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Wave Patterns: A Dialogue

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# Wave Patterns

## A Dialogue

**Oe:** We know that your father is a marine scientist, but exactly what branch of marine science does he specialize in?

**Ishiguro:** He's an oceanographer, so it's not exactly marine science. He's studied wave patterns. His work has to do with the tides and waves. His specialty in the 1960s was relevant to the British government's research on the North Sea, which they were very interested in at that time because of the oil.

**Oe:** In reading your novel *An Artist of the Floating World*, I was struck by the excellent descriptions of life in Japan, of Japanese buildings and landscapes. I would like to ask where you acquired this basic knowledge about your Japanese landscapes and characters, and to what extent they were a product of your imagination.

**Ishiguro:** Well, I think the Japan that exists in that book is very much my own personal, imaginary Japan. This may have a lot to do with my personal history. When my family moved from Nagasaki to England, it was originally intended to be only a temporary stay, perhaps one year or maybe two years. And so as a small child I was taken away from people I knew, like my grandparents and my friends. And I was led to expect that I

would return to Japan. But the family kept extending the stay. All the way through my childhood I couldn't forget Japan, because I had to prepare myself for returning to it.

So I grew up with a very strong image in my head of this other country, a very important other country to which I had a strong emotional tie. My parents tried to continue some sort of education for me that would prepare me for returning to Japan. So I received various books and magazines, these sorts of things. Of course, I didn't know Japan, because I didn't come here. But in England I was all the time building up this picture in my head of an imaginary Japan.

And I think when I reached the age of perhaps twenty-three or twenty-four I realized that this Japan, which was very precious to me, actually existed only in my own imagination, partly because the real Japan had changed greatly between 1960 and later on. I realized that it was a place of my own childhood, and I could never return to this particular Japan. And so I think one of the real reasons why I turned to writing novels was because I wished to re-create this Japan—put together all these memories and all these imaginary ideas I had about this landscape that I called Japan. I wanted to make it safe, preserve it in a book before it faded away from my memory altogether. So when I wrote, say, *An Artist of the Floating World*, I wasn't terribly interested in researching history books. I very much wanted to put down on paper this particular idea of Japan that I had in my own mind, and in a way I didn't really care if my fictional world didn't correspond to a historical reality. I very much feel that as a writer of fiction that is what I'm supposed to do: I'm supposed to invent my own world, rather than copying things from the surface of reality.

**Oe:** That seems to be a very concrete illustration of the way a writer's imagination takes shape. In my book *The Silent Cry*, I wrote about Shikoku. I was born and grew up in a mountain village on that island. When I was eighteen, I went to the University of Tokyo to study French literature. As a result, I found myself completely cut off from my village, both culturally and geographically. Around that time my grandmother died, and my mother was getting older. The legends and traditions and

folklore of my village were being lost. Meanwhile, here I was in Tokyo, imagining and trying to remember those things. The act of trying to remember and the act of creating began to overlap. And that is the reason I began to write novels. I tried to write them using the methods of French literature that I had studied. Reading your novels, and thinking about English literary history, I get the strong impression that, in terms of method, you are a novelist at the very forefront of English literature.

I was interested in the way that *An Artist of the Floating World* begins with a description of a large building, and how we enter the world of the novel through that building. In the same way, *The Remains of the Day* begins with a description of a large mansion. This entrance into the novel overlaps to a great extent with the earlier book. It was easy for me to see how the two books are connected, and how one develops from the other. Reading the two books together and observing this overlapping, I thought to myself that here was certainly a great novelist.

**Ishiguro:** That's very flattering. I'm very interested to hear some of the background about your being cut off from your past in Shikoku. Are you saying that the urge to remember or stay in touch with your past was actually crucial in making you become a writer?

**Oe:** I have a book that is just coming out in French translation from Gallimard, *M/T et l'histoire des merveilles de la forêt*. The "M" is for matriarch and the "T" is for trickster. A while ago I wrote a book called *Contemporary Games*, about the myths of the village and the universe of the village. As I wrote *M/T et l'histoire* I listened once more to my grandmother talking about cosmology, and wrote it down just as it was, in her own words. In fact, the history of my village is already lost. Almost everyone has forgotten it. For example, there is a place where dozens of people were killed in a riot, but no one remembers that. My family and especially my grandmother remembered those things very well, and told me about them. I grew up in the village listening to these stories. Then, when I was fourteen, I moved to the city and was completely cut off, while they were all dying. So now the only person who remembers the core of the myths

of that village is me. This is what I want to write about now. I want to write a book that will sum up or finish all of my work up to now. These things will be the main theme of the book, and right now they are what is most important to me.

**Ishiguro:** I hope the English translation will be appearing very shortly. I look forward very much to reading it. I think *The Silent Cry* is an extraordinary work. One of the reasons I think it's such a special work is that it's often difficult for a writer to get a certain distance from very personal events in his life that have touched and disturbed him. This book seems to stem from such an event, but at the same time you seem to have kept control, to have maintained an artistic discipline, so that it actually becomes a work of art that has meaning for everybody. It's not simply about Mr. Oe. It strikes me that one of the ways in which you manage that is a certain kind of humor, a unique tone. It's very different from the kind of humor found in most of Western literature, which is mainly based on jokes. In your books, everything has a peculiar sense of humor that is always on the verge of tragedy—a very dark humor. This is one of the ways in which you seem to have been able to keep under control events that must be very close to you. Mr. Oe the artist has always managed to keep in control of the work. But do you think this sort of humor is something unique to your own writing, or have you gotten it from a larger Japanese tradition?

**Oe:** It's interesting that you should ask that, because one of the things I feel is unique about your work is your control over the distance from the periods and characters in your work. All of your books have a distinct tone, even though they are connected on a deeper level. So I appreciate your comments about the tone and distance in my works.

I think that the problem of humor, which you just brought up, is a very important one. This is one of the points in which I differ from Yukio Mishima. Mishima was very strongly rooted in the traditions of Japanese literature, especially the traditions of the center—Tokyo or Kyoto—urban traditions. I come from a more peripheral tradition, that of a very provincial corner of the island of Shikoku. It's an extremely strange place, with a long



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history of maltreatment, out there beyond the reach of culture. I think my humor is the humor of the people who live in that place. Mishima had a great deal of confidence in his humor, so perhaps it's accurate to say that his was the humor of the center, whereas mine is the humor of the periphery.

**Ishiguro:** I would be quite interested to hear what you feel about Mishima. I'm often asked about Mishima in England—all the time, by journalists. They expect me to be an authority on Mishima because of my Japanese background. Mishima is very well known in England, and in the West generally, largely because of the way he died. But also I suspect that Mishima's image confirms certain stereotypical images of Japanese people for the West. And this is partly why I think he is easy for Western audiences. He fits certain characteristics. Of course, committing seppuku is one of the clichés. He was politically very extreme. The problem is that the whole image of Mishima in the West hasn't helped people there form an intelligent approach to Japanese culture and Japanese people. It has perhaps helped people to remain locked in certain prejudices and very superficial, stereotypical images of what Japanese people are like. Most people seem to regard Mishima as a typical Japanese, in some sort of way. Of course, I never know quite what to say in response to this because I know very little about Mishima and very little about modern Japan. But that is certainly the impression I get—that in the West he is being used to confirm some rather negative stereotypes. I wonder what you think about Mishima and the way he died, what that means for Japanese people, and what that means for a distinguished author such as yourself.

**Oe:** The observations you just made about the reception of Mishima in Europe are accurate. Mishima's entire life, certainly including his death by seppuku, was a kind of performance designed to present the image of an archetypal Japanese. Moreover, this image was not the kind that arises spontaneously from a Japanese mentality. It was the superficial image of a Japanese as seen from a European point of view, a fantasy. Mishima acted out that image just as it was. He created himself

exactly in accordance with it. That was the way he lived, and that was the way he died. Professor Edward Said uses the word “orientalism” to refer to the impression held by Europeans of the Orient. He insists that orientalism is a view held by Europeans and has nothing to do with the people who actually live in the Orient. But Mishima thought the opposite. He said, in effect, “Your image of the Japanese is me.” I think he wanted to show something by living and dying in exact accordance with the image. That was the kind of man he was and that was why he gained literary glory in Europe and the world.

But what in fact happened is that Mishima presented a false image. As a result, the conception of Japanese people held by most Europeans has Mishima at one pole and people like Akio Morita, chairman of Sony, at the other pole. In my opinion, both poles are inaccurate. But if this is the case, where can we look for a more accurate image of the Japanese people? Going back to your book *An Artist of the Floating World*, at the very end there is a scene with a number of young Japanese and the artist, who is looking at them in a warmhearted way. I think that people like those young Japanese really do live in Japan, and that they are the ones who have brought prosperity to the Japanese economy. Of course, Mishima had nothing to say about them. And writers like me, who take a negative view of Japan, have not captured them either. So I think that your novel exerted a good influence on perceptions of Japan in Europe, a kind of antidote to the image of Mishima.

I have a question I wanted to ask. Reading your work and talking to you, one does not at all get the impression of someone born in Japan. In the case of Conrad, one of my favorite authors—to me he is a kind of ideal novelist—one gets the strong impression that he is a genuinely English author, as well as a true European. On the day when you received the Booker Prize, there were reports in the Japanese mass media of your remarks on Salman Rushdie.\* There were many people who were moved by those remarks, including myself. We felt

\* In his speech accepting the Booker Prize, Ishiguro said: “It would be improper for us not to remember Salman Rushdie this evening and think about the alarming situation and plight in which he finds himself.”



that this person was a genuinely European novelist, a genuinely European personality, that this was real European intelligence.

The Japanese themselves want to be perceived as peaceful and gentle, like Japanese art—landscape paintings and so on. They don't want to be seen as economic imperialists or military invaders. They would like others to think of flower paintings, something quiet and beautiful, when they think of Japan. When your books first began to appear in Japan, that was how they were introduced. You were described as a very quiet and peaceful author, and therefore a very Japanese author. But from the first I doubted that. I felt that this was an author with a tough intelligence. And in fact that has been demonstrated again with each of your books. Your style always involves a double structure, with two or more intertwined elements. I also felt that this kind of strength was not very Japanese, that this person was, rather, from England.

**Ishiguro:** Well, I don't try to be a quiet writer. That's really a question of technique more than anything else. There's a surface quietness to my books—there aren't a lot of people getting murdered or anything like that. But for me they're not quiet books, because they're books that deal with the things that disturb me the most and the questions that worry me the most. They're anything but quiet to me.

On the question of being a European writer, I think that partly this has been the effect of my not knowing Japan very well. I was forced to write in a more international way. If I had continuously returned to this country after I left it in 1960, and if I had been more familiar with Japan all through my growing up, I think perhaps I would have felt a greater responsibility to represent Japanese people in this way or that way, to be a kind of spokesman, if you like, of Japan in England. But as things worked out, I didn't return. This is my first return to this country in thirty years. I was very aware that I had very little knowledge of modern Japan. But I was still writing books set in Japan, or supposedly set in Japan. My very lack of authority and lack of knowledge about Japan, I think, forced me into a position of using my imagination, and also of thinking of myself as a kind of homeless writer. I had no obvious social role, because I wasn't a

very English Englishman, and I wasn't a very Japanese Japanese either.

And so I had no clear role, no society or country to speak for or write about. Nobody's history seemed to be my history. And I think this did push me necessarily into trying to write in an international way. What I started to do was to use history. I would search through history books for information in the way that a film director might search for locations for a script he has already written. I would look for moments in history that would best suit my purposes or what I wanted to write about. I was conscious that I wasn't so interested in the history per se, that I was using British history or Japanese history to illustrate something that was preoccupying me. I think this made me a kind of writer who didn't actually belong. I didn't have a strong emotional tie with either Japanese history or British history, so I could just use them to serve my own personal purposes.

I wonder, Mr. Oe, do you feel responsible for how Japanese people are perceived abroad? When you are writing your books, are you conscious of an international audience and of what the books will do to Western people's perceptions of Japan? Or do you not think about things like that?

**Oe:** I was interviewed once by a German television station. The interviewer had translated one of my books into German. He asked me whether it was very important to me to be translated into German. I said no, and a deathly silence fell over the studio. The reason I said no is simply that I write my books for Japanese readers rather than for foreigners. Moreover, the Japanese readers I have in mind are a limited group. The people I write for are people of my own generation, people who have had the same experiences as myself. So when I go abroad, or am translated abroad or criticized abroad, I feel rather indifferent about it. The responsibilities I feel are to Japanese readers, people who are living together with me in this environment.

Speaking as a reader, foreign literature is very important to me. William Blake is important to me. I've written one book based on Blake, and one based on Malcolm Lowry. Another book was about a Dante specialist who lives out in the country. With respect to Dante, I have been influenced in various ways by

scholars from your country. So in that sense I have been much influenced by foreign literature. I read your books in English, for example. Still, I think that when I write my books, I write them for Japanese readers. I feel a certain sense of responsibility that I just can't break out of, even though I feel that there is probably something mistaken about that attitude. Naturally, I believe that a real novelist is international, like yourself. In your case, of course, I think that in addition to being international you are also very English. In *The Remains of the Day* you discovered viewpoints from which it is possible to describe both English people and Americans well. The viewpoint is completely different from that of a Japanese person or a Chinese person. From a certain viewpoint, it is possible to see an English person well, and also an American person. And that viewpoint has produced your style. I think that this sort of author is genuinely European, international in an essential way. So it might be that I am a more Japanese author than Mishima. I myself hope that younger Japanese authors will be able to discover a more international standpoint or outlook.

**Ishiguro:** There never seems to be a clear relationship between the audience an author thinks he is addressing and the audience that in fact the author does come to address. Many of the great classical writers, whether the ancient Greeks or whoever, had no idea they would eventually address people from cultures very, very different from themselves. Possibly Plato was writing simply for the people who were living in Athens at the time, but of course we read him many, many years later in very different cultures. I sometimes worry that writers who are conscious of addressing an international audience could actually have quite a reverse effect, that something very important in literature might actually die because people are watering down their artistic instincts. It's almost like a mass-marketing exercise.

I worry particularly because this is a time when American culture, or what you might call Anglo-American culture, has become pervasive all around the world—in Asia, Latin America, and so forth. It seems to be growing and growing. Perhaps it is very important that writers not worry about this question of audience. You yourself, Mr. Oe, may think you are writing



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only for your own generation, for the Japanese. But your books are read by lots of people outside that group. People want to translate your work. It seems that as the years go by your reputation grows in different parts of the world. This shows that someone can address a small group of people, but if that work is powerful and sincere it will have a universal, international audience.

On the other hand, I know that there are many writers who are consciously trying to write the novel that is all ready for translation. And of course nobody particularly wants to read these things, because they have lost some sort of initial strength that comes from the intensity of addressing a small group. Perhaps whether a writer is international or not is something that the writer cannot control. It's almost accidental. But often, I think, the deeper the work, and the deeper the truth of the work, the more likely it is to be international, whether the author is consciously addressing a small group of people or a large number of people. Do you think younger writers in Japan are worried about this question of how international they are?

**Oe:** In last evening's edition of the *Asahi Shimbun* there was an article about how a translation of a work by the novelist Haruki Murakami is being read widely in New York. The article quoted a review in the *New York Times* to the effect that it was now possible to imagine a literature of the Pacific Rim.

For the past week I have been thinking about just what sort of novelist you are. My conclusion is that, rather than being an English author or a European author, you are an author who writes in English. In terms of furnishing the materials for literature, there is a tremendous power in the English language. Somehow it seems that the initiative in world literature has been with English, especially in the field of the novel. As long as he has the English language, an author can leave England and still remain a great writer. Lawrence was that way, and Lawrence Durrell; also E. M. Forster. I felt that by thinking of you in this way, as a writer of English, I had got hold of something essential. By way of comparison, Murakami writes in Japanese, but his writing is not really Japanese. If you translate it into American English it can be read very naturally in New York. I

suspect that this sort of style is not really Japanese literature, nor is it really English literature. But as a matter of fact, a young Japanese author is being read widely in the United States, and I think that this is a good sign for the future of Japanese culture. A young Japanese writer has achieved something that I was never able to achieve, nor Mishima nor Kōbō Abe.

**Ishiguro:** I think I too share these same worries. I attended a lecture by the European intellectual George Steiner, who is at Cambridge and very well known in Britain. I think you are familiar with many of his ideas. One of his constant worries is that all the cultures of the world are disappearing because they are being swallowed up by this ever-growing, large blanket called Anglo-American culture. He is very disturbed by the fact that scientific papers in China and here in Japan are often written originally in English because they have to be presented at conferences where only English is understood. In the communist countries the young people listen to the latest Western rock music. He is very afraid of a certain kind of death of culture, because this bland, colorless, huge blanket called Anglo-Americanism is spreading around the world. In order to survive, people have to sacrifice many things that make their culture unique and in fact make their art and culture mean something, and instead contribute to this meaningless blanket, this strange thing that is conquering the world.

I think that is quite an important thing to be concerned about. Certainly my generation of writers in Britain has perhaps not worried about that kind of thing enough. We have perhaps been concerned about the opposite problem, of not being international enough. I think this is certainly a problem that we have to think about. I think it will be very strange if we all contribute to the same sort of culture, if we're all addressing the same sort of audience. We could all end up like international television. A lot of television programs now are rather superficial, but they're international. It would be sad if literature and serious art were to go the same way—to the lowest common denominator—in order to appear international.

There is a sense among younger writers in England that England is not an important enough country anymore. The

older generation of writers assumed that Britain was a very important country, and so if you wrote about Britain and British problems it would automatically be of global significance. The younger generation of writers in England are very aware of the fact that this is no longer true, that England is now rather like a little provincial town in the world. Some younger British writers have a kind of inferiority complex; that is, they have to consciously make an effort to address international themes, because if they simply write about life in Britain, nobody is going to be interested. Perhaps that feeling doesn't exist in the United States or Japan, since there is a strong sense that these two societies are now at the center of the world, and the twenty-first century is going to be somehow dominated by these two powers. But, certainly, living in England, I feel that same pressure, that I have to be international. Otherwise I'm going to end up in the same position as Danish or Swedish writers, of being very peripheral, because a lot of the great questions of today are passing Britain by. In a way, I think young Japanese authors don't need to feel that sort of inferiority, just because of the way history is moving.

**Oe:** Of course, I have nothing against the fact that Japan is becoming rich because of radios and automobiles. I don't own an automobile, but I do have a radio. But I do think that the state of the economy and the state of literature are unrelated. I think Japanese authors should clearly realize that Japanese literature is very peripheral. When a peripheral literature attempts to become a central literature, one of the things that happens is that it tries to become exotic. I think Mishima tried to create a literature of the exotic. But I believe that attempt was mistaken. Paradoxically, it may be possible for Japanese writers to play a certain role in world literature if they express Japanese concerns in a literature of the periphery.

I am familiar with George Steiner. He seems to be very fond of the idea that things are dying—first it was tragedy and now it is culture. I think that the image of Anglo-American culture as a huge blanket spreading across the world is one of his best. But I can't really agree with what you said about England being a peripheral nation in terms of the world economy

and international relations. I believe that in terms of culture, England still occupies a very important place in the world, and will continue to do so in the future. Looking forward to the twenty-first century, it doesn't seem to me that Japan will become a cultural center just because of its economic strength. I don't believe that American cultural spokesmen will have a very great deal of power, or that Soviet cultural spokesmen will be very powerful. I think that in the twenty-first century, statements by isolated writers and scholars from small countries that appear to be on the periphery will play a very important role in world culture. One example is the novelist Italo Calvino, who recently died a tragic death. He was scheduled to deliver the Mellon Lectures at Harvard University, and was working on the manuscript for those lectures until he died on the day before he was to leave for the United States. The manuscript has been translated into English as *Six Memoirs for the Next Millennium*. Reading it, I think that this work by a novelist from Italy, a country that is economically and politically on the periphery, contains things that will be of central importance in the next century. Another example is the Czech novelist Milan Kundera, now living in exile in France. Reading, for example, the Israel Address, which is found at the end of his book *The Art of the Novel*, I think we will find the most central expression of how a writer will have to live and act today. So I think what writers from Japan must learn is that they need to think about how they can contribute to world culture as representatives of a small but cultured nation in Asia. Moreover, they should do so without the help of businessmen or politicians. They will have to open up on their own a road to England, or a road to France, simply as writers.

**Ishiguro:** I would like to add to my earlier remarks. It wasn't simply because Britain was declining as an economic power that I was suggesting writers in Britain had a sense they were peripheral. I don't think it is really so much in connection with economic power. In fact, I think it is in some ways quite the reverse.

Writers from Britain, and to a certain extent writers from Germany and France—and I myself have had this experience—



go to an international writers' conference and somehow feel inferior compared to writers who come from places like Africa or Eastern Europe or Latin America, in the sense that in many of the great intellectual battles—between liberty and authoritarian regimes, or between communism and capitalism, or between the Third World and the industrialized world—the front line somehow seems to be in these countries, and there seems to be a more clearly defined role for writers like Kundera or some of the African writers. Writers from all the Eastern European countries always seem to have some sort of clear political role to play. This may well be a mistaken assumption, but it's an easy assumption that comes over a lot of us who come from the safer countries, if you like, the safe, prosperous countries like Britain or West Germany or France, although the situation has suddenly changed for the West Germans.

In historical terms, if we are writing from Britain or Sweden or France in the latter part of the twentieth century, we are writing from somewhere very far away from where the main events are taking place, and we somehow lack the natural authority of writers in Czechoslovakia or East Germany or Africa or India or Israel or the Arab countries. And I think this is the reason for this inferiority complex, rather than that Britain is simply not quite as important an economic power as it used to be. Of course it is still a very powerful economic force. But in terms of the great intellectual debates that seem to be central to the latter part of the twentieth century, there is the feeling that perhaps we in England are in the wrong place to view the big battles.

Perhaps it's a good thing that British writers feel they have to travel, at least in their imaginations. I think the younger generation of British writers, much more than the older generation, tends to write novels that are not set in Britain, or at least not set in their time. They look back through history for a time when Britain itself was in crisis, and so the war figures quite large. Or they use their imaginations to create complete imaginary landscapes. This kind of thing is happening more and more, and I think it comes out of this idea that somehow England is far away from the important events—political and social—in the world. Perhaps writers in Japan and the United States do

not feel it quite so much, because there is a sense that somehow, quite aside from the economic question, Japan and America are at the forefront of something crucial that is about to happen in the world. I think that has a certain effect on how writers view their work and on where they go for material to feed their imaginations.

**Oe:** When I myself go abroad to participate in various conferences, it is always simply as an individual writer. I think that the things I have talked about have been more or less unrelated to Japan's economic growth. My sense of Japan is that it is still a peripheral country, and that in spite of its economic power it is still not living up to its international role, particularly in Asia. Thinking back, I think I may share some of the responsibility for this state of affairs, so I talk about that and the sort of things that a writer, as a writer, might be able to do to compensate.

For some reason, Japanese writers tend to stay away from international writers' conferences. Up to now, at least, there have not been many authors who have gone abroad to speak out about Japan's place in the world, about the contradictions felt by Japanese writers in the midst of economic prosperity, about the things that trouble them deeply. So for my part I am trying to do that, little by little. Japan has many very capable businessmen and politicians, but as a novelist I want to speak out internationally about things that they never mention. And I think it is meaningful for writers from abroad, especially young writers like yourself, to come to Japan to look closely at this country and to meet Japanese intellectuals. I hope this will lead to a deeper understanding of things such as the difficult role played by Japanese intellectuals amid material prosperity, and to cultural encounters at a genuinely substantial level.