Ordinary People: The Reader’s Changing Relationship to Kazuo Ishiguro’s Narrators

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Ordinary People: The Reader’s Changing Relationship to Kazuo Ishiguro’s Narrators

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Abstract

This study explores the role of the narrator in Kazuo Ishiguro’s work, concentrating on the middle three of his seven novels (The Remains of the Day, The Unconsoled, and When We Were Orphans). Critics note the fragmented nature of memory drifting in and out of the narrators’ consciousness, and focus on individual narrators as they unreliably remember their past. The narrators create identity and meaning with their stories; critics have examined the errors and self-delusions in the individual stories. My work seeks a pattern spanning the various narrators, and sees a development in Ishiguro’s novels that changes how the reader experiences the narrator’s story. My research uses critical studies, Ishiguro’s interviews, and close reading of Ishiguro’s text.

By variously appealing to the reader’s own consciousness (their sense of identity or cultural clichés, for example) to fill in gaps and background he has purposely only sketched, Ishiguro increasingly shifts the center of consciousness in his novels from the narrator to the reader. The reader is challenged to write the story along with the narrator; the story increasingly involves the reader’s own memories and identity; the reader becomes a participant in the creation of meaning. The effect across Ishiguro’s novels is to suggest a reservoir of memory fragments common to us all, and processes of story-telling shared by us all. From this perspective, his work appears to be a life-long study of how we create meaning, set in the murky realm of memory. The Nobel Prize committee’s 2017 award to Ishiguro was to a writer "who . . . has uncovered the abyss beneath our
illusory sense of connection with the world" (Svenska Akademien). This thesis considers Ishiguro’s work as supremely connected with the world of inner consciousness, and as illustrating our commonality in creating meaning across the abyss.
Dedication

To Peter
Acknowledgments

All the knowledge, enthusiasm, dedication, and support of the people comprising the Harvard Extension School are gratefully acknowledged. They have expanded and enriched my world immeasurably over many years, as they continue to do for all their students. Special thanks to Dr. Talaya Delaney for loving Ishiguro’s work and for her expertise, encouragement, and inspiring questions. Special thanks to Professor Laura Schlossberg for watching over the thesis writing with deep insight and tact, and for her broad knowledge and thought-provoking comments. Thanks to both for their kind, thoughtful, and skillful guidance; I could not have been more fortunate. My appreciation continues to grow for the gifts that they generously shared. A thank you to the friends who taught me so much in class, and who made me laugh, particularly Catherine Matthews’ color-coded Anglo-Saxon parts of speech.
Table ofContents

Chapter I: Introduction..............................................................................................................1
Chapter II: A Butler (The Remains of the Day) .................................................................6
Chapter III: A Musician (The Unconsoled) ........................................................................19
Chapter IV: A Detective and Orphan (When We Were Orphans) ..................................39
Chapter V: Conclusion............................................................................................................57
Bibliography ............................................................................................................................67
Chapter I
Introduction

My research questions explore the span of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels, focusing on his narrators. The manner in which his different narrators tell their story (drifting through memory and consciousness, creating meaning) engages his readers in varied ways, offering different views on how we ourselves create meaning for our lives. Ishiguro has said, “[W]here the consciousness is located in a novel” is “more important” than, for example, whether the narration is in first- or third-person, and determines how the reader’s own consciousness is engaged (Matthews 119). By changing the center of consciousness in his narrators across his novels, Ishiguro changes the relationship of the reader to his narrator, and thereby changes the type of challenge to self-reflection that he offers his readers. Despite these differences, however, Ishiguro and his narrators share with the reader the task of creating meaning.

Focusing on the narrators of three of Ishiguro’s novels, this thesis will examine a narrator who makes meaning through self-deception and unreliability (The Remains of the Day [1989]); one engulfed in confusion and disorientation (The Unconsoled [1996]); and one insistent that truth can be uncovered through determination (When We Were Orphans [2000]). In looking at memory and consciousness, questions will be explored such as: How does the role of the narrator change in the novels? Specifically, how is memory engaged, and where is the center of consciousness in the story? Whose memories are being recovered, in what fashion, and how do they change from novel to
novel? How does narrative voice affect the relationship of the reader to the text, changing the reader’s experience of engagement?

My hypothesis is that Ishiguro is increasingly open in his invitation (or requirement) that the reader move from spectator to participant; that the exploration of memory, trauma, and identity are elements through which Ishiguro presents his narrators’ stories, and later invites his reader’s participation; and that his purpose is to bring the reader to experience his sense of relativity and community in the world. The reader witnesses the early narrators’ stories, but with later narrators is appealed to fill out the story themselves, and even assist in creating it. Ishiguro draws the reader’s attention to the narrator’s efforts to find meaning (how they build their story), and by analogy, to our own efforts. He accomplishes this through shifts in consciousness, where the reader is asked in the middle novels to sort through a multitude of tales and consciences, requiring a more active role for the reader. Early Japanese and English settings will diversify and expand into international and universal settings. In Ishiguro’s first three novels (A Pale View of Hills [1982], An Artist of the Floating World [1986], and The Remains of the Day [1988]), each narrator has autonomy and integrity as if they existed in the ‘real’ world. The reader sees the story of the novel as belonging to and controlled by the narrator. The reader’s role is to understand the narrators’ stories, each of which start out as a means to shape an identity and face for the world that satisfies the narrator’s self-identity. The stories they tell themselves begin by using selective memory to construct a vision of their past that highlights duty, achievement, talent, or skills of which they are proud or where they find satisfaction. The reader, however, hears elements that suggest there is more to the stories than the narrators are revealing; or even more likely, than the narrators
themselves are aware of. Thus, the stories serve to hide disturbing elements in the narrator’s past. The first three novels become the stories of narrators whose self-deceptive memories, due to a precipitating crisis, start to unravel and reveal the unsettling elements that were not incorporated into the “cover story.” The reader to some extent will anticipate these revelations ahead of the narrator, but the reader’s focus is on the narrator’s increasing awareness of what was suppressed, on their response to unbidden memories, guilt, mistakes, and ultimately readjusted identities.

The center of consciousness in the first three novels belongs to the narrator. The stories are paced and controlled in the narrator’s very personal voice. If the reader’s understanding skips ahead, we still frequently pause to watch the narrator catch up, or to watch the narrator hide from or avoid what they now know. What matters is what is happening in the narrator’s mind. In *Artist*, for example, the reader may ask “What do I think of what Ono did?” (Ono changed his art to support Japanese empiricism leading up to World War II, in contrast to his earlier idealistic romantic art expressing the “floating world.”) The reader may even ask, “What would I have done in his place?” But Ono, along with Etsuko in *Pale View* and Stevens in *Remains*, anchor their stories to their singular and unique consciousness. Their stories are about what happens inside that consciousness. Ishiguro has created three narrators with whom the reader engages and empathizes. One of the great pleasures in reading these three novels is that the reader finds no false steps in Ishiguro’s portrayals. Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens voice and pace and control who they are, what they say, and what they do (with Ishiguro, of course, as their creator). In creating their identity, the narrators “write” their own story. The memory fragments assaulting the narrators, loosened by a time of crisis or transition, force a
rewrite for the narrator. But whether accepted, rejected, self-justified, or reconciled, the raw material for the first three of Ishiguro’s novels belongs to his individual narrator’s consciousness. The reader’s role is to witness the story, and the changing of the story, with empathy, with some amusement, and with sadness as awareness dawns. We know these narrators deceive themselves and are unreliable in what they reveal to us, and we know they suffer for this. The analogy to our own lives, however, is veiled – they remain “other.”

In the novels that follow (The Unconsoled and When We Were Orphans), Ishiguro no longer speaks to the reader solely through his narrator’s singular voice and consciousness, and the narrator’s story will incorporate elements that are outside the narrator’s consciousness. The narrator will no longer be the only “writer” (speaker/narrator/expresser/shaper) of a story. Ishiguro’s nature is to speak softly, to demonstrate rather than to lecture, but his narrators increasingly develop effective (not louder) ways to make the reader aware that the elements of the narrator’s story are not tied solely to the individual narrator. Memories and identities are disparate, confused, free-floating elements that we all use, misuse, and borrow. The reader feels commonality rather than separation and judgment; they may even be sympathetic. In the first three works, the reader is a passive witness, perhaps at most a psychoanalyst. In the fourth novel, The Unconsoled, the narrator, Ryder, is no longer cohesive or realistic, nor centered; the reader is confused by many consciences in a surreal setting. The consciousness is multiple, chaotic, unprocessed by the narrator. In confusion, the reader is challenged to become the narrator/Writer, to find a story; and to sense that creating a story will be the same process (choosing from a similar mist of fleeting memories and
elusive conclusions) that we ourselves use in creating meaning in our lives. The boundaries between the reader, narrator, and writer will seem to dissolve in the shared effort to make sense out of the fragmented confusion.

In many ways, the narrators of Ishiguro’s first three novels are similar, and these similarities will be the starting point of my thesis. There is a single set of memory fragments uniquely belonging to the narrator that is presented in the narrator’s individual voice and style. The reader’s understanding of the narrator’s past and gradual recognition of the effect of past actions (which is the story of the novel) appear in the order and pace in which they unfold for the narrator. The narrator’s memory is prompted by a current event, but the recovery of the past is hampered by the narrator’s wish to not recognize uncomfortable elements from the past. The narrator gradually comes to (a certain level of) awareness and self-knowledge. *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), and *The Remains of the Day* (1989) are about how Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens uniquely process and confess their memories, with the reader as a somewhat wiser witness.
Chapter II

A Butler (The Remains of the Day)

Stevens, the butler, is the first-person narrator of The Remains of the Day, Ishiguro’s third novel. The reader’s relationship with Stevens parallels the relationship with Etsuko and Ono (the narrators of his first and second novels, A Pale View of Hills and An Artist of the Floating World), and can serve to explore the effect of Ishiguro’s narrators in his first three novels. In fact, many critics have considered these first three as forming a unit in Ishiguro’s work. One of the most striking elements of Stevens’ narration is his ‘voice’. It is beautifully and consistently rendered. Ishiguro has said that:

[S]omewhere I feared [Stevens’ voice] was something that was in me. . . . Yes, I looked at these things: coldness, a fear of the world of emotions, and this urge to control everything through professionalism, through technical ability. (Gallix 137)

Stevens is dutiful, restrained, loyal, professional, stiff-upper lip-British, constrained, inhibited, modest, sometimes touching, sometimes inadvertently amusing - a perfect example of what is expected of a butler between the wars in England, devoted to an eminent Lord in a distinguished mansion. From a 1986 interview with Gregory Mason, what Ishiguro says of the artist Ono and the mother Etsuko (the narrators of his first and second novels, Pale View and Artist) is equally applicable to the butler, Stevens: [T]hey are “fairly normal”; their “downfall” is that they “lacked a perspective beyond [their] own environment”, trapped in a “parochial perspective” (Mason 9). Stevens exhibits this parochialism in the most condensed manner of the three. Ishiguro notes that:
The butler is a good metaphor for the relationship of very ordinary, simple people to power. . . . This is a condition that I want to write about. It struck me that the figure of the butler, the man who serves, someone who is so close and yet so very far from the hub of power would be a useful person to write through. (Swift 37)

That stereotypical figure of the English butler, which is known all round the world, I thought would serve well as some kind of emblem of this terrible fear of the emotional in one’s self. . . . The butler was also a metaphor for me for the relationship ordinary people have to political power. (Kelman 46)

[Stevens is] a metaphor for me. . . . [M]ost of us, we don’t really get into position where we run things. What we do is we just kind of do our little jobs, we just get on with our small lives and hope for the best. . . . We hope that somebody up there, upstairs uses our little contributions in a good way. In other words, we’re rather like butlers. . . . [Stevens] says, ‘Look I’m just a butler. I can’t make these big decisions about how we run the world But I’ll get some dignity from saying that I’m serving a master, a great man who does know all about these big things.’ And, he abandons responsibility over this political life, and his tragedy is that the person he’s working for is a Nazi sympathizer. (Swaim 100-101)

Ishiguro renders Stevens’ voice perfectly. The stilted, repressed voice captures a social inferior speaking timidly to power. He cannot express his personality or feelings openly, for fear of being perceived as too much an individual, too much presenting himself as an equal to power. He is muted, careful, sometimes obsequious, so as not to offend his master or imply that he is an equal. In addition, his role is to mirror his master – to cultivate exquisite taste and polite aristocratic bearing, to compliment his master’s standing. The butler could be perceived in the manner of a ‘trophy wife’, where his cultivation and dignity reflect on the master. Stevens is inordinately proud of his language and bearing, all rendered in that muted and convoluted voice of his in his narrative – refined, but a pose behind which the ‘real’ Stevens has disappeared. Even Stevens himself has lost access to his ‘real’ self. There is great poignancy in Stevens’ position (all our positions), in that we ‘butlers’ must sacrifice ourselves in order to make
our way in the world. At the same time, the butler Stevens wants to live in a great manor and work for a ‘great’ master. The butler takes as much pleasure in the grand surroundings and exciting happenings at Darlington Hall as the master. When he polishes the silverware (to a degree in which he prides himself), he is, after all, touching the silver. While Stevens’ social position may limit his choices, he can also be held responsible for making a ‘pact with the devil’, giving up autonomy for the sake of his ambition. He has reached the pinnacle of butler-dom by trading up to finally work for Lord Darlington. As Ishiguro said, Stevens’ tragedy is that he works for a Nazi sympathizer, but it is also that he sacrifices his relationships with his father and with Miss Kenton. He sacrifices his emotional life. He also sacrifices what political power he might have gained by associating with others of his class, like the townspeople in Somerset who are exploring their own political power in contrast to the traditional class structure and hierarchy.

The reader will witness the entire story through Stevens’ perfectly modulated voice, but the reader will also find humor and errors in what Stevens narrates. For example, it is dawning on an aging Stevens that he is beginning to make professional mistakes that he never made before:

Nevertheless, I think you will understand that to one not accustomed to committing such errors, this development was rather disturbing, and I did in fact begin to entertain all sorts of alarmist theories as to their cause. As so often occurs in these situations, I had become blind to the obvious – that is, until my pondering over the implications of Miss Kenton’s letter finally opened my eyes to the simple truth: . . . nothing more sinister than a faulty staff plan. (Remains 7)

Or more ominously, later in the novel as he excuses his employer for pro-Nazi sympathies:

It needs to be said too what salacious nonsense it is to claim that Lord Darlington was anti-Semitic, or that he had close association with . . .
Fascists. Such claims can only arise from complete ignorance of the sort of gentleman his lordship was. *Remains* 123

Or with regard to Miss Kenton: “I happen to know for a fact that she has no wish for a family” *Remains* 150. Stevens’ “alarmist theories” are actually closer to the truth of his declining powers, and he is indeed “blind to the obvious”, but he has missed the real obvious truth. The greater “ignorance” of his Lord’s character belongs to Stevens. And he has completely misread Miss Kenton’s yearnings.

In a sense, Stevens calls the reader to take a journey to Cornwall with him, although our journey will be through Stevens’ diary accounting of the trip. We will be taking the three-day trip in retrospect, after it has occurred. Our journey will be through Stevens’ memory and notes – a journey through his consciousness, as suppressed, unbidden memory fragments come to Stevens’ awareness. Ishiguro implies that there is an outer world of what ‘really’ happened, and Stevens’ inner world, which resists the ‘real’. The memory fragments have existed in Stevens’ unconscious, but as he recalls them, he is forced to rearrange their significance and meaning for him. The reader sees the ‘real’ patterns sooner than Stevens, but that is not the story of the novel. What the story will be is watching a ‘real’ person’s struggle with his ‘real’ past choices. It is a past that cannot be undone. Part of the sadness and beauty of Ishiguro’s writing is how convincingly Stevens never strays from his basic character and voice, and how ‘realistic’ he appears. As Stevens begins planning, he speaks to the reader: “I should say”, “. . . it is only fair to point out”, “You may be amazed” *Remains* 5, 7, 10. He affects this tone throughout the novel, but as the journey progresses, disturbing memories sometimes appear with emotion and distress that Stevens immediately covers. The reader can ‘read’ Stevens’ character in these incidents. For example, on Day 3, Stevens dines with other
lodgers at a cottage near Tavistock. Stevens is taken for an upper-class gentleman, due to his dress and borrowed car, and Stevens does nothing to refute that impression. The other diners suspect the truth of Stevens’ real station in life, and one of them baits him:

“There’s something that marks you out as a gentleman. Hard to put a finger on it. . . . Mind you . . . dignity isn’t just something gentlemen have” (Remains 163). Stevens ‘realizes’:

[It would be far too complicated a task for me to explain myself more clearly to these people. I thus judged it best simply to smile and say: ‘Of course, you’re quite correct.’ This had the immediate effect of dispelling the slight tension that had built in the room. (Remains 163)

The reader senses the “tension” is internal to Stevens, as he fears discovery and self-discovery. It is “scary (or at least embarrassing) for the reader”, as well as Stevens (Schlossberg 2017). Whether or not the villagers force Stevens to confess, Stevens himself has come to a hint of self-awareness of his pose. Ishiguro’s story is about Stevens’ self-discovery. The reader analyzes Stevens’ failings, but also deeply empathizes with Stevens’ painful emotions and his efforts to cope with them.

Although the reader intuits early on that Stevens’ narration cannot be relied on, and ‘knows’ several truths before Stevens, the reader’s role is as witness to Stevens’ growing awareness. Ishiguro gives the sense that there is an independent reality in the narrator’s past (Darlington Hall, professional butler associations, war, fascism, 1930s/1940s Britain, among other elements), and that Stevens’ task will be to learn to understand his past more clearly, and less parochially. His task will also be to read the emotions and thoughts that he had repressed while rigidly focusing on his professional duties. We have a sense of Stevens’ intention to ‘drive’ the story he narrates, to honor and recapture the past as he created it, but that he gradually loses control as memories from
the past assault him. Stevens plans the journey to Cornwall to visit Miss Kenton many years after she left employment Lord Darlington’s housekeeper. He will take a driving tour, in his new employer’s car, and with his former employer’s old fashioned travel manual as guidebook. The guidebook is out-of-date and meant for gentlemen travelers, not butlers, but that is the point. This is how Stevens ‘drives’. It symbolizes the rules he follows, but he will get lost and never find some of the sights described. Stevens tries to ‘drive’ both the car and his narration in his characteristic manner – over-constrained, unimpulsive, proud, loyal, and blind. He does, of course, somewhat lose his tight control over the journey, surprised by unexpected memories. (Later, in The Unconsoled, Ishiguro’s fourth novel, the narrator will have no travel guide – Ryder will have lost his “schedule”. The narrator will function very differently from Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens.)

Stevens similarly ‘drives’ the narration of recovered memory in his account of the firing of two Jewish maids at the request of Lord Darlington. In Day Three’s diary entry, we learn that Lord Darlington wished to avoid offending the sensibilities of his anti-Semitic diplomatic guests, and requested that Stevens fire two maids simply because they were Jewish. Stevens recollects Miss Kenton’s protest and fury over his actions, and her threat to leave. Stevens recalls that as the threat was not acted upon and diminished over time, he “with a light laugh” “tended to tease her every now and again,” asking when she would be leaving (Remains 133). A year or so after the maids’ dismissal, Stevens recalls that Lord Darlington admits the dismissal “was wrong” (Remains 134). Then Stevens recalls a “foggy afternoon” in “encroaching mist” sitting in the summer house with Miss Kenton resting after the work of the day. It is Stevens’ recollection that it was misty and foggy. Perhaps it was; or perhaps Stevens’ memory of this long-suppressed episode
comes to him in a misty, shrouded manner. Perhaps new memories require a foggy, dreamlike atmosphere, covert and still partially hidden; less threatening to a rigid sense of self, more easily forgotten if too much of a threat. Perhaps in bright sunshine, Stevens’ daytime butler identity would assert itself and deny or distort this fragile fragment of memory.1 Whether there really was mist in the late afternoon, Stevens can more readily allow himself to remember under cover of real or imagined mist. The remembered scene comes from an unconscious, hidden side of his mind, and its foggy outlines will work in his unconscious, as well as being partially brought to consciousness. (In another instance of fog, Ishiguro has his narrator Ryder getting lost in the city - for the first of many times – at a time when the “fog thickens” (The Unconsoled 111), and when Ryder is in his ‘dreamworld’.) “Perhaps a little predictably” Stevens brings up the episode of the maids by teasing Miss Kenton again that she has not yet resigned (Remains 135), and telling her of Lord Darlington’s regret because:

‘I just thought you’d like to know, Miss Kenton, since I recall you were as distressed by the episode as I was.’ (Remains 136)

Stevens remembers Miss Kenton saying:

... as though she had just been jolted from a dream, ‘I don’t understand you... As I recall, you thought it was only right and proper that Ruth and Sarah be sent packing. You were positively cheerful about it.’

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1Ishiguro uses nature in similar ways in other novels. When Ono looks out into the garden of his old house, which symbolizes his pride in his past achievements, he notices the snow falling lightly. It is early spring. “Only the stone lantern at the back of the garden had a substantial cap of white on it” (Artist 104). The muffling snow on the lantern suggests that Ono’s memories are still partly hidden from his awareness. As spring progresses, the wider world will intrude into Ono’s repressed consciousness, and the snow will have melted. In The Unconsoled, at the moment of a revelation regarding Brodsky’s role in the city, “The fog had got much thicker and I had lost my bearings” (The Unconsoled 111).
[Stevens remembers responding:] ‘Really, Miss Kenton. . . . Naturally, one disapproved of the dismissals. One would have thought that quite self-evident.’ (Remains 136)

Stevens makes his exit from the summer house, but looking back at her in the summer house “all I could see of her was her profile outlined against a pale and empty background” (Remains 136). The reader listens to the narration of these memories in the same order and pace in which they come to Stevens’ consciousness. Probably for the first time, Stevens has juxtaposed these memories in this newly causal and revealing way. In recollecting the episode, Stevens has for the first time coupled the event in his mind with Miss Kenton’s anger, her self-acknowledged cowardice in not resigning herself, and with her perception that Stevens was not bothered with any wrong he may have done. The reader reads between the lines. Characteristically, although Stevens has a clearer grasp of ‘reality’ in recollecting these memories in this particular order and form, ‘reality’ also remains veiled and inarticulate for him. Ishiguro and the reader focus on Stevens’ processing of disturbing memory. In recollecting this episode, Stevens has possibly for the first time coupled the event in his mind with Miss Kenton’s responses at the time and a year later, and with the timing of Stevens admission of regret (only after Lord Darlington has voiced regret). The reader can see self-discovery still coupled with evasion. Stevens remains true to himself.

Critical scholars ask: Why is Stevens' narration unreliable? What is he hiding from? What mechanisms does he use to distort or block his memory? What form do his memories take when they break through? How do his class and profession determine his character and ‘voice”? I would argue that the reader also focuses on getting to know Stevens, and at the end of the novel, the reader remains separate and outside, looking into
Stevens’ consciousness. The reader studies Steven’s unreliability for the same reasons that interested Ishiguro in portraying him: “the deep reasons why we all have to be unreliable narrators. Because most of us when we look at ourselves, we have to be rather unreliable in order to face ourselves (Gallix 139). The narrator, who began the story, ends it, in almost the same voice with which he began the story. Stevens sits on the bench in Weymouth, at the end of the day. “And I must say, it has been something of a relief not to be motoring . . . one can also get a little weary of it after a while” (Remains 201). He remembers Miss Kenton’s confession that “I get to thinking about a life I might have had with you, Mr. Stevens” (Remains 208). Stevens is conscious at that moment: “Indeed – why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking.” In this moment of clarity, the reader is provided the key line of the novel. A proud, ordinary butler, much like us, is confronted with his destination, which is not the one he foresaw or planned. But he smiles, congratulates her on her expected grandchild, and says: “It was a great pleasure to see you again, Mrs. Benn (Remains 208). He resolves to “try to make the best of what remains of my day” (Remains 212).

The effect on the reader is also heart-breaking, as we see an empathetic narrator low on options at this point in his life, finally understanding that he made serious errors and cannot relive them. His remaining time is limited even if he could make amends. As David James puts it, speaking of a later novel (Never Let Me Go), one of the effects of Ishiguro’s writing is to draw the reader into “affective involvement” with the narrator. The reader becomes “implicated” and “entangle[d]” emotionally, hoping for “consolation” for the narrator, “complicit” in hope. At the same time, “Ishiguro provokes

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I am grateful to Professor Linda Schlossberg for this insight.
us in the end to oscillate between . . . circumspect and consolatory readings.” (The “circumspect” reader utilizes intellect and judgment, and can see beyond the parochial world of Stevens’ view. The “consolatory” reader exercises empathy and hope.) In Ishiguro’s first three novels, the reader swings much more widely to the empathetic side, although not exclusively. I believe that Ishiguro purposefully develops more of the “circumspect” approach in his readers in his later novels, incorporating more “detachment . . . [,] skepticism . . . [,] and critique” (James 2016, 498).

Mead describes the dichotomy in Ishiguro’s work (in his analysis of The Unconsoled) by contrasting elements of “low trauma fiction” (he calls “misery literature”, loaded with romantic yearnings, melancholy, self-indulgence, and self-pity) in the novel with elements of “high trauma fiction” (with the goal of reconciliation and healing through narrative) (Mead 502-3). It appears that both Mead and James are describing the empathetic pull of the narratives on the reader, and contrasting it with a sterner, intellectual role for the reader. To Maya Jaggi in 1995 (112), Ishiguro noted that “adjectives like . . . ‘[s]pare’, ‘subtle’, ‘controlled’, surprised me . . . [But] I concluded it was to some extent me,” and not only the character of his narrators. Perhaps Ishiguro thought readers (like me) were expecting his later novels to resemble the first three, and were at first disappointed with his fourth, The Unconsoled. The reader, for one, is unconsoled by Ishiguro’s fourth novel. I believe as Ishiguro branched out with his fourth and later novels, the reader’s role is forced to change.

Although there are developments in the later novels, the seeds of these developments can be seen in the first three works. For example, ‘reality’ is not as solid in these novels as it may seem. Ishiguro has said on several occasions that he imagines a
great deal of the setting of the novels, that the setting comes very late in his writing process, and that his historical research is not thorough-going. Therefore, when the narrators start to recognize the ‘reality’ of their pasts, what ‘really’ happened, and where their responsibility may lie, some of that ‘reality’ is fantasy. The reader sometimes colludes with the fantasy. The reader, if they are sensitive to this, will partly focus on their own collusion in the fantasy or myth that Ishiguro presents. There is a small tug away from the central narrator’s consciousness if we do not see a ‘black and white’ struggle between the narrator’s desire to hide from and to expose ‘reality’. Ishiguro will increasingly use myths in his later novels.

Ishiguro has said of Remains that “we are all in some sense butlers” (Matthews 115), in our smallness, powerlessness, and ordinariness. As a young writer, he has also said that the narrators of his first three novels are all failures, and that his writing came out of his fears that he too might end up looking back on a failed life. Of the first three narrators:

Their lives are spoiled because they don’t have any extraordinary insight into life. They’re not necessarily stupid, they’re just ordinary. (I write out his fear that I, myself will waste my talent . . . [or choose something] that could be disastrous. (Vorda and Herzinger 86-7)

At the end of each of the first three novels, the narrator has not provided the reader with an answer to ‘where they will go from here’, although each arrives at a shift in their identity. In similar ways, the future will be a mixture of pain, reconciliation, new beginnings, a return to unconsciousness, or perhaps with the sense that it does not matter much whether we remember the past. The future takes over no matter what was in the past (Etsuko’s other daughter, a rebuilt Nagasaki, Ono’s grandson, the art of banter). Stevens expresses a new self-awareness to the greatest degree. Etsuko does not expressly
narrate self-consciousness at all, and we are unsure if Ono will forget his ‘journey’ now that his daughter is successfully married and his irrepressible grandson seems to have no sensitivity or interest in the past. The reader does sense that each narrator has somewhat incorporated ‘reality’ more consciously at the end of their story. Stevens’ identity has shifted; his sense of grand butler-hood is diminished, and his mission has lost its drive. The reader has accompanied him on his journey, and comes to its end along with Stevens with sorrow and regret. There is a large emotional component in the reader’s towards Stevens, in empathy for a fellow creature. The reader’s intellectual challenge is in wondering how Stevens became the way he is, and much of the critical studies are about psychoanalyzing Stevens, as previously noted. Perhaps Stevens will learn the art of bantering to serve his new employer. We are not able to know his future; we know he has changed at least a little.

But Ishiguro also says that the ‘realism’ of Japan and Great Britain between the wars, or the profession of butlers, or great country houses – all are somewhat imagined. The ‘reality’ that the narrators are avoiding is not so realistic as at first glance. Yet the effect on the reader of the first three narrators is that they are ‘real’ people. It is true that this is what all fiction does, creating a world that surrounds the reader, and insinuating new ideas through the voice of fictional characters. At the same time, the narrators in Ishiguro’s later novels (with the exception of Kathy H. in Never Let Me Go), are not as ‘real’ as Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens, for various reasons. And Kathy H., while graceful, warm, appealing, and seemingly ‘real’, is a clone. Can a clone totally avoid the distancing and lack of realism of being a clone? Ishiguro’s narrators begin to express more than
what a single ‘realistic’ consciousness can, no matter how perfectly they are portrayed and voiced.
Chapter III

A Musician (The Unconsoled)

In The Unconsoled (1995), his fourth novel, Ishiguro no longer places the center of consciousness in the mind of his narrator, and the reader will experience The Unconsoled in a very different way from, for example, The Remains of the Day. His narrator and protagonist is Ryder, a young-ish man and world-renowned pianist. Ryder travels widely, performing and giving important, highly-anticipated lectures in the cities he visits. His professional prospects are grandiose, exaggerated to the point of farce. His situation differs from Etsuko (A Pale View of Hills), Ono (An Artist of the Floating World), and Stevens (The Remains of the Day) in his age, his seeming extraordinariness, and in his perspective. He is not looking back at his life from old age, as they are. Ryder’s memories are less fixed, and in the midst of being created. A cover story has not coalesced. Ryder may be a way for Ishiguro to depict a character in the middle of making choices in his life, when the future is suggested and feared, but unknown. He is in contrast to the first three narrators who have already made their choices, and in old age are facing consequences they did not foresee. There is a sense that Ishiguro may be sharing his own present in The Unconsoled, although parodied, and this adds to the immediacy of the reader’s experience. The novel may also be sharing the chaos of the writing process itself.

A sense of uncertainty hovers over The Unconsoled from the very beginning. Ryder arrives at his hotel in an unnamed middle-European city. He has arrived from travelling to other unnamed cities. We never learn the name of the city. It is irrelevant,
whereas the earlier novels are firmly set in an identifiable time and place. At the close of the novel, Ryder moves on to another place (Helsinki is named, but it could be anywhere). Unlike the first three novels, the main action takes place in this single city, in the present, but the city seems to have no ‘reality’ behind it. When memories invade, the narration does not shift to a place in the past, the way it does in the retrospective memories from World War II that visit Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens.

Ryder narrates the novel, but does not compose a story or identity out the varied elements he remembers from the past or experiences in the present. His consciousness is not really conscious; his voice is merely a conduit for chaotic fragments. We never learn how he views himself or what his goals are (the opposite of Stevens in Remains). The Unconsoled explores an emotional and intellectual realm that is less constrained and controlled than the voices of Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens could allow. To be conscious is to be taking in the world while telling oneself a story, explaining the world while experiencing it, exerting control over it. Ishiguro says:

I’ve come to this conclusion that most writers – and I suppose I have to include myself in this – somewhere deep down, they are slightly unbalanced. . . . [M]aybe somewhere in their childhood, something didn’t quite match up, and they know there is nothing they can do about it now. And I think they go over this wound over and over again in their writing. . . . [I]t’s the only kind of consolation people have when they realize that . . . some equilibrium has been lost somewhere way back, and they can never retrieve it. But there’s a consolation: you start to build your own world [in writing]. (Swaim 108)

In Ryder, Ishiguro has constructed a narrator who has not built his own world or exerted control. The fragmented elements passing through Ryder’s mind remain abstract pieces for the reader because there is no one absorbing them and giving them individualized meaning. Ryder does not use suppression to fashion his identity (as does Stevens). The
very title of Ishiguro’s fourth novel is telling; for the reader, as well as Ryder, experiencing *The Unconsoled* is far from consoling.

As *The Unconsoled* begins, Ryder (we do not learn his first name) has been invited for an important event on ‘Thursday night’, where he will be the central guest/performer. He has been summoned to somehow save the unnamed city from an unspecified trauma or decline, which he alone can affect. The city’s musical life is the center of its culture. Salvation may be linked to a return to romance and passion, which are represented by the discredited conductor Brodsky. The decline is linked to Brodsky’s cold and sterile successor. However, Brodsky is obsessed with old emotional wounds (he has swung too far in the direction of passion and risks becoming its victim), and may not be successfully rehabilitated. Ryder arrives alone at his unnamed hotel, and the novel consists of confused events, encounters, and memories over the next few days, leading up to the mysterious ‘Thursday night’ performance. What is past and what is present is never totally clear; all seem to pass through Ryder’s mind with no ordering. Ryder encounters figures from his past and present (presumably, but he does not tell us any coherent story of his life): his wife and son, his parents, himself at different ages, school friends, a neurotic young pianist, Brodsky’s ex-lover, city fathers, and citizens of the city. But whereas Lord Darlington figures as a ‘real’ character in *The Remains of the Day*, outside of Stevens’ portrayal, Ryder does not have any ‘guidebook’ for the people he encounters in his story. Their appearance and disappearance in the novel remain chaotic and untethered, for him and for the reader. The reader wonders: Who are these people, and do they ‘really’ exist outside Ryder’s mind? The reader, as well as Ryder, is confused about past and present, and what these characters represent. They certainly do not seem to have
any existence (even within the fiction of the novel), in contrast to Lord Darlington, Miss Kenton, various diplomats, and the Jewish maids in *The Remains of the Day*. In Ryder’s absence, the reader is forced to take the chaotic pieces that he offers, and seek a story or message of consolation for themselves, in the absence of a guide (neither Ryder nor Ishiguro provide conscious direction).

In the novel’s first scene, Ryder steps from his taxi, and wanders across the “deserted lobby” (*The Unconsoled 3*) of the hotel, where the “ceiling was too low and had a definite sag, creating a slightly claustrophobic mood, and despite the sunshine outside the light was gloomy” (*The Unconsoled 3*). The subsequent events of the novel are summoned to this gloomy world; they originate in Ryder’s unconscious mind, consisting of past memory and present ‘reality’ that is not ‘real’, or even realistically imagined. The reader is further cued to the unconscious nature of Ryder’s story by Ryder’s lack of control or choice over events.

Ishiguro introduces a murky world outside ‘reality’, originating inside Ryder’s unconscious. Ryder responds to learning of the hotel manager’s failure to greet his important guest due to the pressure of arrangements for ‘Thursday night’: “I simply nodded, unable to summon the energy to enquire into the precise nature of ‘Thursday night’” (*The Unconsoled 4*). The unconscious is unsummoned and uncontrolled, out of the reach of consciousness. An omniscient reader will not be able to recognize Ryder’s self-deceptions (and by implication, what is ‘real’) in the way they could with Ishiguro’s first three narrators. There is no sense of ‘reality’ even gestured towards that the reader can intuit a few steps ahead of Ryder. The reader enters the city, debarks from the taxi, and enters the gloomy hotel together *with* Ryder, rather than as empathetic spectator
outside the narration. The reader experiences Ryder’s disorientation and confusion in their own experience of reading the novel.

We find further early evidence that Ryder’s world is not ‘real’. Gustav, the hotel porter, arrives to carry Ryder’s bags to his room:

[While the porter showed the room to Ryder,] something about the diligence with which he went about his task, something about his efforts to personalise something he went through many times each day, rather touched me and prevented me from interrupting... It occurred to me that... [h]e was... worrying once more about his daughter and her little boy. (*The Unconsoled* 13)

Ryder goes on in detail about Gustav’s worries. But Ryder has only just arrived, and has never previously met Gustav. How does he know all this detail? By introducing Ryder’s mind-reading with “it occurred to me”, Ishiguro is signaling that these observations are from Ryder’s mind, and do not necessarily refer to an independent ‘reality’ (Fairbanks 613). On the other hand, Ryder does not even recognize Sophie and Boris, who we soon learn are his wife and son.

The most significant ‘fact’ for Ryder and the reader holds true throughout *The Unconsoled*: Ryder has lost the “schedule” for his journey. We do not learn where Ryder has come from, only that it was a “long journey” (*The Unconsoled* 4). When he arrives, he does not remember the purpose of his visit, or the details of his itinerary. Miss Stratmann, his guide during his stay, suggests he see the sights of “Old Town... as soon as your schedule allows...”. Of course, you’ve had a chance by now to familiarize yourself with your schedule” (*The Unconsoled* 11). Of course, Ryder is *not* familiar with his schedule. Later, in his hotel room, Ryder rationalizes the loss of his schedule: “If I had not received a copy of my schedule, the fault was [Miss Stratmann’s], not mine...” (*The Unconsoled* 15). A fragment of memory drifts into Ryder’s consciousness:
And then suddenly a moment came back to me from the long plane journey . . . [When I was] making a careful study . . . of my schedule . . . . Indeed, I could recall the very texture of the . . . paper on which my schedule had been typed, the dull yellow patch cast on it by the reading light . . . – but try as I might, I could remember nothing of what had been written on that sheet. (*The Unconsoled* 15)

From the start, the reader knows Ryder is in a strange world; he can read other people’s minds; he forgets important relationships; past and present have porous boundaries; always on the verge of sleep, he is very close to memories and dreams crowding in from his unconscious. He has no map or schedule for this world; he lacks control and will power. He is not fully conscious. The world of *The Unconsoled* is the unconscious. Lying on his hotel bed, Ryder was:

. . . starting to doze off when something suddenly made me open my eyes again and stare up at the ceiling. . . The room I was now in, I realised, was the very room that had served as my bedroom [as a child]. . . . I looked down at the floor . . . [and remembered] where several times a week I would set out in careful formations of plastic soldiers . . . . [The] realisation that after all this time I was once more back in my old childhood sanctuary caused a profound feeling of peace to come over me. . . I felt myself sliding into a deep and exhausted sleep. (*The Unconsoled* 17)

Ryder is always near sleep. He follows Sophie and Boris (whom he begins to recognize as his wife and son) to a playground. Night is beginning to fall (daylight clarity is disappearing). Sophie scolds Ryder for trying to solve other people’s problems all the time and not paying attention to his family. (We suspect she is right if he cannot recognize them.) He responds, “It’s all this travelling . . . . Never seeing anyone you know. It’s been very tiring.” Sophie invites him back to her apartment for a “nice supper”:

My earlier weariness came over me again and the idea of relaxing in the warmth of her apartment . . . seemed suddenly highly enticing. So much so
that for a brief moment I might even have closed my eyes and stood there smiling dreamily. (*The Unconsoled* 38)

In the same scene, Boris is playing on the climbing frame, calling to his parents, “Look, this is easy . . . . [I]t’s easy to do in the dark.”

[Ryder] saw then that Boris looked cold and somewhat shaken. All his earlier energy had evaporated and it occurred to me the performance he had just put on had required large resources on his part. (*The Unconsoled* 38)

Boris is a projection for Ryder, able to act but only in the dark, putting on a performance, which is utterly enervating. We see Ryder on the edge of unconsciousness; we see him appropriating Boris’ identity, and we are reminded of Ryder’s always looming exhaustion. Scheduling and executing a conscious existence seems so much harder than succumbing to sleep. In typical fashion (repeated throughout the novel) at the end of each day:

[A]n intense surge of weariness came over me, so that it was virtually all I could do to stagger back to my bed and collapse on top of it, sinking at once into a deep sleep. (*The Unconsoled* 116)

Driving with Sophie and Boris to one of his countless duties to others, it is raining and the car gets stuck in the grass. Ryder climbs in the back seat “where I had once spent so many contented hours” (as a child):

Through the window nearest my head I could see blades of grass and a pink evening sky. . . . Before long, a deep restfulness started to settle over me and I allowed my eyes to close for a moment. As I did so, I found a memory coming back . . . . (*The Unconsoled* 263)

Evening is approaching; memories drift in. The thinnest of membranes separates past from present. He reverts to being a child again, and falls asleep.

His wife Sophie appropriates the role of Ryder’s conscious self, which he has abandoned. In scolding, she expresses what he cannot:
'You’re like everyone else. . . . You go on like there’s all the time in the world, you just don’t realise, do you? [W]e have to get a move on. Build something for ourselves soon. . . . You don’t realise what a lonely place the world can become if you don’t get on with things. (The Unconsoled 250)

Ryder’s somnolent self says:

[A]long with so much else, Sophie had succeeded in reducing my carefully planned time-table to chaos. (The Unconsoled 289-90)

The reader experiences Ryder’s frantic sense of too many things to do, with no ‘schedule’ to organize them, and no energy to accomplish them. Contrary to subverting his schedule to chaos, Sophie is reminding him of his schedule and duties, which Ryder will forget by the next morning.

Ryder is easily lost:

We came to a halt at a crossroad. The fog had got much thicker and I had lost my bearings. (The Unconsoled 111)

Even walking to the concert hall for the all-important ‘Thursday night’:

I found myself wandering from one tiny side-street to the next, quite possibly going in circles, the concert hall not visible anywhere. . . . With an effort, I straightened my posture and adopted the demeanour of someone who, with all his affairs well in hand, was taking a relaxing stroll around the town. (The Unconsoled 386)

Without a guidebook, the best Ryder can do is ‘adopt the demeanour’ of knowing the way and being in control. But we remember from Boris’ example that going through the motions, performing, can be exhausting.

The future intrudes on Ryder just as the past and present do. One of the city’s leaders tells Ryder a story about a man who did not have a bad life, who in fact met with success. Again, Ryder appropriates another character’s story without consciously connecting it to his own fears of the future:
But this man, every now and then, he looks back over this life he’s led and wonders if he didn’t perhaps let certain things slip by. He wonders how things might have been if he’d been, well, a little less timid. A little less timid and a little more passionate. (The Unconsoled 374)

The story being told of this man comes from Ryder’s own (unconscious) mind; the man does not ‘really’ exist, but he appropriates a desire of Ryder’s to live more assertively.

Fairbanks describes the setting of The Unconsoled as having:

The characteristics of . . . dreaming . . . not as an extended dream but as a dreamworld, [the difference being] that ‘a dream’ takes place outside but related to a ‘waking life’ while a ‘dreamworld’ is itself the ultimate reality . . . [where there is a] characteristic failure of the percipient’s higher cognitive functions to register their illogical or impossible features. (Fairbanks 606)

In this dreamworld, Ryder does not recognize inconsistencies. The reader recognizes inconsistencies, but cannot make a rational story out of them; the reader experiences Ryder’s dilemma. The story of Brodsky’s love affair, or his downfall, or of Ryder and Sophie’s marriage, or the decline of the city, cannot be uncovered, but Ryder’s sense of being pulled first one way, then the other, can be shared. Rather than fragments of memory visiting the conscious (as they do in A Pale View of Hills, An Artist of the Floating World, and The Remains of the Day, which the narrator first resists and then gradually incorporates into their identity), Ryder inhabits his unconscious, unable to order or process the events of the The Unconsoled. In contrast to a dream that a real person dreams, where ‘reality’ is distorted and disguised, to be remembered on waking, there is no reality outside at all to reference. Whether Ryder inhabits a dreamworld, or is projecting his memories and future fears onto his present, the narrator is not remembering memory fragments with a single believable consciousness. The reader is unable to sense that something has ‘really’ happened, and that the narrator is struggling to suppress
awareness of it. Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens are in tight control of their stories and identities, until memories gradually force reassessment; their autobiographical ‘schedules’ succeed in providing direction and meaning for most of their lives (although they have resisted uncomfortable truths, and they are unreliable narrators). Their ‘schedule’ (conscious identity) could be said to be their ‘consolation’, a means to make sense of their lives and maintain equilibrium. (In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens’ choice of guidebook for his journey to Cornwall perfectly describes his intention to reaffirm his sense of himself; however, memories return in altered form, intruding on his intentions.)

Ryder’s dream state in *The Unconsoled*, by contrast, is both experienced and rendered directly, not as remembered. Although the past tense prevails, it represents a moving narrative present, and Ryder ‘narrates’ *The Unconsoled* only in the sense that his is the consciousness registering the events of the story, not in the sense that he is shaping his story for the reader or any audience within the fictional world. (Fairbanks 609)

The reader of *The Unconsoled* is focused on their own sense of being assaulted and out of control, rather than on sympathetically witnessing Ryder’s predicaments. Ryder is not driving his own story. The reader starts asking: What is the story? Whose consciousness is central? Lacking a narrator’s story, the reader inhabits their own dreamworld, and an intellectual effort is required of the reader to find Ishiguro’s meaning. As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, perhaps Ryder is in the middle of creating his narrative, before he has been able to construct his life’s ‘consolation’ and gain control of his identity. Without a schedule he remains asleep, assaulted, unconscious - *unconsoled*. The reader sees the elements assaulting Ryder as abstractions, possibilities, fragments available to us all in narrating our lives, as yet un-individualized, unconnected to a central consciousness – an unspun story. The free-floating elements are potential
building blocks (duties, ambitions, memories, relationships, guilt, and dilemmas). As fragmented abstractions, they are universally shared. Building an identity (Ryder’s, Ishiguro’s, or the reader’s) requires a conscious effort. However, the reader is not given sufficient knowledge of Ryder to construct a logical story for him, and the chaotic fragments remain unconnected, and unattached to a recognizable individual. The reader can choose to attach them to Ishiguro, to Ryder, or to themselves. The center of consciousness in The Unconsoled is with the reader, to make what they can of the fragments. In The Unconsoled, Ishiguro has reached out to his readers in a more direct way to ask, “Don’t we all feel like this (Kriider 129)?”

The spatial and temporal distortions in the novel (doors opening into unexpected places, impossible perspectives from above a stage, buses that never reach their destination) are also represented by Ryder’s lost schedule. Ryder is incapable of scheduling his perceptions. Perhaps Ishiguro is representing a lack of control in the lack of realism in The Unconsoled. Realism is what is typically taken for reality, but what is real is actually ordered and interpreted by a central consciousness – someone in charge of scheduling. Ryder slips into sleep, the unconscious, at every point of choice, relinquishing conscious control. He is incapable of perceiving, coordinating, prioritizing, or planning.

Disorienting the reader further, as Mead notes, Ishiguro has not given Ryder a personal history, as it is generally defined. Further, there is no present in The Unconsoled: “[T]he present tense is entirely absent from the novel’s narration” (Mead 507). As Mead describes it, The Unconsoled lacks a “frame narrative” that is present in Pale View, Artist, and Remains. There is no “[frame] structure [that] establishes temporal
order and allows the reader to find her or his way” (Mead 506). The reader is challenged to build temporal order out of confusion.

David Coughlan provides a creative way to describe the narrator and reader’s roles in *The Unconsoled*. He sees Ryder as assuming simultaneous roles as “both ‘writer’ and ‘reader’ . . . making Ryder a ‘wri-der’” (Coughlan 101). Coughlan depicts the narrator as reading his own story right on the novel’s pages as the reader turns them, rather than remembering and pondering it in his mind. He sees Ryder telling the story as it unfolds, at the mercy of the events, pulled first this way, then that, by one person or event, then another. Ryder is not guiding or shaping what is being remembered. He does not know where he has been nor plan where he is going. People’s demands or sudden recollections circumvent any plan he tries to make, regardless of whether their existence is outside his mind or inside his originating in his unconscious.

Moreover, Ryder is not the only ‘wri-der’ of his story. The reader is challenged to create logical, spatial, and temporal order in the novel. Even the name of the unnamed city (Vienna, Budapest, Warsaw, Belgrade?) begs to be supplied by the reader. Since Ryder does not make sense of his (if they are his) fragments of memory, does he fail in his role as ‘Writer’? Who then interprets and makes sense of *The Unconsoled*? The reader steps into this role, because it is human nature to make sense and create stories. As noted, the reader’s response to *The Unconsoled* requires more intellectual effort than with Ishiguro’s earlier novels.

Fragments of (possibly Ryder’s) past identities float through Ryder’s mind, as well as scenes from the present (through glimpses of his role as Sophie’s husband, Boris’ father, his professional life as a famous musician and lecturer, or his role as savior to the
world). The future, however, becomes the primary ‘schedule’ for *The Unconsoled*. Early on, Ryder expresses fear of the future when encountering an old school chum. Ryder recalls:

> It was . . . at that [remembered] moment I had first realized, with a distinct chill, that there was another side to the school golden boy [Geoffrey Saunders, but also Ryder? Ishiguro?] – some deeply vulnerable dimension that would ensure he would never live up to the expectations that had been placed on him. (*The Unconsoled* 47)

Ryder’s schoolmate may be speaking of the future when he tells Boris: “The really great [football] players are often defenders” (*The Unconsoled* 50) – one needs to defend against potential pitfalls in the future. Ryder may be predicting the future when he apologizes to Boris, “I should have organised things better . . . . I just wasn’t thinking clearly tonight” (*The Unconsoled* 62). His ongoing lack of schedule does not ensure a more organized future.

Even if one takes an author’s interviews about his work with a grain of salt, Ishiguro’s responses to questions about *The Unconsoled* can shed some light on our understanding of the novel. Ishiguro has said that after the first three novels, he wanted to go in a different direction: “There’s another side of my writing self that I need to explore: the messy, chaotic, undisciplined side” (Swift 41), perhaps in the direction of Salman Rushdie (a contemporary with whom he is contrasted), or Dostoyevsky whom he claims to “revere”. Having written under the influence of Chekhov, whom he also “revere[s]” (Kelman 50), Ishiguro said that he wanted to avoid the cowardice of repeating elements for which he had been praised, and to “write something very messy and jagged and brilliantly imperfect, in the way Dostoyevsky has done” (Kelman 50).
The Unconsoled is unquestionably a new direction, and it certainly is chaotic. It appears to be uncharacteristic of the exquisite, restrained, sensitive, ‘Japanese’ Ishiguro the reader assumes they know. Ishiguro said he finds it interesting how his work is analyzed; that he came to “an uncomfortable realization” about his own “buttoned up stuff” through some analyses of his early novels:

[T]o what extent do you open yourself when you write, take risks, allow in certain things . . . into your consciousness. . . . There came a point when you ask, am I writing about [Stevens’ obsession with control] like this, in a voice like [his], because I am afraid of losing control in the writing process? (Jaggi 112)

[The Unconsoled] is supposed to be a metaphor for the way most of us have lives that we blunder through, pretending we know where we’re going but not really knowing where we’re going. (Oliva 122)

He wanted to write “something that would reflect the uncertainty and chaos I started to feel” (Jaggi 117). Ryder incorporates elements from the author’s own consciousness into his ‘dreamworld’. The fictional world of The Unconsoled is open to random, free-floating elements, some derived from characters in Ishiguro’s first three novels, from Ishiguro’s life, and from the perplexed reader trying to puzzle out the story. The reader begins to inhabit the ‘dreamworld’ with Ryder and Ishiguro. Without a schedule or guidebook, the reader makes guesses from intuition, or their own experience; the story cannot be completed as if it were a jigsaw puzzle – pieces are ill-fitting or missing.

The future expands to encompass Ishiguro the writer, if we consider the principal representatives of the future in The Unconsoled: the musicians Christoff and Brodsky, and Brodsky’s paramour Miss Collins. Among them, they illustrate the major dilemmas for Ryder (which he is not able to understand), and also, I believe, for Ishiguro: whether, or how to, express emotion, empathy, passion, and romance in his work, versus
intellectual analysis. Stevens’ effect on the reader in Remains (and also Etsuko’s and Ono’s in Pale View and Artist) is to evoke strong empathy and sadness, despite the reader knowing the narrators were complicit in making their questionable choices. In The Unconsoled, Ryder has not yet made irrevocable choices. The reader is given confused fragments of potential choices, with some warning signals, but the future is not set. For example, Ryder seems to have ignored is wife and son in his pursuit of professional gain, but Ryder still has time to change direction, if he so chooses. Similarly, Ryder has yet to choose his musical future, although his options are represented by the city’s two chief musicians, Christoff and Brodsky. Ishiguro uses Ryder’s musical options as metaphors to represent identity in a broader sense than merely modern versus romantic musical styles. What Ishiguro depicts are potential identities for Ryder and the reader (and for himself?), contrasting cool analysis with emotional engagement, and avoiding the extremes of cold or maudlin.

Brodsky was the official musician of that imagined unnamed city for many years in the past. One could imagine the city as the writer Ishiguro’s mind. Brodsky represents emotion (its power and its dangers), and he believes in his love for Miss Collins.

Someone plays an old recording of Brodsky conducting:

Within minutes the music had cast a spell over us all, had lulled us into a deeply tranquil mood. Some of us had tears in our eyes. We realized we were listening to something we had so sorely missed over the years [after Brodsky’s downfall]. Suddenly it seemed more incomprehensible than ever that we should have come to celebrate someone like Mr. Christoff [Brodsky’s successor]. Here we were, listening to true music again. The work of a conductor not only immensely gifted, but who shared our values. (The Unconsoled 113)

But Brodsky became obsessed with an old ‘wound’ (from past trauma) and turns to drink.

The city replaces him with Mr. Christoff. However, “perhaps [Christoff’s]
performance[s] had been a little functional. . . . There was certain dryness to it all. . . . ‘[C]old’ was the word that had sprung to . . . mind” (The Unconsoled 101-2). With Christoff at the helm, a city father laments: “Why don’t we resign ourselves to being just another cold, lonely city” (The Unconsoled 107)? Christoff, of course, has his own defense for his music and claims the populace is too ignorant to understand it:

When I first came here, [the people] were crying out for precisely [Christoff’s music]. For some ordering, for a system they could comprehend. The people here, they were out of their depth, things were breaking down. People were afraid, they felt things slipping out of their control [with Brodsky’s music]. (The Unconsoled 190)

But the city fathers have decided to rehabilitate Brodsky, and summon Ryder to inaugurate the city’s cultural renewal with a recital, lecture, and concert on ‘Thursday night’. “That passion, that fine vision . . . it’s all been waiting somewhere deep inside [Brodsky]” (The Unconsoled 114). Ryder’s job will be to introduce Brodsky, and a city father predicts:

When you finish speaking, no one in this city will ever again look at Mr Brodsky and see the shabby old drunk they once did”. (The Unconsoled 115)

Ryder’s response to his (finally clarified) mission on returning to his hotel room that evening is characteristic:

An intense surge of weariness came over me, so that it was virtually all I could do to stagger back to my bed and collapse on top of it, sinking at once into a deep sleep. (The Unconsoled 116)

However the writer Ishiguro must write on (just as Ryder keeps on traveling from city to city). On Thursday afternoon, Ryder thinks a little about the evening speech yet to be written. He (Ishiguro?) weighs two opposite directions for the speech:

The first was: ‘My name over the years has tended to be associated with certain qualities. A meticulous attention to detail. Precision in
performance. The tight control of dynamics’. . . . The alternative was to strike a more obviously farcical note from the start. (*The Unconsoled* 136)

Ryder is expressing a writer’s dilemma, but the reader can step back (since Ryder makes no conscious choices), and see the dilemma as belonging to the writer Ishiguro. Ishiguro chooses to present the disparate elements of the dilemmas with their possible conclusions: Sophie’s and Ryder’s troubled relationship dramatized by Miss Collins and Brodsky failures; Brodsky’s overwrought passion and obsession with his wound failing once again; the deaths of Bruno the dog and Gustav sliding from pathos into maudlin farce; Mr Christoff’s cold technique offering no salvation; Ryder (the writer) exhausted trying to reconcile and choose. Ishiguro could be voicing his own thoughts with Ryder’s words to Miss Collins (who is offering to help Ryder with his confusion):

> [T]he world seems full of one sort or another, who are in fact remarkable only for a colossal inability to organize their lives. (*The Unconsoled* 146)

Miss Collins also expresses fear of the future – “[I]t’s too late . . . to put the terrible years behind us” (*The Unconsoled* 277); and the futility of trying to recapture the past – “Some things . . . are best forgotten”, she tells Brodsky (*The Unconsoled* 326). The choices one makes in the past and present set the future course. Miss Collins denied love; Brodsky drank away his talent to move people. What course should Ryder set (if he could wake up)? Ultimately, where will Ishiguro take his writing?

The result of Ryder’s lost schedule is that Ryder appears to have no center of consciousness to plan, remember, integrate, record, relate, or reconcile his stories (they are plural rather than unified), and the reader has no emotional guide to identify who

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3It is interesting to think of *A Pale View of Hill*, *An Artist of the Floating World*, and *The Remains of the Day*, as belonging to Ryder’s “meticulous” category, and *The Unconsoled* as farcical. But in addition, the first three novels cast an emotional spell over the reader, whereas *The Unconsoled* evokes an analytical response.
Ryder is. A reader’s ‘consolation’ in reading may be said to involve empathy with a novel’s central character, satisfaction in being a step ahead of the protagonist, perhaps in being surprised by a narrator’s unexpected understanding or change of heart; or perhaps the reader’s experience of catharsis in following a traumatic or tragic story to the end. In The Unconsoled, Ishiguro has not given us a narrator who provides us with any of these ‘consolations’.

David James describes consolation as different from mere sentimentality or comfort. With Ishiguro’s early narrators (although James’ example is Kathy H in Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go), the narrator:

Entices us to feel temporarily consoled, not because we identify with [the narrator’s] situation . . . but because we can sympathize with the hope of finding momentary solace against the odds – of recognizing when it can be more important to care about mental refuge than to critique its supposed fallacy. (James 2016, 498)

Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens express hope in their unreliable narratives. They see themselves as they hope to be seen. Without the courage of a schedule, Ryder appears to have no hopes. The reader will seek to supply the hopes and consolation.

Nor does Ryder change over the course of the novel. Here he apologizes to his son, Boris, for failing to teach him how to perform a certain task:

‘I should have organized things better,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry. I . . . I just wasn’t thinking clearly tonight. It was so busy earlier on. But look, I promise we’ll make it up tomorrow. We can do all kinds of things tomorrow. . . . What do you say?’ (The Unconsoled 62)

Tomorrow, of course, will be a repeat of today.

Ryder cannot remember his own shame as a child, for failing to meet his parent’s expectations – and he never remembers during the novel. The young pianist, Stephan, appears to appropriate what Ryder cannot; Ryder’s shame comes at him repeatedly in the
novel in Stephan’s voice, but is never reconciled in Ryder’s consciousness. Stephan’s speaks of his early music lessons:

‘Things really went well until . . . well, until when I was ten years old’ . . . . I’m ashamed to admit this . . . [b]ut when I was ten, well, I just stopped practicing’ . . . . This is awfully embarrassing, it’s like someone else I’m talking about . . . . Anyway, it all ended rather badly.’ (The Unconsoled 72)

Stephan is talking about someone else. To write of Ryder’s consciousness is misleading. He stumbles through the novel unconscious, or at best semi-conscious. Ryder appropriates supporting characters like Stephan to provide schedules for his life, but the many conflicting characters provide conflicting schedules that are not harmonized in a single schedule. Ryder does not recognize Stephan’s memory as his own:

I realise it’s none of my business. . . . My advice to you would be to try and enjoy your playing as much as you can, drawing satisfaction and meaning from it regardless of [your parents]. (The Unconsoled 71)

The advice, which may be for himself, hangs out there un-interpreted by Ryder.

The last scene in The Unconsoled offers no reconciliation. Running after Sophie and Boris following the disaster of ‘Thursday night’, they all board a tram. Ryder is rebuffed by his wife. Boris cries “We’ve got to keep together,” but for Sophie “He’ll never be one of us. You’ve got to understand that, Boris. He’ll never love you like a real father” (The Unconsoled 532). Ryder takes a seat on the tram as his wife and son leave. There is an “enticing” breakfast buffet being served on the tram, and Ryder fills his plate. A worker begins a conversation, and:

[Ryder] began to picture myself . . . exchanging pleasant talk with the electrician,” who was “obviously in no hurry to get off the tram. . . [F]or a long time to come [w]e would go on sitting there together”. And with the tram running a continuous circuit. . . . Then, as the tram came to a halt . . . I would disembark, secure in the knowledge that I could look forward to Helsinki with pride and confidence”. (The Unconsoled 534-5)
The reader knows of course that Ryder remains in his dreamworld, and that Helsinki will be a repeat of wherever he is now. Ryder’s imagined future resembles Stevens’ last scene (where he thinks he might master the art of banter in the future), but Ryder experiences no earlier scene of a kind of emotional reckoning such as Stevens’ Cornwall encounter with Miss Kenton. Like the tram, Ryder’s life is on a continuous circuit, with no hope of consolation beyond a good breakfast and comfortable chat. But the themes in Ryder’s choices (despite his inability to choose) remain with the reader. *The Unconsoled* is about love, ambition, and memory (as always with Ishiguro). It is also about the choice of mind versus heart in an artist’s work. The reader cannot know, but perhaps *The Unconsoled* is also about mind versus heart in the author; and that struggle does evoke empathy in the reader for Ishiguro, if not for Ryder. The role of living one’s life means writing one’s own schedule, creating one’s own story. The reader is also identifying with the act of writing. Ryder’s true story cannot be uncovered, but we all share with him the same confusion and disorientation in telling/writing our life stories.
Chapter IV
A Detective and Orphan (When We Were Orphans)

When Ishiguro breaks away from a single center of consciousness and narration with The Unconsoled, and upsets conventional space and time in the novel, the reader may reassess the first three narrators in Pale View, Artist, and Remains. We might ask if the ‘realistic’ portrayal of Japan and the post-World War II atmosphere is more imaginary than at first reading; or be more likely to see the narrators’ stories as explorations of the author’s fears for his own future. As noted earlier, Ishiguro himself connected his personal fears to his first three narrators. Still, Ishiguro’s first three novels mainly appear to be psychological explorations of trauma, memory, and reconciliation centered on the individual. With Ryder, in The Unconsoled, the narrator’s memory is untethered to an organized consciousness, and the center of consciousness moves outside the individual, even outside the novel, to the writer and the reader as writer. The writer provides memory fragments from many sources, and the reader tries to provide an organizing center of consciousness (or ‘schedule’).

In When We Were Orphans (2000), Ishiguro creates a narrator named Christopher Banks who mixes tight individual control and ‘scheduling’ (reminiscent of the butler Stevens) with roles that serve as metaphors. Ishiguro draws the reader in as witness to Christopher’s first-person story, but at the same time signals to the reader that Christopher represents a class of people beyond himself. In fact, Christopher represents all people. Ishiguro did state in an interview about Remains that we are all butlers (and
therefore that Stevens’ story is universal), but the voice and situation and details of Stevens’ narration are so sensitively portrayed that the reader takes Stevens’ story first as an individual ‘confession’ and as one of memory retrieval and reconciliation. We feel empathy for Stevens’ situation: Yes, this can happen to someone; whereas with Christopher, we are led to consider: Yes, this happens to us all. Ishiguro leads the reader away from the role of mere witness, or the role of ‘scheduler’. Christopher’s portrayal moves in a more abstract direction towards symbols. As Ishiguro said in 1990, discussing *The Remains of the Day*:

> [M]y overall aim wasn’t confined to British lessons for British people because it’s a mythical landscape which is supposed to work at a metaphorical level. . . . Yet this is a problem I’ve . . . had . . . throughout my three books. . . . this whole question about how to make a particular setting actually take off into the realm of metaphors so that people don’t think it is just about Japan or Britain . . . but to take off as metaphor and parable. . . . [O]ne of the joys of fiction is that you are actually saying things that are universal . . . . (Vorda and Herzinger 75)

Ishiguro’s use of parable is much more obvious to the reader in *Orphans*.

Christopher is a young Englishman in London in 1930 when the novel opens. He is remembering his past from alternating viewpoints of different ‘presents’. On one level, Christopher is the center of consciousness. Time and place shift in the novel, but Christopher appears to be the center as he recounts memories of his Shanghai boyhood, of coming to London in 1923 at the age of 9, of back-and-forth travels between Shanghai and London during the 1930s as he investigates the strange circumstances of his parents’ disappearance in the past, alternating with ‘present day’ 1930s London. In the last chapter, set in London in 1958, an aging Christopher concludes the novel by recounting his recent trip to Hong Kong (still searching for his mother), and a summing up of his life’s story. Christopher’s memory unfolds in fragments, and he is a not-completely-
reliable narrator, à la Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens. But unlike these three, he really is trying to figure out “how he got here”, and has faith in logic and order as a means to do so.

Christopher’s principal motivation in life, as he tells it, is to be a grand detective (on the order of Sherlock Holmes or Charlie Chan); he will uncover truth through inspection, deduction, and sheer determination. Christopher ‘schedules’ his life and memories around his great detective identity. The 1930s, the British background, Shanghai, and allusions to the Chinese drug trade lend a quaint atmosphere to Orphans, encouraging the reader to expect Christopher’s story to be a traditional British detective novel. The reader is also led to expect that the British colonial rule will be benign, and that racial stereotypes will be true.\(^4\) Sketched in by Ishiguro to fit a cozy British detective novel, the reader fills in the type with their expectations of the detective novel genre. We know the journey and the ending from the beginning: crime will be solved, evil will be conquered; all will be well; the omniscient detective will win the day. The reader is cued to see Christopher as a literary type. As a child in Shanghai he creates a game of the great detective with his friend, Akira, because he wants to find his parents, and he never lets go. As a schoolboy in England, his detective fantasy-life continues:

I would often enact again, in my imagination, all our old detective dramas in just the way Akira and I had always done. (Paine 137)

On his fourteenth birthday, his public school friends give him a magnifying glass as a birthday present, and Christopher’s professional path is set. Ishiguro gives us the metaphor of the great classic detectives, from Sherlock Holmes of the 1880s, through the 1880s,

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\(^4\) Critics have noted a pattern of racism in the Sherlock Holmes stories. Non-whites (or whites returning home from the British colonies) are associated with evil, danger, deformity, or degeneracy (Siddiqi). Or there is, for example, the “sallow Malay” who offers an opium pipe to Watson in Doyle’s “The Man with the Twisted Lip” (Doyle 2).
early 1950s – a period that “coincides . . . with the peak and downfall of the British Empire” – to develop Christopher’s character (Sönmez 80):

> [What] starts in childish make-believe games, is deepened with his needs to regain his family and to feel in control when he has been rendered unbearably vulnerable [- he has been orphaned -], and then grows into a grander and more publicly acceptable mission ‘to root out single-handedly all the evil in the world’ (Orphans 16), ‘to combat evil – in particular evil of the insidious, furtive kind’. (Orphans 21)

(Sönmez 80)

What better metaphor to symbolize grandiose goals that combine righting the wrongs of the world with saving one’s parents than the classic detective (at least for the English-speaking world)?

Christopher was raised in the International Settlement of Shanghai, where his father worked for a British trading company, and his mother volunteered with a group trying to end the Shanghai drug trade. We learn that ‘benign British’ colonial trading companies are facilitating the ‘evil Chinese’ drug trade, and Christopher’s childhood paradise may not be what it seemed to him. His best friend Akira is Japanese. His parents go missing under mysterious circumstances, and Christopher channels his fear and grief into the ongoing detective game with Akira. The hero, Christopher as a great detective, will find and rescue his parents. The reader expects the investigation to be successful (as they always are for the classic detective), and for Christopher to ultimately return his family back to ‘the way it was’.

Ishiguro opens the story to myth in additional ways. The very name of the novel, When We Were Orphans, signals myth: “We” were orphans (the reader and Ishiguro the writer, as well Christopher and the two other orphans in the novel). Christopher never sums up his story as ‘I used to be an orphan (but now I am not). The sense of orphan-
hood as metaphor comes from the reader’s interpretation; the title itself invites this interpretation. In another sense, *When We Were Orphans* suggests A.A. Milne’s classic children’s book *When We Were Very Young*, with its stories of Christopher Robin and Winnie-the-Pooh. Many readers all over the world will have had that book read to them by their parents. The allusion hints at childhood as an idealized paradise, when we were innocent, and protected by parents. “When we were young” is precisely one of the metaphors or myths of Ishiguro’s novel – all of us were children once, and all of us know the common fantasies of childhood: fear of being abandoned by parents, and then the grandiose and seductive fantasy of saving them/the family/the world. When we (the reader) were young, along with Christopher:

> I was already beginning to appreciate for the first time the scale of responsibility that befalls a detective. . . . I had always understood, of course, that the task of rooting out evil . . . is a crucial and solemn undertaking. (*Orphans* 31)

Along with the myth of the comforting British detective novel, where a successful solution to a case is a foregone conclusion (Machinal), Ishiguro has incorporated the universal myth of childish omnipotence. Christopher truly plays his role as Christopher Robin, ‘scheduling’ his life as a child would, and tracking down evil with a magnifying glass as Sherlock Holmes would. Touches such as Christopher’s London address (14b Bedford Gardens), and the names of his cases (the ‘Studley Grange business’, for example), allude to Sherlock Holmes’ famous 221B Baker Street lodgings, and Agatha Christie’s mysteries, such as *The Affair at Styles* (Sönmez 82). They also poke fun at his pretentions, although, like Ishiguro’s butler Stevens, Christopher takes himself seriously. Further (slyly), there is Christopher’s childhood nickname, Puffin. Puffin Books is the children’s imprint for the British publisher of Penguin Books. Since the 1960s it has been
among the largest publishers of children's books in the UK and much of the English-speaking world (Wikipedia). Christopher as Christopher Robin (and one could argue as Puffin), represents ‘Every Child’ living in a sheltered world.

Christopher admits in moments of clarity, as do Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens, that his memories may at times mislead the reader (and himself). When he reminisces about his childhood home in Shanghai:

If I close my eyes a moment, I am able to bring back that picture . . . : the carefully tended “English” lawn, the shadows cast by the row of elms . . . the house itself, a huge white edifice with numerous wings and trellised balconies. I suspect this memory . . . is very much a child’s vision . . . .

(Orphans 53)

In another example of abstraction, Ishiguro’s handling of national identities highlights the relativity of identity, rather than the characteristics of any specific national identity. National identity is treated as a metaphor for the universal desire to belong to a group. The particular group is not important. Christopher’s home in the International Settlement of Shanghai forms his first national identity – he and his friend Akira define themselves as “international”. The Settlement is protected, ideal, and good. Outside, in contrast, the Chinese section of Shanghai is seen as dirty, dangerous, alien, and evil. This is where the Chinese drug trade is carried on. (In reality, the drug trade, of course, is carried on right under Christopher’s nose in his safe ‘International’ / ‘English’ family home.) Adding complexity, Akira’s view of Christopher’s parents’ silence towards one another is that “this was on account of [Christopher] not behaving sufficiently like an Englishman” (Orphans 76). (Ironically, his upright, moral, very ‘English’ mother, however, will end up as the concubine of a Chinese drug trafficker, and it is ambiguous whether she is a victim or somehow complicit in her fate. Christopher will not bring her
back to be buried on English soil after her death, acknowledging that in some sense she chose her life in the Far East.) So, what does it mean to be ‘English’ or ‘Chinese’?) Of course, Christopher’s perception of his parents’ arguments is also an example of a sense of childish omnipotence – the child is responsible for everything that occurs in his parents’ lives. Interestingly, adults are blamed for national chauvinism. But we have heard Christopher unreliable narrate his experiences at a British boarding school, where he himself desperately wanted to be seen as stiff-upper-lip English enough. A school chum later reveals to him that he had been “such an odd bird at school” (Orphans 7). But Ishiguro portrays the desire to fit in, to be part of a group, as a universal wish. When Akira is sent to Japan for a period of time, Akira realizes that his parents want him to be more Japanese. When Christopher asks his Uncle Philip how he might become more English, Uncle Philip describes Ishiguro’s metaphor of ‘national identity’ as relative:

> Well, it’s true, out here, you’re growing up with a lot of different sorts . . . Chinese, French, Germans, American, what have you. It’d be no wonder if you grew up a bit of a mongrel. . . . You know what I think, Puffin? I think it would be no bad thing if boys like you all grew up with a bit of everything. We might all treat each other a good deal better then. Be less of these wars for one thing. . . . Why not become a mongrel? It’s healthy. (Orphans 80)

Christopher is worried that if he followed this advice, everything would “scatter”, and Uncle Philip expresses an adult thought (possibly Ishiguro’s own):

> You might be right. . . . People need to feel they belong. To a nation, to a face. Otherwise . . . [t]his civilization of ours, perhaps it’ll just collapse. And everything scatter, as you put it. He sighed, as though I had just defeated him in an argument. (Orphans 80)

Ishiguro’s genius is to objectify the question of national identity, but at the same time to touch the reader with a little boy’s very real terror:
“But if I . . . [became a mongrel of races], everything might . . . Like that blind there . . . if the twine broke. Everything might scatter.” (Orphans 80)

After nightmarish distortions, stereotypical criminals, and the revelation of Christopher’s mother’s extraordinary fate (she did not die and leave Christopher an orphan; she was sold to a Chinese warlord by Christopher’s ‘Uncle’ Philip, and finally found by Christopher to be living in a Hong Kong nursing home), Ishiguro can still move the reader to sorrow for an aging Christopher, and curiosity for his future. Ishiguro has depicted Christopher as a fictional Christopher Robin, a cartoonish Sherlock Holmes, and also as an empathetic narrator.

Puffin’s childish world of certitudes and dualistic thinking (good-versus-evil, black-versus-white, or detective-versus-criminal) is contrasted with Uncle Philip’s sophisticated and cynical (or mature and realistic) viewpoint. Philip’s murky character (the reader is never clear who he is) becomes a metaphor for the grownup world. In an irony at the end of the novel, Christopher learns that Uncle Philip is the reason for his mother’s disappearance (he sold her to the Chinese warlord!). But this ‘evil’ deed served to fulfill Uncle Philip’s promise to Christopher’s mother to take care of Christopher in England – the money purchased Puffin’s (very British) upbringing and education in England. Or was the sale a punishment because she spurned him as a lover? Later, Uncle Philip (is he really an uncle) is revealed to be working for the British government and for the communist Chinese, but who really is the good guy and the bad guy in the grown-up world? In a twist on the classic murder mystery, the revelation of the mystery of Christopher’s missing parents takes place in an enclosed room (Uncle Philip’s study), but with the criminal (Uncle Philip) explaining everything, rather than the detective (Sönmez 83).
Christopher also symbolizes orphans, which Ishiguro defines to express a universally shared experience. The reader brings to the figure of the orphan the expectation of a “Romantic waif” (Auerbach 395) who will triumph over adversity through grit and charm; in the end, the orphan turns the tables, rights the wrongs, and wins the reward (Brontë’s Jane Eyre, or Dickens’ Oliver Twist and David Copperfield, as notable examples). The title When We Were Orphans includes We, as previously mentioned. With a twist, when both of Christopher’s parents disappear, Ishiguro describes Christopher as refusing to believe he is an orphan. First as a game and later as a profession, he believes he will find his lost parents; he tightly ‘schedules’ and plans for his identity as a detective. Christopher’s loss and grief are repressed. He is sent to England because there is no one to take care of him in Shanghai. The authorities tell him:

So then, Christopher. It’s all decided . . . [the Colonel has] most kindly agreed to see you safe to England . . . . My poor lad. First your father. Now your mother. Must feel like the whole world’s collapsed around your ears. . . . [B]e brave. You’ll soon pick up the pieces again. (Orphans 26)

Christopher responds:

It’s awfully kind of you, sir . . . . But if you don’t mind, sir, I think I oughtn’t to go to England just now . . . . Because you see, sir, the detectives are working extremely hard to find my mother and father . . . . I think they’re bound to find them very soon . . . . They’re the very best detectives. (Orphans 27)

When Christopher reminisces with the Colonel many years later about his voyage to England, he finds himself “steadily more irritated” that the Colonel remembers Christopher as “withdrawn and moody, liable to burst into tears at the slightest thing”. On the contrary, Christopher recalls:

According to my own, quite clear memory, I adapted very ably to the changed realities of my circumstances. . . . [F]ar from being miserable on that voyage, I was positively excited about life aboard the ship, as well as by the prospect of the future that lay before me. (Orphans 28)
There is only one slip by Christopher when the colonel comforts him: “[A]fter all, you’re going to England. You’re going home” *(Orphans 29)*:

I . . . deeply resented the colonel’s words. . . . [T]he city steadily receding before me contained all I knew. Above all, my parents were still there [in Shanghai]. . . . I wonder[ed] if even now I might catch sight of my mother – or even my father – running on to the quay, waving and shouting for me to return. But I was conscious even then that such a hope was no more than a childish indulgence. *(Orphans 30)*

Very much like Stevens in *Remains*, Christopher occasionally admits his true emotions, but like Stevens, he quickly reverts to his controlled ‘schedule’.

Growing up in England, Christopher’s schoolmates see him as a wounded orphan (the ‘odd bird’), but Christopher’s “own memory is that I blended perfectly into English school life”, easily adapting with a “bold spirit” the English schoolboy mannerisms *(Orphans 7)*. Christopher thinks he successfully hides his all-consuming interest in detection, but his schoolmates give him a magnifying glass for his fourteenth birthday! Christopher’s *emotional* reality is that he is orphaned and alone (the outside world recognizes this), but he will not identify himself as an orphan. His quest to find his parents will prove he is not an orphan.

Christopher meets Sarah Hemmings, the second orphan in the novel, while he is a student at Cambridge. He is attracted to her, but she dismisses him. Typically, Christopher consoles himself that he is grateful to be rebuffed, and characterizes his romantic interest in Sarah as simply social climbing:

*[The incident of dismissal] had, after all, brought home to me how easy it was to become distracted from one’s most cherished goals. My intention was to combat evil . . . and as such had little to do with courting popularity within social circles. *(Orphans 22)*


Sarah and Christopher eventually form a friendship, and she casually mentions “If my parents were alive today . . .” (*Orphans* 48). When Christopher asks, “Did you lose your parents long ago?,” she responds, “It seems like forever. But in another way, they’re always with me” (*Orphans* 49-50). Sarah and Christopher are potential soul mates, and later in the novel Sarah invites him to leave Shanghai and live happily-ever-after with her in Macao. Christopher reacts:

> I suppose I was surprised when I heard her utter these words; but what I remember now, overwhelming anything else, was an almost tangible sense of relief. Indeed, for a second or two I experienced the sort of giddiness one might when coming suddenly out into the light and fresh air after being trapped a long time in some dark chamber . . . . [S]omething that brought me a kind of dispensation I have never dared hope for. (*Orphans* 226-7)

Sarah has offered a chance for Christopher to accept that he is orphaned, that he has found another orphan with whom to build a life, and to abandon the impossible task of finding his parents and rebuilding the paradise of his perfect (imagined) childhood. Sarah sees this opportunity as a chance to:

> [Put aside] all these years looking for something, a sort of trophy I’d get only if I really, really did enough to deserve it. But I don’t want it any more, I want something else now, something warm and sheltering. . . . I think it’s what you should want too. (*Orphans* 227)

“Very well,” says Christopher. “As soon as I said this, I could feel a massive weight lifting off me” (*Orphans* 228). But Christopher stands up Sarah on the day of their departure, to chase yet another clue in the search for his parents. He is not ready to accept an identity of orphan, implied by running off with one.

The third orphan in the novel is Jennifer, Christopher’s ward. Sarah mirrors Christopher’s compulsive striving (she too was seeking a ‘sort of trophy . . . if I . . . did enough to deserve it’) (*Orphans* 137). Jennifer mirrors Christopher’s stoic refusal to
recognize his loss. She was orphaned at a young age, like Christopher. Christopher notices how “self-possessed” she appeared to “almost everyone . . . “for one who had experienced such a tragedy” of losing both parents (Orphans 139). Self-possession is Christopher’s goal for himself. But later, Christopher seeks to project his grief onto Jennifer, encouraging her to express what he represses. When her trunk with all her worldly possessions seems to be lost, he tells her:

That was rotten luck about your things. You’ve taken it awfully well, but it must have been a terrible shock . . . I think you’re awfully brave. But there’s no need, you know, to put up a show . . . If you want to let your guard down a bit, you should do so. I’m not going to let on to anyone . . . . (Orphans 140)

Yet Christopher “deserts her” in London (Orphans 141), to seek his parents in Shanghai. He justifies his choice:

After all, how will Jennifer ever be able to love and respect a guardian who she knew had turned away from his most solemn duty . . . Don’t you see how very urgent things have got? The growing turmoil all over the world? I have to go! (Orphans 155)

 Seamlessly, Christopher’s mission expands to saving the world, reminiscent of Ryder in The Unconsoled. In self-delusion, Christopher expects “[Jennifer] will be truly glad I rose to the challenge of my responsibilities” (Orphans 159). Christopher then barely thinks of Jennifer for most of the novel, but years later when he is asked to run away to Macao with Sarah, he at first uses Jennifer as an excuse to deny Sarah: “You see, there’s Jennifer . . . Even now, she’ll be waiting for me” (Orphans 228). When Sarah says that all three of them can live together in Macao, Christopher agrees. But he stands up Sarah (and Jennifer).

It is only at the very end of Orphans that Christopher may have come to some acceptance of his orphan-hood, but the reader is not really sure where Christopher stands.
He tells Jennifer that he still sees in her the same spirit as when she was a little girl: “The world hasn’t changed you as much as you think. . . . It just gave you a shock, that’s all” (*Orphans* 330). Jennifer has an idea that perhaps she and “Uncle” Christopher can all live together in the country, with her future husband and “three, no four children” (*Orphans* 332). Jennifer offers the image of a family unit as “closure” for all three orphans (she even includes Sarah), a classic ending where an orphan finally reclaims their “rightful” place in the world. But Christopher also appears sad and full of regret at the novel’s end, like Stevens: “I should have done more for you, Jenny, I’m sorry” (*Orphans* 330). He resembles Ryder telling Boris that he should have planned things better. Christopher finds himself “cheered” by Jennifer’s “half-joking…” fantasy for the future as he “drifted through those grey days in London” (*Orphans* 332), but in hearing news of Sarah’s present “happiness and contentment” from a letter she writes to him, he thinks it “never quite ring[s] true” (*Orphans* 333). Stevens will work on his bantering skills in what remains of the day. Christopher’s final thoughts are:

> But for those like us, our fate is to face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadows of vanished parents. There is nothing for it but to try and see through our missions to the end, as best we can . . . . (*Orphans* 335-6)

However, in addition to representing (and undercutting) childhood paradise, orphans, classic detectives, ‘benign’ English colonialism, internationalism to overcome racism, and the forces of ‘good’, Christopher is also an amusing, engaging, and moving narrator. In *Orphans*, Ishiguro seems to ‘correct’ the alienating chaos that Ryder creates in *The Unconsoled*. He gives the reader some consolation by making Christopher more approachable and recognizable than Ryder. With the British detective novel premise, the reader is promised a familiar, reassuring read – cozy and predictable. Ishiguro throws in
some exotic locales for spice, and suggests the seductive atmosphere of 1930s film-noir. He also raises the reader’s hopes (engaging their empathy), as we champion Christopher’s efforts. As with *The Unconsoled*, some later war episodes set in Shanghai disrupt time and space for the reader, creating a dreamworld for parts of *Orphans*. But the reader maintains a sense that this novel will be comforting, and that a ‘real’ Christopher lurks behind the chaos. ‘Reality’ does return at the end (in the sense of logic and expectations of time and space) with *Orphan’s* closing pages set almost twenty years after the war in Shanghai. Despite Christopher’s role as metaphor for universal childhood and orphan-hood, his final scene is as moving as Stevens sitting by the pier in growing dusk, taking stock of what remains of life. Christopher reconciles himself to broken (impossible) childish dreams. His world is greatly diminished from his earlier grandiose goals:

> There is nothing for it but to try and see through our missions to the end, as best we can . . . . I do not wish to appear smug; but drifting through my days here in London, I believe I can indeed own up to a certain contentment. I enjoy my walks in the parks, I visit the galleries; and increasingly of late, I have come to take a foolish pride in sifting through old newspaper reports of my cases in the Reading Room at the British Museum. (*Orphans* 336)

But differently than Stevens, Christopher is not so broken. He comes through his experiences with more mature understanding of growing up. Of his mother, he says:

> I realized she’d never ceased to love me . . . . All she’d ever wanted was for me to have a good life. . . . [A]ll the rest of it, all my trying to find her, trying to save the world from ruin, that wouldn’t have made any difference either way. . . . She said there was nothing to forgive. (*Orphans* 328)

Before his last meeting with Uncle Philip, Christopher converses with a Japanese colonel. The colonel comments on Christopher’s story of his improbable encounter with Akira as a soldier among the ruins of Shanghai:
Christopher: I thought he was a friend of mine from my childhood. But now, I’m not so certain. I’m beginning to see now, many things aren’t as I supposed.

Colonel: Our childhood seems so far away now. . . . Our childhood becomes like a foreign land once we have grown.

Christopher: Well, Colonel, it’s hardly a foreign land to me. In many ways, it’s where I’ve continued to live all my life. It’s only now I’ve started to make my journey from it.

(Orphans 297)

Christopher’s future also holds more promise than Stevens’ goal to learn to banter better. If he accepts the universal orphan-hood of growing up, and his kinship with orphans, he perhaps may set up house in the country with his ward, Jennifer, even though he ran away from Sarah, the second orphan of the novel. Ryder, in contrast, has no final scene of (almost) self-revelation and reconciliation.

Overlaying Christopher’s individual story is Ishiguro’s metaphor of universal orphan-hood, which has been made more explicit than the butler of Remains. The butler as metaphor (‘we are all in some sense butlers’) becomes clear in Ishiguro’s interviews, but is less clear within the novel. In Orphans, however, there are two centers of consciousness. On the one hand, Christopher Banks narrates his story as a believable individual, drawing the reader in as witness to understand and empathize; he ‘schedules’ the story around his all-consuming drive to be a great detective, to solve the mystery of his parents’ disappearance, and to save the world. The professional detective cover lures and charms the reader, and also serves as camouflage for a while for Ishiguro’s metaphor. Christopher becomes a parody of a detective (peering at a dead war victim with a magnifying glass (Orphans 291); or pausing in the midst of a battle to “notice . . . my light flannel suit was now almost covered in dust and grime” (Orphans 261). On the other
hand, the metaphor is a more direct, less hidden one than in Ishiguro’s four earlier novels. In 1998, Ishiguro demurred when categorized as a ‘Japanese’ writer (“Don’t we all feel like this?”) (Krider 129). In 2000 with *Orphans*, his narrator overtly explores the relativity of identity, and Christopher cannot be categorized as an ‘Englishman’, or as any nationality. The reader is distanced from a purely empathetic response to Christopher by Christopher’s functions as metaphor. The reader responds analytically to the meaning of the metaphors. Christopher stands for ‘Every Man’, something more than himself. In *Orphans*, Ishiguro handles the universality of his themes more formally and openly. His skill in drawing empathy towards his narrators from his readers is more muted, and he plays more with abstract metaphors that demand analysis from his readers. It is more obvious that one of Ishiguro’s main themes across all his novels is ‘Don’t we all feel this way’? In *Hills, Artist, and Remains*, the reader is primarily tethered to the narrator’s consciousness. In *The Unconsoled*, the reader is tethered to the narrator and the Writer’s unconscious. In *Orphans*, the reader is charmed by the narrator’s consciousness, but is also directed towards metaphoric meanings behind Christopher’s story.

In the chaotic dreamworld of war towards the end of the novel, set in 1937 Shanghai, the metaphors are portrayed as merging in Christopher’s mind. The ending of childhood collapses into war and the ending of civilization. Having returned to Shanghai, still on his mission to find his parents, Christopher walks through rubble:

I . . . had the impression we were moving through not a slum district, but some vast, ruined mansion with endless rooms. . . . [E]very now and then it would occur to me that in among the wreckage beneath our feet lay cherished heirlooms, children’s toys, simple but much-loved items of family life, and I would find myself suddenly overcome with renewed anger towards those who had allowed such a fate to befall so many innocent people. (*Orphans* 258)
When Christopher meets up with a dying Japanese soldier, he is convinced the soldier is his old playmate Akira:

You remember, Akira. All the games we used to play . . . [t]hose are good memories . . . . Those were splendid days . . . . We didn’t know it then . . . just how splendid they were. Children never do . . . . (Orphans 280)

And he strives to maintain his childish optimism as an adult:

After all [he tells Akira], when we were children, when things went wrong, there wasn’t much we could do to help put it right. But . . . [n]ow we’re grown, we can at least put things right. (Orphans 281)

Christopher later contradicts himself:

[A]ll this about how good the world looked when we were boys. Well, it’s a lot of nonsense in a way. It’s just that the adults led us on. One mustn’t get too nostalgic for childhood. (Orphans 282)

Soon after, he and Akira meet a frantic little girl beside her dead mother and brother, and Christopher’s advice to the child is no better than the advice he received when boarding the ship to take him to England as a newly-orphaned boy:

[I]t’s awfully bad luck. But look, you’ve survived, and really, you’ll see, you’ll make a pretty decent show of it if you just . . . if you just keep up your courage . . . . (Orphans 291)

The back and forth nature of Christopher’s feelings toward life shows itself everywhere in Orphans, and is carried through to the novel’s end, when everything will be “resolved” (as we expect in a detective novel) – but not as we and Christopher wish.

There are only fragmented hints of consolation for The Unconsoled. In Orphans, Ishiguro depicts Christopher’s multiple group allegiances and consolations as shared by the reader and by society, and the shattering is not due to Christopher’s guilty actions, but to the nature of the world. The groups universalize the narrator’s world and widen the reader’s challenge. Christopher at first rejects orphan-hood, then rejects Sarah, the second
orphan in the story, but in the end acknowledges his deep emotional connection with Jennifer, the third orphan. The reader moves from empathy to collusion, and then to experiencing recognition of disillusionment as communal orphans.
Chapter V

Conclusion

In summary, there are shared strands of development in Ishiguro’s work across his novels that lead in a similar direction, and that increasingly clarify a vision that was present but shrouded in his early work. Beside the three novels focused on here, I look briefly at his other works, because they, too, develop in the same direction.

All of Ishiguro’s narrators are like us. He notes that his first three are ‘ordinary’, meant to portray “spoiled” lives (Vorda and Huizinga 86-7). Their understandable dreams for escape (Etsuko), honor (Ono), and dignity (Stevens) blindly drive each to make seriously flawed choices. Their stories are self-protective and then begin to crack; the reader is a witness to this process, with a vantage point a few steps ahead of the narrator. In seeming contrast, Ryder performs on an international stage, is world-renowned, and is summoned to perform the role of savior for the cities he visits. His life suggests a rising-star artist on the international scene (perhaps Ishiguro himself?). But rather than emphasize Ryder’s extraordinary qualities, Ishiguro depicts him as another ordinary man with exaggerated pretentions. Ishiguro inflates Stevens’ comical aspirations to grand-butler-dom to the point where Ryder becomes a caricature of pomposity; but he is no savior:

Look, the fact is, people need me. I arrive in a place and more often than not find terrible problems. Deep-seated, seemingly intractable problems, and people are so grateful I’ve come. (*The Unconsoled* 37, cited by Wormwald 235)
Ryder’s bumbling incomprehension and inability to schedule anything is Ishiguro’s focus, rather than any demonstration of being “the world’s first living pianist . . . perhaps the greatest of the century” (The Unconsoled 11). In his Nobel lecture, Ishiguro notes, “I . . . emphasize . . . the small and the private, because essentially that's what my work is about” (Nobel 9). Being “ordinary” and “small” is what we all share.

Christopher Banks has delusions of grandeur similar to Ryder’s, and a string of world-famous crime-solving successes, but Ishiguro portrays him as extraordinarily ordinary by identifying him with Christopher Robin and When We Were Very Young, and has fun with Christopher’s grand-detective illusions. Ryder makes the reader include the writer, Ishiguro, in the narrative; Christopher makes the reader include themselves in the internationally-recognized stereotypes of Christopher Robin and Sherlock Holmes. Both can be included among Ishiguro’s “ordinary” people.

Later, in Never Let Me Go (2005), Ishiguro again seems to expand the boundaries of ordinary, but still with the purpose of exploring what we all share. The clones in this sixth novel are raised by the Hailsham guardians to be ordinary (“as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being” (Never 261). The narrator, Kathy H, is supremely ordinary – warm, engaging, obedient, passive, accepting. She is more humane and appealing than the humans in the novel. Ishiguro surprises the reader out of their expectations for Kathy H’s familiar coming-of-age narrative by making her a clone. The characteristics of her ordinariness are starkly highlighted for the reader by contrasting them with her startling identity as a clone, raised to be an organ donor for humans. The reader is extremely uncomfortable, and provoked into finding a story beyond the one that
Kathy H thinks she is sharing. Again, the reader is forced into participation in the creation process.

Ishiguro seeks ways to seduce the reader into examining their own similarities with his ordinary people, including himself. The butler is not a surprising metaphor for small ordinariness. Christopher as detective, on the other hand, is expected to be a metaphor for omnipotence. What we get in Christopher, however, is an ordinary person determined to solve his life with his detective *persona*, inevitably falling short. As Ishiguro said early in his career (of *Artist*):

> People have actually to deceive themselves to a certain extent to preserve their dignity . . . . [Ono must come to a] certain kind of reconciliation . . . [that] he was just a small ordinary man. (Sexton 32)

As are all his narrators.

A second development across Ishiguro’s novels is an increasingly obvious use of metaphors to illustrate his themes. The first three novels elicit strong emotion from the reader towards his three very ‘real’, individualized narrators Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens. As noted, the narrators elicit empathy, and rely on the reader to unpack (or not) the emotions aroused. However, Ryder is emotionally distanced from the reader. Instead of luring the reader in with a story, we see him assaulted by disparate elements that he cannot bring into even a self-deceptive focus. The reader’s attention is on the disparate elements – random, unexplained, and unconnected to a story or to a believable person. They are examples of elements common to us all in constructing meaning: Ryder with no first name; unnamed cities; wandering characters from earlier Ishiguro novels; musical styles representing emotional choices; demands and memories swirling around; parents, wives, and sons with scarcely any individuality. The reader is more intellectually
challenged than emotionally seduced in engaging with these elements. Emotional engagement, somewhat detached, comes with the recognition that as we examine them, we understand that Ryder/the Writer’s confusion is analogous to our own in our own lives. We understand that Ishiguro is holding up a mirror to us (and to himself), asking us to step into the murky world behind the mirror. The shared emotion is bittersweet; life does not exactly have happy endings.

Christopher Banks’ very identify is cobbled together with stereotypes (classic British detective, Winnie-the-Pooh acolyte, or International citizen, among others). The reader brings all the associations and clichés of the stereotypes to reading Christopher’s narrative, filling in the gaps of Ishiguro’s sketches, lured into participating in fleshing out Christopher’s generic identity. Ishiguro:

Evokes, manipulates . . . and ultimately subverts stereotypes, myths, and generic conventions to create stories with a metaphorical quality which ultimately reveal some deeper and universal truths. (Fricke 34)

The stereotypes serve to:

Make it easy . . . to enter his worlds . . . familiar at first, but turn out to be far more complex than expected. (Fricke 35)

Thirdly, and related to Ishiguro’s increasing construction of his narrators with the use of metaphors, is the reader’s shift from an empathetic response to a more intellectual response. This parallels the shifting location of the center of consciousness in Ishiguro’s novels. Even a flawed, blame-worthy protagonist who is the center of consciousness of a novel (like Stevens in Remains), will capture the reader’s interest and sympathy, despite any judgment we may have of his behavior. In contrast, as Ryder relinquishes responsibility for telling his story, and the center of consciousness shifts to the reader, Ryder extinguishes the kind of empathetic response that Stevens evokes. At the same
time, Ryder’s memories seem to expand beyond the borders of his single consciousness and grow to include those of the writer, Ishiguro. Some of the novel seems to come directly from Ishiguro’s life/consciousness/earlier novels. Ryder is young, an artist, an international traveler, scheduled to talk about his art, and asked by his hosts and audiences to ‘save’ the cities he visits - like Ishiguro? At least superficially, he resembles Ishiguro more than the elderly, reminiscing narrators of a post-World War II era in A Pale View of Hills, An Artist of the Floating World, and The Remains of the Day. The unconsolled Gustav, the heroic porter identifying with his Hungarian Café society of porters, with pride in his profession and dedication to servility, recalls the butler Stevens (The Remains of the Day). Ryder’s son Boris’ drawings of Superman suggest Ono’s mischievous grandson Ichiro (An Artist of the Floating World), with his love of American monster films. Boris’ box of toy footballers is reminiscent of Ryder’s memory fragment early in The Unconsoled when he was “lost within my world of plastic soldiers” (The Unconsoled 16). With the young, neurotic pianist Stephen’s compulsive anxiety to please his parents, or with Brodsky’s endless whining (always “touch[ing his] wound, caress[ing] it” (The Unconsoled 313): Is Ishiguro satirizing his empathetic portrayals of his first three wounded narrators? The reader is asked to make connections and to create – to name a city, to intuit a trauma, to solve the puzzle of Ryder, to weave the fragmented characters into a single, recognizable consciousness – to write Ryder’s story.

In Pale View, Artist, and Remains, the unfolding story is enclosed within a snow globe in the narrator’s mind, with the reader outside. The reader marvels at the exquisiteness of the miniature world, fascinated with the swirling elements inside, but the

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5The toy soldiers may even foreshadow the Celtic and Saxon warriors of The Buried Giant, Ishiguro’s seventh novel (2015).
elements are framed through the narrator’s consciousness. As the narrator becomes compelled to incorporate suppressed memory fragments, the reader is a witness to this process (what Stevens sees, for example, what he remembers, how he interprets his recollections, how he orders them in his diary, and how he almost comes to reconciliation with guilt from his past).

The reader’s response to *The Unconsoled* requires more intellectual effort than Ishiguro’s earlier novels. With Ryder on the verge of dream/sleep/unconsciousness throughout, the consciousness of the novel has shifted from the narrator to the reader. The reader is tasked with narrating trauma, memory, recognition, recovery, and identity. Ishiguro includes the reader in the task of writing, and we identify more with Ishiguro than with Ryder. Judging from some disappointed reception to *The Unconsoled* (“Rorem compared the novel to Chinese water torture, whilst Robert Kiely invoked the fanciful image of Ishiguro as Mozart in a trance at the piano, pounding the same chords again and again without end” [Coughlin 97]), it may be that there was a wish for a repetition of Ishiguro’s earlier style.

*The Unconsoled*, taken together with Ishiguro’s statements about his desire for a new direction in his writing, suggests that Ishiguro is sharing his own consciousness in this novel, while still making the reader the ultimate center of consciousness (the one creating meaning). The reader can place certain of the novel’s disparate identities (Gustav, Ryder’s parents, Boris, Stephan and Stephan’s parents) in the narrator’s past (Ryder as a grandson and son, a child, an adolescent). But because they repeat similar elements from Ishiguro’s earlier works, they might be seen as part of Ishiguro’s past. We cannot know if they are autobiographical, but we can see them as part of his writer’s
toolbox. These are materials that Ishiguro goes back to rework in *The Unconsoled*. (He will continue to rework them in future novels.) In *Pale View, Artist*, and *Remains*, we are focused on the narrator’s consciousness. With *The Unconsoled*, the reader looks across the four novels and asks what is happening with Ishiguro as a writer, and within us. We are directed to the process of writing, rather than to the process of witnessing.

In addition to shifting the center of consciousness and inviting intellectual analysis, Ishiguro increasingly involves the reader in creating the narrator’s story along with the narrator and the author. The reader is less aware that the Japanese settings of *Pale View* and *Artist*, and the English country-manor setting of *Remains* are largely imagined, as Ishiguro reveals in interviews, because of the *sense* of realism he creates. The reader does not have to work to fill in the gaps from their own experiences or memories. But in *The Unconsoled*, the reader fills in names, imagines storylines, provides order, and creates a schedule for Ryder, using Ishiguro’s previous novels, his biography, and the reader’s own life and dreamworlds. With *Christopher Banks*, the reader is less confused about the story, but we color in Christopher’s character out of the stereotypes and clichés that Ishiguro uses to sketch his *Orphan*, and that we share. The reader uses their familiarity with, and expectations of, the stereotypes to help create Christopher.

Ishiguro’s portrayal of group identities orients the reader to Ishiguro’s point of view: that group identities are universally-adopted and relative. The essence of group identity becomes a theme, rather than the details of a particular group or nationality. Although Ishiguro uses specific group stereotypes (British colonists are benign; Chinese residents of Shanghai are drug dealers; the English must be stoic, for example) – Ishiguro’s more significant point is that viewing groups in this way is childish, but persists into adulthood.
Christopher creates a new interim family, his International Settlement, which is “good,” but that group is also mutable and undependable. To believe in a stereotype of a group is to act childishly; to put one’s faith in a group is to risk inevitable disposssession and displacement. When Christopher decides not to bury his mother in her English homeland, but rather in Hong Kong, because the Far East is where she made her life and created a home, the reader shifts to a broader understanding of groups and homelands and identities, along with Christopher. Wanting to find lost parents, or a homeland, or a national identity represents the same human longing, but we are all orphans at heart. As Paine notes:

We begin to see, as Christopher’s story unfolds, how his personal, intensely inward narrative of his attempt to recuperate his lost childhood is embedded in a larger narrative of a search for national, racial, and cultural identity. (Paine 132)

As characters work out their own stories, like Ryder and Christopher, the reader is immersed in the message that everyone is in the process of writing their own story while it happens. Ishiguro describes the gaps he leaves in his fiction (in 1990):

The reason I’m interested in these gaps . . . is because I’m interested in the way people [such as his narrators] can’t face certain things, when they resort to self-deception [about their past]. (Swaim 97)

In his later novels, the gaps can be interpreted more universally, and the reader is challenged to view the creation of identity and meaning as a shared human challenge. The reader understands their participation in creating meaning, and the common flawed ways we go about the process.

Myth and metaphor become unmistakable in Ishiguro’s latest novel, The Buried Giant (2016), where his fictional world has no reality at all. The setting is Arthurian England – a mythical land. The land is inhabited by pixies and dragons; its narrators
(three, instead of one) are Wistan (although "perhaps [this was] not [his] exact or full name" [Giant 4]), a veteran of King Arthur’s battles; Sir Gawain, a knight of King Arthur’s; and a Boatman who ferries people to a strange island. All the settlements in this land “to your eyes . . . would have seemed identical” (Giant 4); little is individualized. Saxon and Celt are interchangeable. Memory and forgetfulness are abstracted into a mist (the dragon’s breath), affecting all people universally. The cultural and religious wars between the Britons and Saxons have no identification with any current wars, except as a metaphor for all war. Reconciliation in Giant is also expressed metaphorically: Wistan and his wife Beatrice’s love for each other stands for “Love” and personal commitment, opposed to “War;” their story is mainly presented abstractly and symbolically, rather than dramatically. Ishiguro does, of course, include emotional scenes, being Ishiguro.

In 1989, Ishiguro told a famous Japanese author, Kenzaburo Oe, that:

> I had no clear role [as an author], no society or country to speak for or write about. Nobody’s history seemed to be my history. (Oe 58)

He set two books in Japan, and wrote the third with the most British of clichés as narrator, a classic English butler. Ryder seems to be a global citizen. The characters in Orphans offer conflicting national identities (English, Canadian, Japanese, Chinese, ‘International’), but are united in the end as orphans, whether literally or figuratively. The reader is torn in their reaction to Kathy H, the protagonist in Never. She is the attractive narrator of an engaging coming-of-age story, and she is also a strange clone. The Buried Giant is pure metaphor set in a fairy tale.

Ishiguro engages our emotions, provokes our thoughts, and writes us myths to wake us up to our shared humanity. This is how ordinary people make meaning of their lives. Woven among the varied themes across Ishiguro’s work is a thread that seeks a
community for himself with his readers. Perhaps a lost five-year-old has made a home with his readers. Don’t we all feel like this?
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