a given desire, such as memory's narrativising capacity, its propensity for idealisation, and the notions of psychologically motivated misremembering and forgetting.

In the course of my analysis I will be making reference to certain methodological tools outlined in the sections below, which introduce a selection of the most relevant theories of memory and concepts of loss. Three consecutive sections will be devoted to surveying the theoretical contribution of Frederic C. Bartlett, Sigmund Freud and Daniel L. Schacter, whose propositions emphasise memory's intrinsically reconstructive character and its capacity to distort the past by imposing cohering patterns and desired meanings. The last section, in turn, will concentrate on the Freudian concepts of mourning, melancholia and repetition compulsion, as well as on their revisions in the writings of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Dominick LaCapra. Besides the general overview of critical concepts given below, each chapter will contain a brief theoretical introduction to the specific issues addressed in it, aiming to define and classify the notions of narrative, trauma and nostalgia, respectively.

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In 1984 the French historian Pierre Nora announced the advent of the era of memory and commemoration. Nora lists a number of possible explanations for this phenomenon, most of which can be traced to a fundamental shift in the perception of the past. This shift emerges in the wake of the rising popularity of identity politics and the resulting critique of history as a tyrannical approach to the past. The historian regards the rise of memory as a consequence of a threefold decolonisation: global, internal (the emancipation of social, religious and sexual minorities) and

ideological (liberation from the sway of totalitarian regimes) (Nora 41). Memory's role is to furnish freshly constituted nations and social groups with a foundation upon which to build their new identity. Coming from a literary background, British critic Nicola King, on the other hand, sees the recent tendency to emphasise the role of memory as a symptom of "a renewed desire to secure a sense of self," which is threatened by the postmodern ideas about the decentred subject (11). Kerwin Lee Klein, in turn, argues that memory has reached the status of a "cultural religion" which is meant to serve a therapeutic role and re-enchant our sense of the past (qtd. in Domańska 16-17). The past appears to enjoy an "iconic," even "sacred" standing, which makes it a potent weapon in various social and political affairs (Prager 67). The glorious or shameful heritage of the past has been frequently evoked in debates concerning the struggle for equality, emancipation and identity of all kinds of minorities and disadvantaged social groups. The appreciation of the role of memory in building a common identity led to the emergence of the notion of collective memory, introduced by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and committed to studying memory as a social rather than a purely individual phenomenon.

The prominence of memory in social discourse is accompanied by an enhanced interest in its mechanisms. The current understanding of the workings of memory is the joint outcome of a long tradition of philosophical enquiry and a broader interdisciplinary contribution of twentieth and twenty-first century research. My study will be concerned with the notion of remembering as an essentially unreliable mechanism – an approach whose germs could be traced back to Plato's metaphor of the aviary<sup>2</sup> and Aristotle's definition of memory as a presentation of a likeness to the actual experience, rather than as an exact copy of it.<sup>3</sup> This broad

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<sup>2</sup> In *Theaetetus*, an extensive dialogue investigating the nature of knowledge, Plato likens memory to a massive aviary. When one needs to recall particular information, one has to identify the right bird and seize it, which may prove a difficult task, given the size of the receptacle and the elusiveness of the birds. Plato here draws an important distinction between possessing knowledge and being able to reach it, or, in other words, between the availability and accessibility of knowledge (Morris 6-7). His metaphor emphasises the dynamic and elusive nature of the process of recall.

<sup>3</sup> In *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, besides introducing a distinction between memory (*mneme*) and recollection (*anamnesis*), Aristotle states that memory offers merely a likeness of experience, which suggests the possibility of a discrepancy between the two. Viewed from the current perspective, this definition represents one of the earliest expressions of scepticism about the reliability of memory in accurately recording the past.

understanding regards memory as a dynamic mechanism which creatively reconstructs rather than faithfully reproduces past experiences, a property which accounts for memory's capacity to distort and manipulate the past. Its unreliability is a consequence of the complex role it has to perform, which is to arrange the memory content in the form of a coherent self-narrative and thus to secure a stable identity.

In the next two sections, I set out to present selected propositions that contributed to shaping the concept of memory as an unreliable reconstruction – the theory of memory formulated by Frederic C. Bartlett in *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (1931) and Sigmund Freud's considerations of the unreliability of recall, the issue of traumatic memory and the narrative construction of remembering. The third section will briefly review the major preoccupations of contemporary scientific research into memory, including a presentation of the recently established concept of autobiographical memory and an outline of Daniel L. Schacter's research into aspects of misremembering. The last section will outline the theoretical background for the further examination of the experience of loss in Ishiguro's novels. Following a brief overview of the major tenets of Sigmund Freud's contribution to the conceptualisation of loss, a more detailed introduction to the notions of mourning, melancholia, working through and repetition compulsion will be given, owing to their considerable relevance to the ensuing chapters. A consideration of the legacy of the Freudian approach to loss, particularly in Jacques Lacan's revised understanding of the lost object, Jacques Derrida's proposal of resistant mourning and Dominick LaCapra's questioning of the distinction between mourning and melancholia will conclude the chapter.

## **A meaningful reconstruction: Bartlett's theory of memory**

The current understanding of remembering as a process of creative reconstruction owes a lot to the experimental studies conducted by Frederic C. Bartlett, the first Cambridge professor of experimental psychology, who gained international academic renown after the publication of *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (1932). The immediate inspiration for undertaking the research that culminated in the study was Bartlett's growing awareness of the limitations of Hermann Ebbinghaus's<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The German psychologist often credited as the founder of the experimental approach to memory. In his study *Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology* (1885), Ebbinghaus documents the findings of an experiment based on teaching himself nonsense syllables and testing his own recollections. He drew up

experimental method for examining the mechanisms of memory. He found it misguided since – in his view – meaning was an inherent quality of every stimulus capable of triggering personal response. Attempting to divorce content from meaning “creates an atmosphere of artificiality” and becomes a mere study of “repetition habits,” which bears very little relevance to the way memory works in real-life situations (4). Far from dismissing Ebbinghaus’s legacy altogether, Bartlett continued his work by choosing to retain the German professor’s methods for his own study of remembering, while resolving to make it “as realistic as possible” (4). The varied and time-consuming experiments conducted among psychology undergraduates at the University of Cambridge yielded a number of noteworthy observations.

The general principle formulated on the basis of the body of evidence accumulated in the course of Bartlett’s investigation is that “accurate recall is the exception and not the rule” (61). The shape of the texts (such as folk tales or newspaper articles) which his students were asked to read and then recreate from memory after varying intervals proved highly vulnerable to omissions, simplifications and various kinds of distortions. Bartlett attributes most of these to the process of rationalisation, as a result of which the original material of recall becomes simplified, familiarised and more comprehensible. He notices an emerging, or consolidating, cause-and-effect order of the stories being recounted and observes that each successive attempt at recall is a step towards reducing the text to “an orderly narration,” devoid of puzzling and unintelligible elements (86). The shape of the material that is remembered also appears to be “coloured by feeling.” What constitutes grounds for memory is “a general impression, obtained at first glance, and issuing in immediate attitudes of like or dislike, of confidence or suspicion, of amusement or gravity” (53). If, therefore, on the first reading, a given story strikes the subject as frightening or odd, they will unconsciously attempt to recreate those sentiments in consecutive versions of the tale, frequently at the expense of accuracy.

On the basis of the above (and other) observations made in the course of his research, Bartlett goes on to formulate a theory of remembering. The most widely recognisable notion associated with his study is the principle of “effort after meaning.” The term, regarded by the English psychologist as the underlying feature of human memory, can be defined as an ongoing attempt to endow any material that enters the memory with “the maximum possible meaning,” in order to render it intelligible and compatible with

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a forgetting curve, according to which the process of forgetting is quick at first and then slows down in a logarithmic manner.

one's preconceived schemata (84). It is motivated by the permanent desire to connect new material to the material already assimilated. The mechanism of rationalisation serves as the most notable of its manifestations, for its primary role is to simplify the material of recall and gradually transform it into a more coherent and familiar whole. Although this pronouncement about the essentially meaning-making property of human memory may have far-reaching consequences for the understanding of personal memory and life narratives, Bartlett does not draw such broader implications. Another notion which is crucial to his theory of memory is that of memory schemata. He defines them as "an active, organised setting," "a unitary mass" built up of all past impulses or experiences (201). Each new experience is thus immediately juxtaposed with the experiences which are already being stored and is categorised in a particular schema. Schemata do not, however, necessarily need to remain fixed – in the course of time they undergo gradual modification and become increasingly personalised.

An overview of the principles of Bartlett's theory cannot be complete without reference to his argument that the process of remembering relies on reconstruction rather than reproduction. In his discussions of the successive experiments, Bartlett repeatedly notes that the subjects consistently appear to reconstruct the original version on the basis of what he refers to as an "attitude," "a feeling" or "an affect" (206-7). The mechanism of recall is therefore motivated by the effort to construct anew the material being remembered in a way that would "justify" the "impression" that it originally left in one's mind (176). The "attitude" elicited by a particular stimulus is conditioned by an individual's schemata and other personal factors, which may partially account for the fact that certain events are remembered differently by different people. Bartlett comes closest to formulating the gist of his theory when he states that remembering is "an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organised past reactions or experience, and to a little outstanding detail which commonly appears in image or in language form" (213).

In the introduction to the latest edition of *Remembering*, Walter Kintsch numbers Bartlett's work as one of "the three historically most influential publications in the psychological study of memory" (the other two being Ebbinghaus's *Memory* and George A. Miller's "Magical Number Seven"). Akiko Saito, likewise, argues in *Bartlett, Culture and Cognition* (2000) that his work is currently viewed as "an important foundation upon which memory research has subsequently been developed" (3). Bartlett's observation that attitude is the basis of reconstruction is seen

as a foundation for the development of the concept of autobiographical memory (Larsen and Berntsen 103, 113). There are several notions originating in *Remembering* which are going to be important to this study. First of all, the conception of remembering as an inherently reconstructive mechanism will be essential to my analysis of the narratives of the past woven by Ishiguro's remembering subjects. Among other findings that will be referred to in the course of literary analysis are the importance of narrative to the mechanism of memory formation and its subsequent retrieval, as well as the influence of the emotional factor (referred to by Bartlett as the "affective attitude") on the shape of memory content.

### **Constructing a therapeutic self-narrative: Freud's theory of remembering**

In an attempt to encompass the totality of Sigmund Freud's scattered writings about memory, the critic Nicola King posits two models of remembering that appear to battle for primacy (4). The first regards remembering as a reliable mechanism, whose sole purpose is to extract the uncontaminated truth about the past. King likens this notion of remembering to "archaeological excavation," since the past is believed to lurk somewhere in the recesses of memory, ready to be accessed. The second model conceives of remembering as a process of "continuous revision" or "retranslation" of the memory content in the light of subsequent experience (4). It relies on the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* introduced by Freud to account for memory's dependence on the events that occurred in between the encoding and the retrieval of a particular memory. In *Presenting the Past: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Misremembering* (1998), Jeffrey Prager argues that Freud gradually renounced the first model in favour of the second. This shift, according to John Toews, brought about "a collapse of Freud's confidence in his ability to use evidence from his patients' fantasies in reconstructing the real history of event sequences" (qtd. in Prager 146). The collapse of confidence in the essential reliability of the remembering process, which coincided with Freud's rejection of seduction theory in 1897, shifted the attention of psychoanalysis towards the fabulatory capacity of memory and the uses of misremembering.

Although the current legacy of Freud's contribution to memory research remains in dispute,<sup>5</sup> it cannot be denied that several concepts

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<sup>5</sup> His belief in the possibility of inheriting memory-traces from previous generations is an example of a widely discredited idea (Rob White, 40). The most

introduced by the founder of psychoanalysis have exerted a strong impact on the subsequent theorisation of trauma.<sup>6</sup> Among the terms which constitute the core of Freud's theory of remembering is the traumatic experience, understood as "an event of such violence and suddenness that it occasions an inflow of excitation sufficiently strong to defeat normally successful defence mechanisms," and seriously disrupts the proper functioning of the psyche ("Trauma"). Paul Renn puts forward the following "therapeutic model" – "trauma/ repression/ forgetting/ symptom/ remembering/ healing" – which encompasses the consecutive stages of the Freudian process of recovering from a traumatic experience (2). The traumatic stressor (understood by Freud as premature erotic contact with an adult) fails to be integrated by the child's psyche and triggers the mechanism of repression, which pushes the incident "out of consciousness" in order to "isolate" it and come to terms with the resulting emotional charge (Prager 152). Repression brings about the forgetting of the experience for the duration of the period of latency, when trauma lurks unintegrated in the unconscious. The child's first autonomous sexual experiences during puberty pose the threat of the repressed memory resurfacing. The resistance intensifies and as a result of the conflict the subject develops hysterical symptoms (152-55).

It is only through the painful work of remembering, which Roger Horrocks defines as "an involved and emotional" process of "liberating the repressed contents of the unconscious," that the traumatic event can be incorporated into the life narrative of the subject (56). The work of remembering is therefore synonymous with a process of gradual healing,

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controversial aspect of Freud's theory of remembering has been the idea of recovering forgotten traumatic experiences from childhood in the course of analysis. The 1980s saw a rapid proliferation of accusations made by adults undergoing therapy against their parents over alleged sexual abuse in early childhood. It was subsequently concluded that a number of these accusations could be explained by the so-called False Memory Syndrome. The memory of abuse "re-discovered" at a certain stage of therapy was presented as unshakable evidence of abuse. With the help of organisations such as The False Memory Syndrome Foundation, the legitimacy of the findings of "recovered memory therapy" was eventually undermined. This led to a questioning of the validity of Freud's notion of repressed memories, which remains one of the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis (Prager 78-79).

<sup>6</sup> Freud's approach to trauma lay the foundation for the work of such prominent theoreticians of trauma as Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart. A thorough assessment of Freud's influence on the evolution of the understanding of trauma is offered in Ruth Leys's *Trauma: A Genealogy* (chapter "Freud and Trauma").

as its purpose is to liberate the subject from the thrall of a traumatic wound. Remembering stands in stark contrast to forgetting, whose aim is to keep the trauma repressed and retain the subject's unconscious attachment to it. In *Freud Revisited*, Horrocks describes the relationship between remembering and forgetting as one of the underlying paradoxes of psychoanalysis: "by forgetting, we cling; by remembering, we become free" (62). The human psyche becomes the site of an ongoing battle between the desire to hold on to the traumatic burden by repressing, or forgetting, it and the need to shed that burden through the work of remembering (63-64).

In his seminal essay "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through" (1914), Freud puts forward the notion of forgetting as a complex mechanism, involving a variety of actions such as "shutting out" experiences, overlooking the connections between them, confusing the sequence of events and remembering only isolated experiences outside of the context (392-393). Horrocks differentiates between the two types of remembering which are implicitly invoked in the essay: conscious – the remembering committed to tracing the trauma to its origins and repairing the ensuing damage, and unconscious, which is part of the work of resistance and is also referred to as the compulsion to repeat (57). The latter type of remembering consists in the subject unwittingly re-enacting or reproducing the repressed scenario – acting it out instead of consciously remembering it ("Remembering" 394). The aim of therapy is then to make the subject conscious of the traumatic experience and thus to release the psyche from the destructive pattern of repetition (Horrocks 57). The analyst attempts to achieve that through observing and controlling transference – an instance of repetition compulsion, which finds its expression in the analysand's tendency to project the "forgotten past" onto the analyst ("Remembering" 395). Freud closes his essay with the remark that the work of remembering can be a long and arduous process, since it requires the patient to "familiarise" themselves with the resistance in order to be able to "overcome" it by "working [one's] way through it" (399). The mind of a traumatised subject, he concludes, emerges as locked in a continuing struggle between two types of memory: the unconscious compulsion to repeat and the conscious work of remembering driven by the wish to reveal the forgotten and locate it safely in the past, rather than in the permanent present of the unconscious.

Another of Freud's ideas which will be significant for the analysis of the role of memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's novels is the concept of remembering as reconstructing a narrative of the past. This notion is among the basic principles of psychoanalytic treatment, whose ultimate

purpose is to assimilate the traumatic memory and integrate it with one's life narrative. When the subject fully recovers from the trauma, they are able to tell their complete story, having assigned the traumatic experience a place in their autobiographical narrative (Caruth 176). The therapeutic capacity of narrative is embodied in the psychoanalytic notion of the talking cure, which will be invoked in reference to *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*.<sup>7</sup> The narrative aspect of memory is also emphasised by the earlier mentioned concept of *Nachträglichkeit*. Translated as “deferred action” or “deferred effect,” it was introduced by Freud in order to assert memory's inherently reconstructive nature. It expresses the idea that memories are never faithful records of the original experience, as they are inevitably coloured by what happened afterwards, hence Jean Laplanche's rendition of *Nachträglichkeit* as “afterwardsness.” This concept also accounts for memory's capacity for attaching importance to an event which did not appear noteworthy at the time and for retrospectively imposing logic or meaning on a past experience (Horrocks 65). Memory therefore emerges as a creative mechanism, since it reconstructs the memory content in view of the present situation – it makes “the past change in the light of the present” (65). The inevitable corollary of that assertion is the uncertainty as to the authenticity of memories. In *Remembering the Personal Past*, Bruce M. Ross argues that psychoanalysis does not recognise any legitimate grounds to differentiate between accurate and false memories and that the constructedness (rather than the straightforward revival) of memories at the time of retrieval precludes the possibility of ever discovering the truth about the original event (49).

The intrinsically reconstructive character of remembering is further evidenced by Freud's conception of screen memories, which he defines as highly memorable (yet mostly trivial in content) memories of childhood, which conceal, under the guise of a symbol, a repressed content from later life (“Screen” 553-57). Prager sees Freud's argument in “Screen Memories” as an amplification of his belief that “memory is a joint product of fantasy and reality.” What screen memories reveal about the functioning of memory as a whole is that their content is in most cases subservient to a psychological motive – the “why” of remembering (158). This realisation leads Freud to conclude that it is debatable whether one has any real memories *from* childhood as opposed to the subsequently formed memories *of* childhood (“Screen” 559). The above considerations assert the narrative nature of the remembering process as well as its

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<sup>7</sup> A more detailed account of the psychoanalytic conception of the narrative is given in the opening section of Chapter One.

constructive character. As opposed to certain other Freudian insights into memory, these two general propositions have not been scientifically discredited and remain important parts of the current understanding of the workings of memory. Arguably, Freud's most valuable contribution to memory research lies in exposing memory as a potentially unreliable apparatus, whose objectives are more complex and elusive than simply accurately recording the past.

## Memory today

The previous two sections sketched Bartlett's and Freud's contributions to advancing the notion of remembering as a narrative-based, interpretative and error-prone mechanism. The findings of modern memory research, whose most basic tenets will be presented in this section, have validated that conception. The discipline which has – over the last decades – devoted the most attention to examining the mechanisms of memory is neuroscience. A number of types of memory together with the accompanying neural phenomena have been distinguished, named and characterised. An important distinction has been drawn between the three stages of remembering: encoding (acquiring new information), storage (retaining the information) and retrieval (accessing it) (Jonathan K. Foster 25). British neuroscientist Steven Rose notes that retrieval is currently accepted to be a highly reconstructive process; his assertion that “our memories are recreated each time we remember” could be invoked as a corroboration of Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (*Making of Memory* 91). Remembering has come to be seen as a highly complex phenomenon comprising different types of recall. The distinction between sensory, short-term (STM) and long-term (LTM) memory was introduced by Richard Atkinson and Richard Shiffrin in 1968 on the basis of the difference in the length of storage of new information by the brain. Memory has also been categorised as implicit and explicit, where the former stores the influence of events and situations which have shaped one's present constitution but cannot be consciously recalled, whereas the latter involves an awareness of the circumstances of the events remembered (Jonathan K. Foster 41-42). In the 1980s, neuropsychologist Larry Squire popularised the distinction between declarative (remembering *that*) and procedural (remembering *how*) memory. Declarative memory has been further subdivided into semantic (our knowledge of the world acquired through learning) and episodic (the events of our personal past) (Rose, *Making of Memory* 120). Autobiographical memory, a subtype of episodic memory, will be discussed below.

Alongside drawing numerous distinctions between the various kinds of recall, neuroscience has been preoccupied with the distribution of memory processes in the brain. It has been agreed that there are three major memory centres in the brain: the hippocampus (responsible for consolidating explicit and declarative memory), the amygdala (responsible for storing implicit and non-declarative memory) and the cerebral cortex (which stores the data processed by the hippocampus) (Nalbantian 136). The basic vehicles of memory are neurons, a vast array of brain cells, which interconnect and form synapses. However, the exact mechanism of memory formation is yet to be discovered and the “enigma of human memory” is yet to be solved, concludes Steven Rose in his assessment of the current state of neuroscientific research (“Memories” 67).

The type of recall on which my literary analysis will concentrate is autobiographical memory – a term which gained currency in the 1980s as a result of the rising tide of interest in remembering and its role in the formation of the self. Consequently, it is still an emerging discipline whose scope and tenets have not yet been fully outlined and theorised. One of the founders of that notion, David C. Rubin characterises it as a highly interdisciplinary field of studies involving the contributions of “neuropsychology, clinical psychology, personality theory, social psychology, the study of narrative ... and laboratory memory research” (1). Also referred to as “personal” or “recollective” memory, it can be defined as a repository of information about life experiences on the basis of which one builds a sense of identity. Rubin explains that autobiographical memories have a constructive character as they are re-created at the moment of retrieval. They are, therefore, malleable and prone to modification – in the service of the stability and coherence of identity. The three components involved in the process of reconstruction are narrative, imagery and emotion (4). The reconstructive nature of autobiographical memories is also emphasised by Janet Feigenbaum, who argues that their shape at retrieval is determined by “a number of affective and motivational factors,” “our beliefs about ourselves and the world at present” and the ever-changing context, time and purpose of recall (qtd. in Petry 157).

Memory researchers are particularly interested in the onset of autobiographical memory. It remains contentious whether its inception takes place at the age of two, when the cognitive self has begun to form, or nearer the age of five or six, when essential language skills have been acquired (Howe 55-61). A study of the distribution of memories at different stages of life has registered the occurrence of a universal “reminiscence bump” – a period of enhanced recall between the age of ten

and thirty, which plays an important part in the intense development of personal identity and the “anchoring” of the individual’s self-narrative (Robinson and Taylor 125). Other periods which engender an increased number of lasting autobiographical memories are different kinds of turning points in life – the times when the self finds itself “in transition” (Howe 58). Among other issues explored by the researchers of autobiographical memory that are relevant to this book is the notion of the self-narrative. The narrative structure is regarded as the underlying framework of autobiographical memory in that it dictates which episodes are not accommodated into its pattern (Rubin and Greenberg 61). The self-narrative is a representation of life which makes use of the available cultural forms in order to transform it into a coherent story. The most common way of achieving the desired coherence is by adopting a certain genre from the wide cultural stock or creatively modifying an existing one.<sup>8</sup> In its commitment to representing the past as a continuous and meaningful whole, autobiographical memory is believed to impose a borrowed narrative pattern upon the multitude of past experiences, which exposes it as an imitative and interpretative mechanism, informed by what Bartlett has labelled “effort after meaning.”

Virtually all academic textbooks and collections of essays about memory contain a separate chapter or section devoted to the errors and inaccuracies of recall – the unreliability of memory has come to be seen as one of its defining characteristics. One of the areas of research where misremembering features most prominently is eyewitness memory, which scrutinises the accuracy of first-hand accounts of past situations, including those of testimonies presented in court. Such studies indicate that having had a direct, personal experience of a certain event does not necessarily guarantee the witness’s ability to provide a strictly factual and impartial representation of it.<sup>9</sup> Among other testimonies to the fallibility of memory has been the study of a phenomenon known as flashbulb memory. Robert Brown and James Kulik coined the term in 1977 to account for the vivid,

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<sup>8</sup> A more detailed consideration of the self-narrative’s indebtedness to available patterns and genres will be given in the opening section of Part Two.

<sup>9</sup> The capacity of suggestibility to interfere with the accuracy of eyewitness accounts has been demonstrated by a much-quoted experiment conducted by Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer. Participants were presented with the same recording of a collision between two cars and then asked to gauge the speed at which they were moving at the moment of the crash. It emerged that the choice of the verb used to ask the question (“contact,” “hit,” “collide,” “smash”) had a decisive influence upon the eyewitness’s speed estimate, demonstrating that the shape of a given memory “can be changed by the subsequent introduction of misleading information” (Jonathan K. Foster 79-80).

lasting – and frequently erroneous – recollections of the personal circumstances accompanying dramatic events of national or global significance, such as the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy or the attack on the World Trade Centre. Regardless of the degree of confidence in the veracity of one's account, the memory of the event has been proved to evolve over time and remain susceptible to the interpretations and accounts of others (Neisser 82-84).

Bartlett, who attributes the fallaciousness of memory to its inherently reconstructive character, distinguishes between three major categories of memory distortions: “condensation, elaboration and invention” (205). In his study *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (2001), American psychologist Daniel L. Schacter extends Bartlett's classification and distinguishes between seven categories of the common errors of recall. He arranges them into two groups: “sins of omission” and “sins of commission” (4). The former category comprises errors that represent the failure to evoke a particular piece of information from the past, and include transience, absent-mindedness and blocking. The latter consists of errors of inaccurate recall, such as misattribution, suggestibility, bias and persistence.

Of the seven categories of misremembering singled out by Schacter, “sins of bias” is the most pertinent one to the mechanisms of memory at work in Ishiguro's novels. Schacter further subdivides that notion into five varieties: consistency and change biases, which make people underestimate or overestimate the differences between their past and present; hindsight biases, whose function is to alter the perception of the past in the light of the current situation; egocentric biases, which account for memory's subjection to the dictates of the self; and stereotypical biases, as a result of which memory content is modified in order to fit in with certain preconceived schemata (139). Schacter's conception of memory biases appears rooted in Bartlett's definition of remembering as “an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organised past reactions or experience” (Bartlett 213). The two terms in the above definition which are crucial to the notion of memory biases are “reconstruction” and “attitude,” as they presuppose the malleability of memory, and its susceptibility to changing perspectives. For Bartlett and Schacter alike, the current attitude to a certain stimulus or event is the basis for the creative reconstruction of a once encoded memory. Ishiguro's narrators, as the ensuing chapters will indicate, could be interpreted as particularly prone to egocentric memory bias, which Schacter sees as committed to “surrounding the present self in a comforting glow of positive illusions” (153). He singles out a subtype of

egocentric bias which specifically aims to reconstruct the past in accordance with certain “positive illusions,” and, as a result, to inflate one’s self-esteem. Dubbed as self-enhancing bias, this mechanism is informed by considerable selectivity and subjectivity of recall, which is the consequence of adopting “self-serving perspectives” (149-152). What emerges from Schacter’s discussion of memory biases is the implication that, in certain situations, memory remains subservient to the current needs of the self and functions as a mere “pawn in the service of its masters” (160).

### **Theorising loss: Freud, Lacan, Derrida and beyond**

Having outlined the theoretical framework for further analysis of the representation of memory, I will now proceed to introduce certain concepts that will be later evoked in the discussion of Ishiguro’s narrators’ experience of loss. It is safe to say that the notion of loss forms the core of the theory of psychoanalysis, since, in its varying shapes, it constitutes a formative experience in the development of the subject. Whether the childhood losses are real or imaginary (as is the case with the castration complex), they determine the process of identification and the choice of desired objects. The complexities of loss were at the forefront of Sigmund Freud’s attention in his writings over a span of two decades – from *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) to *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1926). In the former, he examines the consequences of the child’s first lost object – the mother’s breast. In “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” (1914), Freud posits the long and arduous process of *durcharbeiten* (or working through the loss) as an antidote to resistance on the one hand, and to the compulsion to repeat, on the other.<sup>10</sup> His influential essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), whose conclusions will be discussed below, defines the two essential responses to a severed attachment to the lost object, which can take the form of a loved person or an idolised abstraction. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud returns to the issue of the child’s accommodation of loss by unpacking the significance of the *fort-da* game, which functions as a point of departure for formulating the concept of repetition compulsion (to be outlined below). Finally, *The Ego and the Id* (1923) contains the most radical assertion of the role of loss in constituting the subject; in an oft-quoted passage, Freud declares that one might conceive of the ego as “a

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<sup>10</sup> In his commentary on the essay, Paul Ricoeur aptly summarises resistance and compulsion to repeat, as conditions marked by, respectively, “*not enough memory*” and “*too much memory*” (*Memory* 79; emphasis in original).

precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes,” which maintains “a record of past object-choices” (31). The extent of Freud’s contribution to the conceptualisation of loss is one of the reasons for the “dominance of psychoanalysis in the field,” which William Watkin, the author of *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, attributes primarily to its capacity for “negotiating between the private realm of the affect and the public realm of its effect and expression” (151-52).

In “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud delineates the two titular concepts which will constitute a frequent frame of reference in the following chapters. The essay opens with a consideration of the parallels between both above-mentioned responses to loss and an enumeration of their common symptoms, among which are “a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world” and “the loss of the ability to love” (311). Freud goes on to outline the process of the work of mourning (*Trauerarbeit*), which begins with the recognition that the loved object has been irreversibly lost and that the libido must “sever its bonds” with it. At this point considerable resistance to that necessity arises in the subject, who then chooses to “turn away from reality and hold on to the object through a hallucinatory wish-psychois” (311). As a result, “the lost object persists in the psyche” and the memories corroborating the subject’s attachment to it become “hyper-invested.” What ensues is an “extraordinarily painful” process during which the ego detaches itself from the lost object, by the end of which it becomes ready to form a new attachment (312). In *Signifying Loss* (2011) Nouri Gana observes that the successful completion of the work of mourning, marked by the subject’s regained capacity to form attachments with others, has to come at the cost of “loyalty to the lost object (s)” (24). Gana argues that the Freudian model of accommodating loss does not promise closure but merely “a momentary solution to the inevitable recurrence of mourning,” which emerges as less concerned with “the loss of the object per se than with the movement of desire as such” (26).

If, however, the work of mourning ends in a fiasco, the attachment assumes the characteristics of melancholia – a peculiar condition in that it shares most of its symptoms with mourning. The distinguishing feature is melancholia’s accompanying “reduction in the sense of self,” which manifests itself in “self-recrimination,” “self-directed insults,” and, at its most extreme, “the delusory expectation of punishment” (311). Whereas in the case of mourning the world appears “poor and empty,” melancholia causes the subject itself to feel that way (313). The latter, described as a “pathological disposition” (310), occurs as a result of the released libido’s inability to transfer its cathexis onto a different object; instead, it becomes

“drawn back into the ego.” This leads to a further “identification of the ego with the abandoned object” and, ultimately, a fixation on the lost object and a regression to narcissism (316-17). The melancholic identification with the object is referred to in psychoanalytic discourse as introjection, as the ego could be said to “metaphorically devour the lost object, becoming it by taking it into itself” (Thurschwell 91). In a broader sense, melancholia continues to be invoked outside the context of Freud’s essay as a refusal, or failure, to accept the finality of loss. In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (2003), David L. Eng and David Kazanjian define it as an “ongoing and open relationship with the past,” which involves “bringing its ghosts and spectres ... into the present.” Mourning, by contrast, is cited to denote a perception of the past as “resolved,” “finished,” and “dead” (3-4).

The rigid and straightforward distinction between the two reactions to loss posited in “Mourning and Melancholia” becomes more obscure or, as certain critics will argue, collapses altogether in Freud’s later writing. His further considerations on the process of mourning contained in *The Ego and the Id* and *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* have been frequently quoted as an attempt to revise the model introduced in the essay. Freud’s earlier invoked statement about the possibility of considering the ego as “a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes” is seen as unequivocal evidence of his retreat from the notion that severing the bond with the lost object is a prerequisite for healing. In *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism* (2009), Tammy Clewell argues that *The Ego and the Id* marks the “culminating moment in [Freud’s] psychoanalysis of loss” as it “removes his mourning theory from the strictures of consolatory closure.” She regards it as an admission of the mistake which consisted in conceptualising melancholia as a pathological disorder. In this revised understanding, Clewell notes, melancholia emerges as “fundamental to the primary formation and subsequent development of the ego.” By discarding the notion of a “consolatory substitution,” Freud redefines successful mourning as an act of establishing “a figure for the lost object and taking this figure into the structure of one’s own identity” rather than by radically distancing oneself from it (12). Ultimately, mourning assumes the status of “an interminable labour,” constantly engaged in working through the subject’s past attachments (13). Melancholia, in turn, becomes recuperated as a “normal” condition which, instead of threatening to dissolve the ego, plays an important part in its constitution.

The validity of the distinction proposed by Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia” has been further contested by several contemporary critics, including William Watkin and Dominick LaCapra. The former argues that

the differentiation put forward in Freud's "seminal but flawed" essay is "pragmatic rather than truly scientific," which has been a frequently voiced reservation about psychoanalytic concepts at large (152-53). Watkin questions the common – and, in his view, erroneous – interpretation of the two responses to loss as representing the attitudes of "the good mourner" and "the bad mourner," on the grounds that there is no evidence that one is indeed more desirable, or even that they are not merely varieties of the same response (167). In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), LaCapra objects to the privileging of working through (or successful mourning) over a melancholic attachment to loss (marked by repetition compulsion and acting out) if the healing has to come at the expense of remembering and remaining loyal to the departed others. "Certain wounds," argues LaCapra, "cannot simply heal without leaving scars or residues in the present"; what is more, they should rather "remain as open wounds" even if that necessitates a continuous struggle not to be rendered incapable of normal functioning in the present (144). The historian observes an inclination of recent critical discourse to apply a reductive "all-or-nothing logic" to considerations of the subject's response to loss, which leads to a "double bind" where the definitive closure offered by working through (based on a "facile notion of cure") is juxtaposed with a destructive immersion in repetition. This dominant tendency, which is a legacy of Freud's differentiation between the therapeutic notion of mourning and the detrimental capacity of melancholia, overlooks the possibility of there being other, more nuanced, responses (145).

Another Freudian concept I wish to introduce here is repetition compulsion, which will be applied to the examination of the legacy of trauma in Part Three. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud considers an episode from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in which Tancred is powerless to refrain from inflicting further pain on the wounded Clorinda, to illustrate trauma's inherent inclination to repeat itself. Astonished by the counter-intuitive phenomenon of the recurrence of traumatic experiences in dreams among survivors of the First World War (at odds with his earlier hypothesis that each dream enacts the fulfilment of a wish), Freud examines "the mysterious masochistic trends of the ego" by determining the significance of what he terms as the *fort-da* game (7). Freud analyses his grandson's peculiar habit of repeatedly enacting in play the event of his mother's disappearance and return as an encapsulation of the human desire to master an unpleasant event by re-enacting the painful scenario and shifting one's role in it from passive to active (11). This mechanism, which he eventually terms repetition compulsion, is defined by Gard Bonnet as "an inherent, primordial

tendency in the unconscious that impels the individual to repeat certain actions, in particular, the most painful or destructive ones.” Linked to primary masochism, the compulsion to repeat may lead to “endlessly repeating certain damaging patterns” without knowing that one is doing so, as the mechanism remains beyond the subject’s conscious control (“Repetition”). Freud places the concept in opposition to remembering and regards it as closely linked to repression and forgetting. “The greater the resistance, the more thoroughly remembering will be replaced by acting out (repetition),” he notes in “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through” (395). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud clarifies that repetition represents the failed outcome of a process of working through a painful event: the subject has forgotten the kernel of a traumatic event and is thus compelled to “repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of ... remembering it as something belonging to the past” (12). What cannot be properly remembered (and thus integrated with the past) needs to be endlessly replayed in the present, causing the subject’s immersion in a self-destructive cycle of repetition.

Several of Freud’s concepts, including those related to the theorisation of loss, were instrumental in the formation of the psychoanalytic model of Jacques Lacan. Across the 1950s and 1960s Lacan re-examined and re-evaluated them in a series of open lectures at the Sainte-Anne Hospital and the École Normale Supérieure. His seminar entitled *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, where he developed his own conceptions inspired by the Freudian notions of the unconscious, repetition, transference and the drive, is seen as a mark of his shift away from the founder of psychoanalysis (“Lacan”). One of the essential differences between the Lacanian and the Freudian models could be subsumed under the categories of lack and loss. Whereas for Freud the constitution of the subject is predicated on the severed attachments, or the losses the ego has sustained, Lacan argues that it is lack, not loss, that determines the process of self-definition. The Lacanian subject “first comes to understand itself in terms of what it does not have” (Watkin 155), rather than in terms of what it has lost. The assumption that lack forms the “core of the psyche” dispenses with the Freudian “pathos of working through specific, historical losses” (Ricciardi 20). Since the lack cannot in any way be filled or worked through, the very notion of mourning loses its validity. Loss, therefore, is converted by Lacan from a specific historical experience to a “‘transcendental’ condition of desire” (Ricciardi 56). This revised conception of loss undermines the Freudian notion of the lost object, which, in Lacan’s view, is “an object that was

never there in the first place to be lost” (qtd. in Homer 85). The object-relations theory also comes under criticism from Lacan, as it presupposes a “possibility of a complete and perfectly satisfying relation between the subject and the object.” For the French psychoanalyst, any such satisfaction is precluded by the insatiable nature of desire, which he defines as a relation of the subject to an intrinsic, immutable lack.

Coming from an entirely different – non-psychoanalytical, non-psychological – background, Jacques Derrida has also proposed a revised understanding of the Freudian conception of mourning. In various writings across the last two decades of his life, most notably in *The Ear of the Other* (1982), *Mémoires: For Paul de Man* (1986), *Points...* (1992) and *The Work of Mourning* (2001), Derrida reflects on mortality and the legacy of loss, frequently in the context of the deaths of fellow poststructuralist theorists.<sup>11</sup> In the above texts one can trace a resistance to Freud’s privileging of “introjection” (understood as assimilating the other into oneself and thus negating their otherness) over the melancholic “incorporation” (retaining the other within as the other). Derrida recognises the inescapable “double bind” of mourning, where one at the same time must and must not absorb the other into oneself, for interiorisation – the prerequisite of a successful completion – has to come at the expense of fidelity to the exteriority of the departed (*Points* 321). The logic (also referred to as “the law” and “rhetoric”) of mourning thus confronts one with an “aporia,” where “success fails” and “failure succeeds” (*Mémoires* 35).<sup>12</sup>

In place of the opposition between mourning and not mourning, Derrida proposes the intermediate notion of “semimourning,” which could be epitomised by the following stance: “I cannot complete my mourning for everything I lose, because I want to keep it, and at the same time, what I do best is to mourn, is to lose it, because by mourning, I keep it inside me” (*Points* 151–2). In order to illustrate the concept of the incorporation of the dead within the living, Derrida borrows Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s metaphor of the crypt, defined as a “specific spot in the ego” which – in the face of the failure of “normal” mourning – accommodates the lost object as a strange body and a “living dead” (*Ear* 57). The

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<sup>11</sup> The volume entitled *The Work of Mourning* (2001) is a record of Derrida’s numerous articles written to commemorate the deaths of such thinkers as Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Gilles Deleuze, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-François Lyotard.

<sup>12</sup> What Derrida means by this paradox is that a successful incorporation fails to respect the otherness of the deceased, whereas a failed one is a success in the sense that it does preserve their distinctness.

recurrent acts of incorporation (or “en-cryption”) following the departures of each loved object constitute the self as a “cemetery guard” (qtd. in Royle 152) – a notion redolent of Freud’s revised model of loss from *The Ego and the Id*.

The above considerations situate Derrida as an advocate of a resistance to what Freud proposes as successful mourning. His insistence on the ethical obligation towards the dead to preserve them within and his opposition to “reconciliation to loss” are subsumed by Patricia Rae under the category of “resistant mourning.” Rae regards Derrida as the leading proponent of a broader socio-political movement characterised by a recuperation of melancholia and a wariness of the imperative of healing (16-17). Dominick LaCapra’s earlier outlined questioning of the received primacy of mourning over melancholia, as well as R. Clifton Spargo’s examination of the ethical aspects of mourning and the considerable body of response to the AIDS epidemic, can all be considered as expressions of a common stance – a Derridean “refusal to mourn” (Rae 17-18). Clewell locates Derrida (and other proponents of resistant mourning) in opposition to Jean-François Lyotard, who emphasises the positive value of mourning, particularly in the context of postmodernism’s attitude towards grand narratives. From Derrida’s ethical standpoint, the path of progressive politics must demand “sustained remembrance” and “ongoing mourning,” on a personal as well as a public level (Clewell 14).

The notions of mourning and melancholia, whose critical legacy has been traced from Freud’s much-quoted essay to their revised understanding in the work of Derrida and LaCapra, will provide the major theoretical context for the investigation of the experiences of loss in all of the ensuing chapters. The concept of repetition compulsion will offer a key to the analysis of the persistence of trauma in Part Three. The Lacanian cancellation of the validity of loss in favour of the transcendental condition of lack has been included in the above section because of the popularity of his reinterpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis. The Lacanian model will not, however, be applied in this study because of its inadequacy to the experience of Ishiguro’s narrators, whose present disenchantments and discontents are, for the most part, direct consequences of tangible external losses rather than results of a permanent and irremediable metaphysical lack (or absence). In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra provides a clarification of the distinction between the categories of loss, lack and absence, to which I will adhere. He contrasts the indeterminacy of absence with both loss and lack’s orientation towards a specified object. There is a clear correlation between the latter categories in that “as loss is to the past, so lack is to the present.”