UNDERSTANDING THE UNCONSOLED AS A NOVEL OF IDENTITY

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will consider three motifs of the novel as they relate to the creation of self-identity and validity. First, the series of alter egos that Ryder confronts form a nonlinear narrative of his life. Second, the surreal landscape and architecture of the city alternates between austere and baroque labyrinths, providing a barometer for the condition of his mind, much in the manner of Poe or Kafka. Essentially, space and time fluctuate according to Ryder’s psychological state. And third, the townspeople erode the line between public and private, take up Ryder’s struggle for identity at the communal level, and, with their infatuation with art and art criticism, provide a parody of the self-perpetuating cycles of high culture. Because these themes and sub-themes revolve around Ryder’s intense two-day crisis of identity, this work might be called a novel of identity, or an Identitatsroman in order to evoke a string of common literary classifications—Bildungsroman, Erziehungsroman, and Künstlerroman—with which this work bears close ties. Ryder, compromised by a performer’s lifestyle, relinquishes control over his identity, allowing the public to determine its composition, and thereby he permits the public to determine his worth. In an effort to add some degree of stability to his identity, he obsesses over giving the greatest piano performance ever, so that his identity as a virtuoso would be forever cemented in the minds of the public and himself.
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Kazuo Ishiguro has written a strange novel. When The Unconsoled made its entrance in 1995, literary critics did not know what to make of it—it was so different from his previous novels; most reviewers disparaged it as dense, elliptical, and even boring (for James Woods of The Guardian it is “in its own category of badness”), but still it found its way onto the Booker Prize short list for that year. Two years later a revision of criticism backs up Salmon Rushdie’s claim that the work is “courageous, complex, and rather beautiful...about a lost soul, endlessly circling, unable to connect with a world that knows him” (Kellaway 7). Secondary literature on this novel has been slow to accumulate, perhaps because the novel seems at first glance to lack intersection with Ishiguro’s previous preoccupation with memory and nationalism. But scholars may soon begin to recognize it as a continuation of his sixteen-year effort to portray problems of identity. Still, radical departures from his earlier quasi-dramatic monologues tell us that this work buds from a different branch than his earlier works on the literary taxonomical tree. Its nearest cousins might be Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865, 1871) and The Trial (1925), two works that will be used throughout this thesis as points of reference to elucidate Ishiguro’s project.

This thesis will consider three motifs of the novel as they relate to the creation of self-identity and validity. First, as will be discussed in section two of this paper, the series of alter egos that Ryder confronts form a nonlinear narrative of his life. Second, in section three, the surreal landscape and architecture of the city alternates between austere
and baroque labyrinths, providing a barometer for the condition of his mind, much in the manner of Poe or Kafka. Essentially, space and time fluctuate according to Ryder’s psychological state. And third, in section four, the townspeople erode the line between public and private, take up Ryder’s struggle for identity at the communal level, and, with their infatuation with art and art criticism, provide a parody of the self-perpetuating cycles of high culture. Because these themes and sub-themes revolve around Ryder’s intense two-day crisis of identity, this work might be called a novel of identity, or an Identitätsroman in order to evoke a string of common literary classifications—Bildungsroman, Erziehungsroman, and Künstlerroman—with which this work bears close ties. Ryder, compromised by a performer’s lifestyle, relinquishes control over his identity and allows the public to determine its composition, and thereby he permits the public to determine his self-worth. In an effort to add some degree of stability to his identity, he obsesses over giving the greatest piano performance ever, so that his identity as a virtuoso would be forever cemented in the minds of the public and himself.

Ishiguro’s novel and others like it, such as Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952), Plath’s The Bell Jar (1963), and Kafka’s The Metamorphosis (1915), make this term Identitätsroman necessary in order to avoid the erroneous label “psychological novel,” a term that recalls the psychological-realistic novels of Eliot, Trollope, and Howells. Two things make Ishiguro’s latest novel incompatible with this grouping: one, the more obvious difference is that this novel, by using a dream-like medium, distorts reality, making it indirectly representative of the world, and two, Ishiguro writes in a post-psychological era, a claim I will elaborate on further below. This category Identitätsroman is not without predecessors or relatives, of course. Indeed, Ishiguro’s
depiction of Ryder’s psyche involves the traditions of the Gothic, dream narratives and theory, and the Bildungsroman.

Ishiguro has come to the genre Identitätsroman by way of the novelistic dramatic monologue, a form some say he perfected with The Remains of the Day (1989). How this innovative novelistic form has made its way into Ishiguro’s repertoire and how it had been received can be framed by a brief discussion of theories on literary variation, both within genres at large and within the careers of single authors. Because the task of placing a novel within a literary tradition entails the adoption of a historiographical paradigm by which to understand the development and demise of genres, scholars should state up front their assumptions regarding the controlling forces in literary history, just as scientists would admit and describe their methodology. A common approach to mapping the literary genome, for example, is the paradigm that literature proceeds as a culmination of the effort of the creative mind throughout the centuries. Each generation of writers takes the best from its predecessor, and leaves behind the unnecessary, and thus evolution continues to the delight of the historical progressivist. Others claim that literature finds itself determined by the societal demands and pressures that contextualize it; genres adapt or die, in the minds of those that perceive literature as a cultural commodity in a competitive marketplace. Others still, such as Franco Moretti, espouse a Darwinian theory to explain the family tree of form. Using the terminology of Darwin, he explains that relatively spontaneous variations in literature parallel mutations in the natural world, and the product of these mutations will either be viable in its environment or not. The species that survive are not necessarily better in an evaluative sense, but they are simply chosen. The Hegelo-Lamarkian understanding of literature, however, views it as “a realm
where variations only arise if predestined to success," a theoretical worldview with little supporting evidence from history (Moretti 267). Moretti also notes that "innovations are more often than not unsuccessful, and successes un-innovative" (267). And even if literary society deems an innovation viable, the odds are strong that it will eventually face extinction upon a change in literary environment. When the climate changes, they perish. And perhaps it is at those junctions, which problematize the genre as it is, that either new mutations appear, some being viable, or others resurface, like a recessive gene, having lain dormant during inhospitable eras. The epic novel, an example of this latter case, brings back a form made great in the classical period: Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), Dos Passo’s *U.S.A.* (1937), and Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970) attest to the reemergence of several elements of the epic.

The pattern of innovation that Moretti describes can be applied not only to genres but also to the path of one writer’s career and to variations within a single work. Variation has found its way into Ishiguro’s career, as it does with all writers, and his latest innovation has, like most innovations, not been endorsed whole-heartedly by the literati. Not everyone will savor this meticulously surreal landscape with the charm of a Marine Corps obstacle course, through which the protagonist Mr. Ryder must navigate toward the culmination of his work and his being: the performance of his life, which is at once his climactic concert and the quotidian staging of his existence. Ishiguro’s fastidious and methodical presentation of a world based on the ensuing droll pleantries and on a general incoherence of life certainly requires hearty readerly endurance, but his precise aesthetic effect rewards the patient.
Many of Ishiguro’s contemporaries also render hard-to-read texts, as seen, for example, in Pynchon’s novels of parodic exuberance and Jeanette Winterson’s allusion-heavy art pieces, but as I try to situate Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel in a particular tradition, I often find myself reaching back more to the early twentieth and late nineteenth century than to his “closer cousins” of the 1990’s. Unlike Winterson and Pynchon, he avoids postmodern self-reflexivity and experimental syntax. He constructs perfect, unassuming sentences that refuse to test the structural limits of language. He also prefers to distance his authorial presence from the text, in part by using first person narrators who guide the tale in a manner similar to Browning’s duke in “My Last Duchess.” He handled his first three novels this way, creating stiff, emotionally repressed characters--Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens--who more or less act their lives out according to subconscious scripts, rather than paying attention and reacting to their feelings. In The Unconsoled, however, Ishiguro adds another dimension to the prose dramatic monologue by detailing the genesis of those subconscious scripts that guide his newest narrator, Ryder, again a stiff, repressed character.

To scrunch together the three traditions that will be elaborated on below—dream narrative, the gothic, and the Bildungsroman—we might be tempted to say that Ishiguro draws from the tradition of the psychological novel, as I acceded above. Yet, because he stands on shattered assumptions about the integrity of the self as an inviolate entity, he must shift the conventions of this genre. John X. Cooper has deemed the latter half of the twentieth century a post-psychological literary era, meaning that authors no longer feel

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1 John X. Cooper has yet to publish his ideas on the post-psychological era, but I have had the privilege of discussing his theory with him first-hand.
comfortable creating characters with distinct and consistently stable psyches, able to be dissected and labeled as though they were mechanical clocks. Less and less do we find the reliable characterization present in Tess or Angel Clare. Thomas Hardy managed to explore human nature in his novels while retaining steady characterization as an axis around which to revolve, a mark of a good writer then. Henry James approached his characters' psychologies as somewhat more obscure and contorted, but still believed them to be ultimately knowable, since after 200 pages or so of dramatic journeys and familial intrigues, these catalysts would draw out the true self under inspection. But with Eliot's "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) we find a character in fluctuation, a self uncontained by some sort of definite characterization sketched around him by the poet. Prufrock nor those around him are able to know him. The same strain of dis-ease with the psyche surfaces in the twentieth century with increasing intensity in the works of Kafka, Baldwin, Beckett, and so forth. The days of Alcott's Little Women, when girls could be divided neatly into four types, have given way to the days of Atwood's The Robber Bride, in which women find their personalities formed primarily in reaction to others.

The great search to find ourselves, or our many different selves (our feminine, masculine, or inner child selves, for example), demonstrates a general angst regarding the impermanence of the self. Is there any part of our consciousness that remains constant and entirely unadulterated throughout our lives? Even memories undergo shading by one's current context, and they, as external experiences, could not be considered the intrinsic self to begin with. The shift from faith to doubt in the concept of character finds
corroboration in the wariness many have shown toward the supposed robustness of
science as an epistemological tool. Psychology, as a science, must suffer these doubts,
and many psychological researchers have themselves begun to question the possibility of
understanding the self (Markus & Nurius 320). The self might be an evolving
culmination of thousands of external events, or, if we think in terms of chaos theory, the
self could be a dynamical system that continually adjusts itself to operate according to new
information retrieved through experiences. In addition to natural perpetual change, we
constantly analyze our actions as psychological data—a metacognitive practice that could
effectively lead to paralysis. Under these conditions, how are we to identify ourselves?
This argument for the existence of a post-psychological era does not imply that we are
absent of identity, or that personality development does not take place; it outlines,
however, a shift that has occurred in the way we understand identity: we perceive it more
and more as a layered construct, manufactured by ever-changing public and private
perspectives.

The postmodern generation has become accustomed to analysis; the New
Psychology of the 1920s has lost its novelty. James Mellard also describes an era aware
of the historicity of original Lacanian models for psychoanalysis.

Some new Lacanians have generated a vision of postmodern life that one
may identify with the paradoxical, perhaps perverse, twist Lacan gives to
ethics and traditional tragedy. In this vision, because Freudian
"universals" have become historical, we now live in a postpatriarchal,
postoedipal universe. (396)
Ishiguro appears to be in a post-psychological period within his career, in that his previous works were contemporized versions of the Browning dramatic monologue, complete with narrators that the reader could figure out, despite their unreliability. But with Ryder, we really don’t know and can never know his identity, for the obvious reason that he is a character in a dream (someone else’s dream perhaps) and for the less obvious reason that even within the dream his psychological identity fluctuates radically. In his life-size dream, Ryder finds his identity largely determined by the town (or the outside world), his parents and family, and his career. His lack of control over events involving him emblemmatizes the lack of control he has over his identity. He chases after his great performance, a white rabbit that displaces the true source of his anxiety: the absence of a stable and significant identity.

It is not enough for Ryder to possess a genuinely representative identity; it must be significant as well. Even though religion, science, history, and the family have all been exploited in the search for essential, unconditional self-worth, when we try to tell ourselves why we are important, we are basically limited either to our actions, possessions, or relationships, as a symptom of an existential reality. Thus, the construction of a positive identity involves a story about ourselves that we tell to ourselves. We can read the dream of Ryder in *The Unconsoled* as the grotesquely baroque tale his unconscious tells himself of his pilgrimage through virtuosity. But not even virtuosic artistic performance guarantees a stable identity, according to Kazuo Ishiguro; in fact the ensuing fame nearly destroys Ryder’s sense of self. In this novel Ishiguro dissects the artist’s quandary using a dream narrative as the conduit, and the
splintered psyche of a concert pianist (notably akin to Ishiguro) as the beleaguered navigator, who literally loses himself in his work.

The dream-narrative structure of the novel allows Ishiguro both to exaggerate the absurdity of a community intent on propagating artifice and to explore the damage such an environment inflicts on individual psyches. This community, an unspecified central European city, has invited Mr. Ryder to perform for them, and he believes a superb performance here will establish him as an all-time great, so that he might retire from his rigorous touring. He tells himself

it was my duty to perform on this evening at least to my usual standards.
To do anything less—I suddenly sensed this strongly—would be to open some strange door through which I would hurtle into a dark, unknown space. (518)

We may read underneath his conscious desire an ontological need to be established as indispensable in the universe. Because he believes no network of loved ones could possibly secure for him a sense of being valuable, he urgently manhandles the cranks and levers of stardom to access personal value. To accomplish his innovative method for excavating the self in literature, Ishiguro draws from the traditions of the Bildungsroman, dream narrative, and the gothic, as stated above.

Ishiguro positions a question of identity as the novel’s primary mystery, and he provides clues as to how Ryder’s identity has shifted over his lifetime. Elements of the Bildungsroman surface as Ryder remembers his strife-ridden childhood and as he encounters younger versions of himself in the persons of Boris and Stephen. Yet, writers in the genre of Bildungsroman have typically assumed that once their characters have
reached maturity they have cemented a certain identity that will abide within them for the duration of their lives. And while Ishiguro does indeed meticulously reveal the formation of our artist-protagonist, his main concern seems to be a finite period of two days during which Ryder will establish his identity as the greatest pianist in the world. Ryder’s psychological biography radiates outward in all directions (even in the direction of his future), with the rays emanating from this one powerful locus.

Ishiguro selectively harvests elements of dream theory in order to construct his sketch of the artist-performer’s plight. But this category, like the Bildungsroman, has been manipulated by Ishiguro for an end that furthers his project. For example, Freud noted that “if a dream is written out it perhaps fills half a page,” so we are clearly not dealing with a realistic, objective representation of a dream (279). Instead of a realistic Zola, who adhered to Freud’s designation of a written dream’s appropriate length, we get in Ishiguro an indulgent Huysmans (Canovas 117). If we try to place this novel within a tradition of dream narratives, then it, alongside Susan Sontag’s novel *Death Kit* (1967), might produce a useful contrast with more literal dream narratives such as Kafka’s “A County Doctor” (1916), or mythical medieval dream-visions such as *Piers Plowman*. In Sontag’s novel, she creates, as Larry McCaffery notes, “a complete dream world, closely related to our own in some respects, but with its own peculiar landscape and logic” (484). Current psychological theory holds that dreams are essentially continuous with our waking lives, though sometimes transcribed into bizarre contexts, developing through a process known as activation-synthesis; our brain shapes random neural firings into somewhat meaningful episodes. The marriage of realistic detail with illogical contexts in Sontag’s novel, as in Ishiguro’s, approximates the scrambled collage of our dreams.
Director/writer David Lynch’s latest film *Lost Highway* (1997) also inhabits the middle ground between nightmare and independent reality. Lynch borrows from the uncanny and spooky elements of dreams in order to manufacture a nonlinear reality in the tradition of Breton and the Surrealists.

Because we never encounter Ryder awakening or falling asleep in the pages of *The Unconsoled*, it cannot be stated definitively that this novel is a dream. Yet because it bears so many properties of a dream, and because application of dream analysis informs the roots of Ryder’s anxieties so aptly, it seems safe to treat it, in part, as such. The moment we imagine a theoretical Rdyer-the-dreamer, every aspect of the novel becomes a projection of his psyche, and we are no longer limited to the somewhat bland Ryder-the-character for insight into his anxieties. Most “dream narratives” are not dreams at all; Ambrose Bierce’s famous short story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” depicts a hallucination, as does Susan Sontag’s *Death Kit* and Borges’s “The South.” Maya Jaggi found her first impression of the novel to be that Ryder was trapped in a prolonged anxiety dream (28), and Susie Mackenzie referred to it as a “controlled hallucination”(12).

Ishiguro challenges traditional narrative technique by carrying formal clarity to an extreme in its own right, using the dream motif as a forum for his exaggeration. He exaggerates the particular anxieties of Ryder the dreamer: loss of control, disorganization, public relations, and so on. Dreams can be the ultimate biography when read sagely. They lack the conscious selectivity of autobiography and they cut to the core of a person’s psychological quandary over identity in a way biography would forever be denied.
Ryder begins in a state of amnesia, essentially a *tabula rasa*, but in sudden spurts, he will somehow know fundamental facts about his life: a wife, child, memories of adolescence, a touring engagement, and so on, in the way that we suddenly know things in a dream. Furthermore, the dream allows for the intensification of an emotion, unadulterated by waking cognition. We can never be so anxiety-ridden as in a dream because the channel between affect and mediating cognition shuts down somewhat during the dream state. And so in Ryder we find the anxiety of trying to do too much at once excruciatingly indulged. Not having to follow the sensible rules of reality allows Ishiguro to challenge traditional narrative progression by de-emphasizing plot and combining his polite narrative voice with the disjointed ennui of a nightmare, creating a subtly disturbing tale.

Jacques Lacan believed the dream is a message, designed by the dreamer’s subconscious and sent to the dreamer’s conscious mind. But the message must be distorted so as not to disturb the waking self too greatly, a theory of displacement first postulated by Freud. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* provide a classic dramatization of a typical dreaming process. Alice, as the somewhat bland locus of the adventure, reacts to the bizarre things that happen to her by using the heuristics she brings with her from the waking world of her traditional English upbringing. Hence, the most upsetting disasters to her arrive in the form of the unfair Croquet Game or the unruly Tea-party which her protocol of order and politeness fails to explain. And when the inconceivability of the chaotic behaviors of the cards becomes too much, she is forced to deconstruct her dream, declare the whole thing a charade, and
wake up. In her dream she is able to diffuse the stress of mastering rules in complicated
Victorian society that seem arbitrary and extreme.

Ryder, too, stands at the epicenter of a nightmare, trying to cope with the shock waves that assault him by using the tools that he brings with him, just as Alice did. He believes that if he approaches the townspeople with an air of a gracious performer they will reciprocate his manners with undying awe, at a respectful distance. But from the first page, Ryder the subconscious dreamer begins to weave his message to his conscious self, to use Lacan’s model, by enacting his worst fears in the relative safety of his sleeping mind. Interestingly, Ryder never wakes up, so we never know if he is indeed a great piano performer, or if he is a waiter in a restaurant feeling the burden of anonymity. Such an inquiry into who the waking Ryder really is probably would not be fruitful. Since there are no clues in the dream as to his actual identity, it is safe to assume Ishiguro did not intend for us to base our understanding of the novel on this question. Still, on the one hand, it seems Ryder lives the life of the famed artist, since he confronts the anxieties associated with a public-determined identity in his dream, and on the other hand, the question of validity and significance plagues us all, and the dream’s ending in which Ryder’s performance appears not quite as crucial as he had anticipated easily could speak of the average world citizen’s angst.

A classic interpretation of the gothic movement in the late eighteenth century depicts it as a reaction against the neoclassical principles of reason, order, balance, and control; writers such as Horace Walpole, Anne Radcliffe, and Mary Shelley indulged their creative imaginations by writing novels that explored extra-rational dimensions (Botting 29). Like the Goths who destroyed the birthplace of the perfectly balanced arch,
these writers censured neoclassical modes of literature and crossed what were considered to be appropriate boundaries of narrative themes and forms by exploiting the twisted and repressed elements of the human unconscious as an aesthetic pose. Most scholars of gothic literature identify a fundamental bifurcation in the genre: the gothic of terror and the gothic of horror. In the terror form, for which Anne Radcliffe remains a popular example, the writer evokes the fears we all harbor regarding the parts of our psyche that we do not understand and that might be capable destroying us, whereas the form of stylized horror, exemplified by Matthew Lewis, focuses on creating a sense of sickening awe upon witnessing various grotesque and bizarre transgressions of societal taboos. Of these two groupings, *The Unconsoled* fits more snugly into the category of terror, as we encounter very little of the bombastic sensual description and downright revolting imagery that one encounters in horror Gothic—with the possible exceptions of Brodsky’s missing leg or his daydream of intercourse with Miss Collins. An even more specific generic location for this novel could be that of the gothic nightmare, a tradition with many biographical reference points; indeed, it is well-known that Mary Shelley claimed to have dreamt the tale of *Frankenstein* (1818), that Edgar Allen Poe suffered from dreadfully inspirational nightmares, that Robert Louis Stevenson located the source of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) in a dream, and so on. Not only do many Gothic writers draw from their nocturnal unease as muse, they also include nightmares within their tales, employing them both as encapsulated episodes within the text (as Brontë and Lewis have used them) and as the unstated premise of the entire work, as we find in *The Unconsoled.*
Many branches of science fiction and fantasy grow out of the gothic, as well as utopian/dystopian literature; one of the first science-fiction novels, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, manipulates the horrified fascination of the reader concerning the power of science to disintegrate natural boundaries. One strategy for writers of science fiction to transmit their point lies in the creation of an alternate world with a plethora of reference points to the society of contemporary Earth, so as simultaneously to remove the reader and elicit comparison. For example, how many science-fiction novels have their setting on a distant planet by the name of Terra? Countless. Suddenly, even the closest parallels to our world seem bizarre, absurd, cruel, or beautiful with the newness of the foreign, a perspective that enables us to evaluate our own familiar world with less bias. It is this effect that Ishiguro employs, using a dream world instead of another planet. We project our cultural anxieties projected onto the future or alternate, in this case, a dream world. When Ryder walks into the town's movie theater and finds *Space Odyssey: 2001* starring Yul Brynner and Clint Eastwood as the central actors—not Keir Dullea and Gary Lockwood, we know for certain that this strange world is ours, but one degree skewed.

A comment by Fred Botting on the relationship between the gothic and science fiction elucidates this work, though clearly not science fiction, as a crisis of modern culture's fixation with separating the self from ourselves (paradoxically), others and nature through technological innovation: television substitutes for social contact, our houses keep out the unruliness of nature, and our incessant bathing protects us from our own animal scent.

The loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured are presented in
the threatening shapes of increasingly dehumanised environments, machinic doubles and violent, psychotic fragmentation...Progress, rationality, and civilisation increasingly suspect, cede to new forms of sublimity and excess, new terrors, irrationalities and inhumanities. (157)

The scene by the cement kidney-shaped pool attests to the sterile excess, to use an oxymoron, of twentieth-century culture. Ryder admires the starkness of the pool—understandable for a man who seems to feel most comfortable when alone.

Lastly, a discussion of the gothic and this novel would be incomplete without reference to the hotel as a modernized gothic castle. There have been many edifices of terror: Poe’s House of Usher, Faulkner’s Sutpen mansion, Charlotte Perkins Gillman’s room with the yellow wallpaper, and Stephan King’s eerie hotel in The Shining, to name a very few. Just as their precursor, the desolate castle, operated, these haunted structures establish a sense that menace cannot be escaped because it is incorporated into the very walls. Also, the eastern European city in this novel, if read as a re-worked Gothic forest, takes on the labyrinthine ghoulishness of the woods in “Christabel,” and threatens to undermine not Ryder’s moral purity, but the integrity of his identity by leaving him stranded in alleys and blustering him about with high winds on precipices.

With dogged single-mindedness, he resists these Gothic forces of chaos and persists in the chase for his performance, only to find that his efforts are built on quicksand; indeed, not a single person sits in the audience when he walks onto the stage at the end of the novel. But, surprisingly, such a (typically postmodern) bathetic travesty far from destroys him. Instead, he learns during the closing tram ride with an electrician that worth and significance can better be established through deeply rooted, vertical,
relationships than through a lateral dance with public fame. Moreover, the novel explores
the anxiety born from attempting to do too much at once, a phenomenon plaguing
Western postmodern society and under dissection in pop psychology as the Type A
personality. This personality operates perpetually in fifth gear and allows others to
inundate him or herself with taxing demands. Heart attacks, nervous breakdowns, and
stomach ulcers plague these Mr. Ryders. The drive to do rather than to be circumscribes
our existence. But if to be is to do, as Sartre (and Frank Sinatra) suggest, and if Ryder is
not allowed "to do," then he is in danger of losing any sense of self whatsoever. Mr.
Ryder could easily be an Everyman for the post World War II era, or, to relate this fiction
to other dreamlike narratives, a Joseph K. of sorts on trial for simply having been born.
Ishiguro reworks what may be called the white rabbit syndrome, as illustrated in Lewis
Carroll's seminal children's tale. A character chases after an elusive vision (information
about a crime he didn't commit, for example), claws past ridiculous and unrelenting
distractions, only to discover in the end a bathetic climax. As each detour or speed bump
presents itself, the anxiety of the protagonist compounds exponentially, and the threat of
total psychological breakdown looms in the background. The white rabbit itself informs
the root of the character's actual frustration more so than the peripheral struggles he or
she mistakes for the problem. The fact that Mr. Ryder feels the need to prove the worth
of his existence in a single two-hour session demonstrates his mal-adjustment to his own
humanity. His real obstacle lies within the nature of goal, not within the booby traps and
mine fields.

In *The Unconsoled*, Mr. Ryder, just as his name suggests, takes a nightmarish ride
through his tangled psyche as he bounces through the has-been cultural capital of Europe.
For a good portion of the novel, he’s without agency, a pinball in an arcade game, hoping to hit the jackpot by giving the performance of his life. His performance must accomplish many things: prove his worth to his discriminating parents, restore a has-been metropolis to an epicenter for the arts, supply him with such recognition that he’ll be able to settle with his family, and lastly, it must express the culmination of his artistic efforts. Rarely even allowing Ryder to sleep, the town expects superhuman feats from him, and he tries to deliver, with the hope of gleaning worth, legitimacy, and love, be it from the superficial public. Early in the novel he insists he is in control with the intensity of a Freudian denial:

...this world seems full of people claiming to be geniuses of one sort or another, who are in fact remarkable for only a colossal inability to organize their lives. But for some reason there’s always a queue of people like yourself, Miss Collins—very well meaning people—eager to rush to the rescue of these types. Perhaps I flatter myself but I can tell you, I am not one of their number. In fact, I can say with confidence that at this point in time, I’m not in any need of rescuing. (146)

Such hearty denial reveals some of his keenest fears: inadequacy, disorganization, and dependency. Only after the trials of his dream, in which he faces his shortcomings, does he surface somewhat triumphant over his dysfunctional psyche. Most critics heretofore have sidestepped this ending which defies any certain interpretation. True, his relationship with Boris and Sophie crumbles and at the end the mother and son say goodbye with sighs to their distant and preoccupied father and husband. But then he boards the tram (which has been emblematic of community, fellowship, and elemental
human connection) and takes his first substantial meal in the company of someone who barely cares that he’s Ryder the Famous Pianist. He does what earlier would have been infinitely aggravating for him: he rides the tram for a second loop for no other reason than to commune with a friend. But then again, we could read the second loop as a sign that he is mired in a dangerous stasis with an undetermined identity.

None of the conflicts in the novel are precisely explicated, not even for the reader’s benefit, let alone for Ryder’s, because that is not where the point of the novel lies. The basic idea is simply that there is constant friction: the irritating hum of an imperfect, existential and naturalistic world that escalates into an indecipherable cacophony of collision and irresolvable conflict. We never know where exactly lies the rotting pit of Ryder and Sophie’s marriage or what exactly comprises the town’s problem, although the title of the novel might provide a hint in that it refers to the general plight of being human: we’re unconsolded for our unimportance in the universe. Any attempt to overcome rather than accept this reality invites a kaleidoscope of quandaries, misunderstandings, and fragmentation.
II

Fractured Projection: The Selves of Ryder

Ishiguro excavates the repressed and fragmented latent anxieties of Ryder’s ego and uses them to construct a nonlinear Bildungsroman that depicts the formation of Ryder. Because Ishiguro, in a sense, has scattered Ryder across the novel, lacing his psyche into virtually every character and every aspect of the setting reflects an aspect of Ryder’s current personality and the history of his personality, it may appear that Ishiguro has engaged in a task opposite to the goals of constructing a Bildungsroman. Franco Moretti would agree:

...the raison d'être of psychoanalysis lies in breaking up the psyche into its "opposing forces"—whereas youth and the novel have the opposite task of fusing, or at least bringing together, the conflicting features of individual personality. Because, in other words, psychoanalysis always looks beyond the ego—whereas the Bildungsroman attempts to build the ego, and make it the indisputable centre of its own structure. (10-11)

But if we consider the acts of piecing together a character and of breaking it apart as partners in a bi-directional equation, then one explains the other. Ishiguro has presented a fragmented self with enough segments available to afford the reader or critic an opportunity to re-construct the life of Ryder—his concerns, motivations, and pleasures. In other words, it is in the act of reading that the Bildungsroman assumes a linear form within the mind of the reader.

To say that every character, and Boris, Stephen, Brodsky, and Gustav in particular, mirrors a stage of Ryder’s life does not necessarily relegate this novel to the
realm of allegory; indeed, all of the characters perform dually as actors in their own right, forwarding the hazy plot of the novel. Ishiguro retrieves the notion of the splintered self from Jung and reworks it in a post-psychological context: Ryder encounters his various selves in his dream, but he isn't aware that they are him, and he has not a clue as to how to consolidate them. He encounters himself in a five-year-old boy lost in his imagination, a young pianist struggling to shoulder the weighty expectations his parents hold for him, an aging has-been conductor battling alcoholism and depression, and an elderly porter who regrets a severed relationship with his daughter. Upon meeting his younger selves, Ryder unwittingly attempts to intervene, albeit half-heartedly, in their destructive situations to head off germination of callused seeds that will grow into his now deep-rooted anxieties. He also tries to assuage the damage already wrought on the older selves by misguided parental treatment and by his subsequent method for dealing with his resulting sense of isolation sparked by his parents: losing himself in his work.

In this refracted Bildungsroman, five-year-old Boris establishes the earliest Ryder as a young boy stuck in a seemingly arbitrary adult world. A young Alice, he copes with an environment over which he can exercise little control; since he has not the tools for understanding and framing the world in an adult-centric context, he undertakes a revision in his imagination. For example, he daydreams of fighting off the thugs who cause his parents to argue: in this fantasy, with his grandfather as side-kick, he is the steely yet merciful hero who easily understands that his parents disparage one another as a direct result of the terrorist activities of a gang. The subtleties of adult conflict elude him, just as the source and cure for the acidic eruptions of Ryder’s parents had eluded Ryder. Both escape to a solitary mental haven. When Boris does reach out to his father, Ryder, it
comes out in the form of a bizarre obsession with a repair manual, the obvious metaphor being his interest in repairing the unfathomable rift which causes his family's discord. After reading about methods for plastering walls, sealing leaks, and taking apart barriers, he proclaims to Ryder, “‘I’m sorry I was selfish. I won’t be anymore. I won’t talk about Number Nine ever again…I’ll be able to do everything soon’” (335). Number Nine, being Boris’s alter ego, is yet another character in the endless onion-peel succession of alter egos in the novel. An enduring post-psychological aspect of this novel, we never know for certain what is at the core of any of the characters, for they lack the three-dimensional, indefatigably stable texture found in the characters of realistic novels. This is not to say, however, that Ryder lacks an identity, as even an onion bears the qualities of onionness; the point is that the integrity of his identity has been compromised by his decision to volunteer it to the public in exchange for the amplification of it.

Most of the characters divorce reality in favor of indulging personal neuroses. For example, in many of Boris’s fantasies he is the ideal public hero—a wise, spiritual crimefighter (an indication, perhaps, of a minor case repressed megalomania). The irony that fame for a five-year-old is highly unlikely poignantly reaffirms how futile Boris-Ryder’s attempt is to procure a broad-based wellspring of validation through performance and fame. Yet here in this passage with the repair manual Boris wants to try: he promises to drop the crutch of a self-manufactured identity with the eager anticipation of being able to do *everything*. This transaction—actualizing his interior world into a do everything/be everything role in the exterior world—may have been Ryder’s keenest desire as a child.

Boris’s eating habits partly explain his physical weakness. He tires easily, avoids real-life sports, and is described as “tubby” (32). Forever munching on pastries, cakes,
cookies, and candy, he misses out on the hearty sustenance a young boy needs to mature into well-developed adult person. Boris keeps his toy plastic soldiers in a biscuit tin, eats cake with Ryder on the bus, and gobbles donuts in the café. His sugary fare does not derive wholly from a child’s sweet tooth: his parents use the treats as hollow consolation prizes for a terrible home life, and Ryder also uses them as baby-sitters while on his troublesome quests. A chocolate and almond cheesecake keeps the boy company while the shadowy journalist photographs Ryder at the Sattler monument, a scene that underscores the idea he has abandoned even the filial part of himself for the public.

Boris’s preference for sweets parallels the conspicuous paucity of Ryder’s meals. Taking only an occasional bite of junk food he, too, avoids balanced meals (we should read in this an emotional metaphor for the unbalanced psyche). Moreover, the entire town echoes Boris’s insubstantial diet. The old town brims over with bistros and bakeries peddling their rich desserts. Geoffrey offers stale pastries to Ryder; Hoffman hopes an exquisite birthday cake will endear his wife to him; and, in a striking mingling of death and sweetness, a funeral procession features cake and peppermints as false consolation for the loss of human life.

The superficiality of Ryder’s life appears to be rooted in early childhood, as evidenced by Boris’s appeal to sugary treats for comfort, in place of an appeal to another human being who could commiserate with him. But those sweets offer little abiding comfort, as it is hard to feel sated on sweets: our taste buds continue to be aroused by sugar for much longer than by heartier foods such as grains, vegetables, or meat. Another aspect of the deleteriousness of food in this novel is illustrated at Boris’s old apartment, while on the hunt for Number Nine, Ryder imagines in a tangential and heavily detailed
daydream that the new resident will offer them cake while handing over the missing toy. Cake, a social version of the daydream, is empty, and it speaks of the postmodern preoccupation with forms that lack content. It is as though the bleached whiteness of a meticulously frosted angel food cake will impose a look of importance on what hasn’t an actual essence within. Yet Ishiguro leaves open the possibility that even though it is not possible to elevate general human worth, at least it is possible to cultivate a being with more health and efficacy. At the end, on the tentatively hopeful tram ride, Boris-Ryder has grown up enough to consume a hearty English breakfast of eggs, bacon, tomatoes, and sausages. Finally, on the next to last page, he begins to fill the deep painful cracks within, which he can see after his cathartic session with Miss Stratmann: “I started to serve myself a little of everything.”

In addition to practicing a sketchy diet, Ryder’s inability to connect with Boris, his child-self, indicates a lack of self-awareness—a fatal flaw for a quest to self-worth. Just as Alice’s Victorian-age parents preferred not to listen to her, Ryder exercises a dangerous obliviousness towards his son. Consequently, Boris tries to gain attention indirectly in the arbitrary adult world. With the character Boris, Ishiguro plays out the Jamesian torn child, as depicted in What Maisie Knew, a story about a child caught between warring parents who each employ her as a weapon against the other. Ryder, Sophie, and Gustav do not use Boris as maliciously as Maisie’s parents, but they do send him back and forth as a go-between in their silent feuds, and he submits to this role as a means to fit in with family.

Understandably, Boris would prefer unconditional acceptance and respect from his father. The fulfillment of his wish would simulate a kind of essential and unalienable
sense of self-worth, since the idea of unconditionality separates our existential actions from our identity, morality, and value. He also wants Ryder to find and retrieve his cherished, plastic toy soccer player Number Nine for him. In the wild goose-chase scenes that follow, as Ryder tries to be the hero his son desires, he encounters frustration and eventual failure. Ryder has no model to follow himself, as evidenced by his parents' callousness toward their son and by their feebleness, as though they are feeble not just in body but also lacking a kind of parental robustness.

Ryder next encounters himself in the form of Stephen, a melancholy young pianist disturbed because his parents withhold unconditional acceptance. He can never play the piano with what his mother (and ergo his father) deems natural genius. In part, that Stephen carries the genes of the dull Mr. Hoffman who revolts his mother, barring her from bestowing total and unchecked love upon him. Her obsession with finding an artistic superman on whom to latch parasitically consumes her and impairs any sort of palpable connection with a real person, even her son. Yet again, a character entrenched in a fantastic, solipsistic world fails to achieve the sense of importance she latently craves. In this case, Mrs. Hoffman perceives maestros, such as Ryder (and, early on, Stephen too), as “important,” and hence she believes attaching herself to a great person will make her great as well. Unfortunately for Mrs. Hoffman, Stephen was not all that she had hoped. Stephen, like Ryder, yearns for the Thursday night performance in order to establish himself as accomplished in the eyes of his parents. We can anticipate that this keen desire will haunt Stephen for the rest of his lifetime, since his older version, Ryder, still fantasizes about astonishing his now elderly parents. Stephen’s fantasy (in concert with the dreams-within-the-dream motif of the novel) reverberates with Ryder’s:
I had this fantasy of spending months somewhere locked away, practicing and practicing...Then one day I'd suddenly come home...I'd come in, hardly say a word, just go to the piano, lift the lid, start playing...Bach, Chopin, Beethoven...My parents would have followed me into the living room and they'd just be looking on in astonishment. It would be beyond their wildest dreams...Sublime, sensitive adagios. Astounding fiery bravura passages.

Stephen buys into his mother's view of the artistic world, and after delivering a stellar concert at the end of the novel, he enlists himself in a pilgrimage to perfection, the drive that clearly has guided Ryder for most of his life.

Ryder tries to intervene in Stephen's obsessive quest; he pleads impatiently with him to take a stand against a set of parents who will never be satisfied regardless of his exhaustive efforts to cater to them (149). For example, when Stephen asks Miss Collins for advice, Ryder breaks in and insists that he should ignore his mother's wish to hear Glass Passions. Interestingly, Miss Collins thwarts Ryder-the-dreamer's attempt to counsel and alter his younger psyche. She claims he knows "nothing of the deeper implications of his current predicament. Why do you take it upon yourself to pronounce like this as though you're blessed with some extra sense the rest of us lack?" (133). Yet her challenge lacks veracity: Ryder is blessed (or cursed) with the omniscience of the dreamer (he can see through walls and know what others are thinking, for example), and he is sharply aware of the metaphysical "deep implications of his current predicament."
That predicament is a lifelong preoccupation with outward excellence aimed at an audience who cannot be satisfied.

Even at the precipice of that grim predicament, Stephen cannot change his behavior; he can only equate acceptance with performance. He chooses to play by the topsy-turvy rules of the grown-up world. In *Through the Looking Glass* the Red Queen tells Alice she can only become a queen herself by crossing to the other side of the chessboard landscape. Alice discovers that when she runs her fastest, the environment also races at exactly the same speed, preventing her from covering any ground. When she complains to the Red Queen, the brusque adult figure huffs an answer to the tune of “That’s the way it is...” Lewis Carroll in the Alice stories replicates what it is like for a child during her frustrating period of indoctrination into an adult world, over which she can exert little agency. At the end of one of Alice’s nightmares, she exclaims “You are all just a bunch of cards!” and wakes up, but Ryder never awakens. Nor does he fully develop his own personal rules and rubrics for life. Boris-Stephen, especially, allows himself to participate in the schema of the adults around them. His passive submission to this confining cycle of thought-behavior indicates a tragic flaw present in adult Ryder.

Mrs. Hoffman’s devastating birthday party underscores just how unconsolated these characters are. Cut off halfway through by Mrs. Hoffman’s disappointment, it symbolically encapsulates the stunted emotional development of most of the characters in this novel. An event heralded as a time for joy and festivity, the irony of a party’s abortion speaks of the jaded disappoint of a great performer, who realizes the drawbacks of being loved by the public.
Like Boris, Stephen is a child caught between parents in a dysfunctional relationship. Mrs. Hoffman never received her virtuoso; Mr. Hoffman could never satisfy his wife; and Stephen could never play well enough for his mother, which would have saved, in turn, Mr. Hoffman’s marriage to her. Since Ryder-Stephen’s parents do not espouse and practice a belief in essential human worth, the son has no choice but to satisfy his parents’ chosen heuristic for determining worth. If he cannot realize his daydream of earning their respect in the living room on a quiet Sunday afternoon, then he must find another way to feel validated. That way might be to earn the entire world’s approval; furthermore, this feat might be enough to convince his parents that he is good. And thereby he would convince himself. After his compelling Thursday night performance, his father—who had arranged for Stephen to play—utterly rejects his abilities:

> We should never have let things go this far...Your playing is very charming...But music, serious music at the sort of level required tonight...that, you see, is another thing...It would simply be too much to see our own dear son being made a laughing stock."

(479-80)

Stephen proceeds to justify to Ryder his parents’ dismissal of his concerto by claiming that they only want him to push himself to be the best in the world. He excitedly carries on about their exquisitely refined taste, not realizing that they are ultimately, and nearly solely, public figures who cannot appreciate music as art, but only as a vehicle for status and identity. Ironically, they claim to try to elicit virtuosic action from Stephen, yet actually they have already decided what they think of his abilities and no amount of
action on Stephen’s part will alter what the Hoffmans have already determined to be his
essence, So they view their son with a demeaning essentialism (you are inherently and
irrevocably a non-artist), masked by a noble, harsh existentialism (we’ll accept you if you
play well), when what Stephen needs is for his parents to see him in a nurturing
essentialist light (you are inherently worth our acceptance and pride). When I use the
term existentialism, I refer to Sartre’s idea that our actions determine our identity and
worth, and by the term essentialism, I mean a stable self-core determines our identity and
actions.

As part of his blindness concerning his parents’ seductive tango with the town,
Stephen faults the town as the source of his discontent—not his parents. It largely bears
the burden of blame for his lackluster life thus far: “It shows what it does to you, living in
a place like this. You start thinking small” (521). He begins to perceive himself as of a
superior breed of humanity, an ubermensch, self-reliant and separate from the herd, and
destined for global dominance. Ryder encourages Stephen to continue with an
apprenticeship in piano, but he pleads that he should do it for himself, not his parents,
as though Ryder was a grimly enlightened Scrooge on Christmas Eve visiting the younger
romantic self at a crucial intersection of life.

The process, however, cannot be reversed; Stephen will become Ryder. In fact,
Stephen already admires Brodsky—the next version of Ryder we meet. Stephen believes
Brodsky perceives music with a bard-like insight not possessed by the audience that sighs
in relief when the conductor collapses on stage: “ ‘They didn’t want it!’ ” cries Stephen.
Brodsky’s experimental interpretation “startled them” (522). Again, the provincial town
hasn’t the essential “artistic superiority” Stephen wants to believe he, Brodsky and Ryder possess.

Brodsky represents the creative genius that has deteriorated, in this case, into drunken longings for former greatness. The characters in this novel perceive the world in terms of their own personal fantasies, and Brodsky is no different. Obsessed over the demise of a relationship with Miss Collins, he putters around with a dog, allowing his talent to fade with the accumulating years—essentially, he is Ryder’s worst nightmare. Relegated to the ranks of ignominy, Brodsky participates, with varying degrees of motivation, in an attempt to revitalize the town through a stellar performance on his part. Both Ryder and Stephen defend Brodsky against the sneering public when he appears to the crowd to have failed miserably at the Thursday night gala performance.

“It bordered on the immoral. That’s it. It bordered on the immoral.”

“Excuse me,” I said, interrupting this time more forcefully. “But I happened to have listened very carefully to what Mr. Brodsky managed to do before his collapse and my own assessment differs yours. In my view, he achieved something challenging, fresh, indeed something very close to the inner heart of the piece.”

I gave them a frosty stare. They looked at me pleasantly again, some of them laughing politely as if I had made a joke.

Brodsky exhibits a ripened version of Boris’s megalomania in his manic conducting style, “perversely ignoring the outer structure of the music” (492). He continues to push “into ever stranger territories,” showing a Faustian disregard for human limits (492). Ryder
recognizes during this interlude the dangerous broadness of the ravine between the artist and audience, and at some level he must also realize that he may become like Brodsky, too far on the other side to connect with the audience at all. A performer needs an audience to exist; Ryder faces the potential extinction of his identity in the embodiment of Brodsky, the failed conductor. Kafka’s “The Hunger Artist,” another Künstlerroman, or artist short story, rather, also depicts the deterioration of the audience-artist symbiosis in terms of the expectations of art held by each party that are mutually foreign to the other. In it, an obsessed starvation artist fails to grab the crowd’s interest because he is too focused on his own personal infatuation with the art form of fasting. Losing popular appeal kills him, just as the public’s loss of demand for Brodsky catalyzes his own bent toward drunken remorse for his dear Miss Collins.

For Brodsky, personal affairs had exploded beyond control in ways destructive to his career. Ryder undoubtedly perceives Brodsky’s brooding over his domestic woe as a ridiculous error, since Ryder himself subordinates his relationship with Sophie to his touring career. Yet he does try to keep his family together, more out of a sense external obligation than from the prodding of a palpable love. Not surprisingly for a dreamer, Ryder behaves as an automaton, having arguments with Sophie over unspecified topics, yet that sound precisely like classic spousal bickering. Again, we encounter form empty of content, this time due to the nature of dreaming, in which it doesn’t matter what the argument is about, only that he is arguing with Sophie.

For him, Sophie represents the uncontrollable. As they make their way to a reception in a gallery bizarrely located in the countryside, the couple engages in one of their literally meaningless arguments. Ryder ruminates over the fragility of his situation
and over how having a family aggravates his attempts to succeed; he “could sense things were in danger of slipping out of control again, and I felt returning some of the intense annoyance I had experienced earlier in the day about the way Sophie had brought chaos into my life” (243). Throughout the novel, Sophie loses Ryder in alleyways, sends him on wild goose chases for Boris’s toys, and preoccupies him with her troubles with her father, Gustav. In return, Ryder transfers onto her his irritation with elusive goals, so that she embodies unattainable contentment. During this car ride, Boris senses doom in the relationship, and his own future, in terms of the Künstlerroman perhaps, and he shouts at Ryder “‘We’re too near the centre of the road….If something comes the other way, We’ll crash!’ ” (246). These words come from the child self of Ryder, who wrestles with the impossible demands he and others have placed upon him. Boris’s paranoia emphasizes the tenuous balance Ryder maintains between his domestic and public lives, a precariousness that prevents him from establishing genuine connection with either.

Brodsky is what he fears he will become if he does indeed put his family first. He does not trust that they can give him a sense of importance as fully as international fame could. He looks at Brodsky and sees tragedy, especially after the concert in which Brodsky still privileges Miss Collins as the object of his obsession. Ironically, the thing over which he truly obsesses—namely, the need to be worthwhile—he fails to achieve, simply because he obsesses over it. His shabby ironing-board crutch manifests outwardly his inner insecurity. Brodsky pathetically loses both his career and his wife: a fate most distasteful to Ryder. Also, that Brodsky is impotent speaks of Ryder’s anxiety over being rendered a superfluous, useless agent, as shown, for example, in the passage above in which the post-concert socialites politely laugh off his defense of Brodsky. Such social
impotence tears at the fabric with which Ryder has tailored his identity. Brodsky-Ryder
daydreams of his “prick getting stiff” just six more times with Miss Collins. In an
exaggerated tangent, typical of dreams, he carries on about Miss Collins’s “pussycat
smelling the way it does” and her elderly hips cracking as they spread (312). He builds
fantasies within his fantasy, imagining a love scene in which he commands her to behave
humiliatingly like a whore with sailors. Yet he knows his wound will prevent him from
realizing his dirty dreams. In a mostly dry and intellectual novel, this pocket of
pornographic indulgence supplies a sense of the grotesque in much the same way as the
Circe episode does in Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922).

The novel itself runs like a concerto, building into a pianissimo-crescendo that
ends in a fiasco in which Brodsky literally falls apart when his wooden leg is sawed off.
His resulting limp might suggest he is one-sided—or that he only perceives the world
from his own solipsistic slant. His “limp” may also be taken as a pun on the fact that his
“wooden leg” fails to harden and execute the sexual escapades he envisions. But he fails
to adjust himself to such a reality of flaccidity and anonymity. Hence, with the
exhibitionist streak of a performer, he not only wants to reunite with Miss Collins but
also to project their union from a stage onto the public: “‘Embrace me. Then let them
open the curtains’” (497). Like Ryder, he is ultimately self-centered; neither ever
connect with the outside world they are so desperate to please, because they so absorb
themselves in their own problems that they subordinate their lovers’ problems.
Furthermore, they have a touch of the stoic in them. They both *must* perform, no matter
what—even if a limb is missing, since they believe themselves so indispensable to the
show. Brodsky perceives the charitable work of Miss Collins, however, as a waste of
time, unlike his own artistic contribution to the community (363).

As Brodsky buries his dog he remembers how he could never live up to Miss
Collins's expectations—the demands she placed on him regarding household repairs, for
example. But most irritating to Miss Collins is Brodsky's insistent nursing of and
fawning over his mysterious wound. What could this wound represent in Ryder's
psyche? Most likely, it is the lack of unconditional love shown to him by his parents, and
as a result of that deprivation, he feels chronically insecure about his abilities as a pianist;
after all, he perpetually believes each venue's show will seal his reputation as the best,
but, like Sisyphus and the rock, he never quite makes it to the top. Miss Collins adds to
Brodsky-Ryder's grief by chiding that his wound has kept him from becoming
"worthwhile," and that she and the music were only "mistresses" he sought consolation
from.

"You'll never be a proper conductor. You never were, even back then.
Your music will only ever be about that silly little wound...it'll never be
anything of any value to anyone else. At least I, in my own small
way...did my best to help the unhappy people here." (499)

Ishiguro positions Ryder's final alter ego as an elderly porter, almost entirely
absent from the spotlight and without social recognition outside that supplied by a
handful of other porters. The novel opens with an episode demonstrating the
superfluousness of someone who takes his occupation of public service too seriously.
Consider the opening episode with Gustav which establishes the central concern of the
novel. In it Gustav the porter explains that he adheres to stringent standards of portering
so as to reap a bounty of respect for his profession. He insists upon holding Mr. Ryder’s suitcases when reason would suggest he lay them down. The contrast between the importance of Gustav’s chore and that of Ryder’s impending task sharply separates them, while yet expressing the same sentiment: the need to be significant. Their shared need foreshadows the startling twist at the end of the novel that reveals Ryder himself as utterly insignificant, and we discover he has been under the same illusion of self-importance as Gustav. Just as the butler Mr. Stevens of *The Remains of the Day* and Ono of *An Artist of the Floating World* deludedly claim a positions of influence in the unfoldings of history, so do Gustav, and a part of Mr. Ryder. The idea that through their own small part they have made a difference to the larger whole consumes them. Ishiguro can empathize: “I suppose I write out of a fear that I myself might try to do things I think are important, and later realize they are not as great or useful as I thought” (Kellaway 7). Gustav nurses the idea that only he can fill a certain role in the matrix of society, without which it would collapse. He resents the notion “that anyone could do this job if they took it into their heads, if the fancy just took them” (6). So, he throws himself into the art of portering, to determine exactly what’s required “to impress on the guests something of the true nature of our work” (8). We first meet Gustav as “the elderly porter,” and not as Ryder’s father-in-law, as we soon discover to be his true relationship. This relationship develops at the end as Ryder fuses together his own identity.

The rift created between father and daughter in Sophie’s early childhood echoes one of Gustav-Ryder’s favorite childhood games in which he had deprived himself of human contact for as long as he could bear it. Ryder had claimed to his companion Fiona Roberts that he enjoyed feeling lonely and wanted to have a life spent entirely alone. To
prepare himself for this, he would often play far from the house, lost in a fantasy, and when he might suddenly feel desperate for the company of his parents, instead of going to them he would “go to a special spot along the lane...where I would remain standing for several minutes fighting off my emotions” (172). He prefers solitude because he associates marriage and family with discord. Fiona hints that there was an infidelity between his parents, “a special thing” that provoked their arguments, but Ryder does not catch on. He mainly concerns himself with being emotionally self-sufficient, rather than deduce the source and treatment of domestic woe.

This scenario resonates with the scene in which Gustav severs verbal communication with Sophie, simply for the sake of severance. His decision leads to “an understanding” that permanently alienates her. He recalls, “Oh goodness me, it wasn’t easy at all, I loved my little girl more than anything in the world, but I told myself I had to be strong. Three days, I said to myself, three days would be sufficient, three days and that would be the end of it” (82). Ultimately self-centered, Gustav is astonished that Sophie does not rush into his arms at the end of the period—a period with no explanation offered for it. So, for pride, they continue the silence. He even refuses to go to her after realizing she had abandoned her pet hamster in a gift box, for which Sophie crumbles into tears. Gustav hears her through her bedroom door, but does not go to her because she did not call specifically for him. Sophie notices him listening and cements her resolve to speak to him never again and he reciprocates the treatment, though they continue to care for one another. Prideful independence brings about emotional disaster for the characters rather than liberation.
Boris (young Ryder) idolizes Gustav, especially his “porter dancing,” although he is terrified that the stress caused by the luggage stunts will lead to Gustav’s death. With Boris, Gustav secures the nearest thing to a meaningful relationship in the novel. Partners in play, they portray the antithesis of perfectionistic, workaholic Ryder, although both display either the seeds or remnants of an insatiable taste for public lauding. Ishiguro uses this relationship to emphasize the divide between public and private (a distinction of realms the dream perverts for Ryder), as Ryder notes that “oddly, although Gustav had only a few seconds before been the focus of every gaze in the room, no one seemed now to pay much attention as grandfather and grandson embraced deeply, making no attempt to hide from each other their immense relief” (407). When real connection takes place it is only outside the bright lights of public performance.

Ishiguro’s Künstlerroman, like James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man (1916), is autobiographical and at the same time, it is not. Reminiscent of Stephen, Ishiguro, during his study at the University of East Anglia, “criticized his own work so savagely that students tried to cheer him up about his writing,” Kate Kellaway noted in 1997. The perfectionism of Ryder suggests a degree of similarity between the writer and his protagonist. He noted to Susie Mackenzie, during a period of reconsideration of the novel by literary journalists in 1997, that “every good parent offers their child freedom to believe that the world is a stable, safe and morally ordered place—and offers it knowing it is a lie” (12). Ryder’s parents were not “good parents” in that they exposed to Ryder the cold existential reality that the world is not a morally ordered place and instead is random and chaotic, without essential human worth.
Another myth we grow up believing, an illusion which most of us are disabused of by early adulthood and some of us never, is that we are capable of achieving anything. When Ishiguro was young he believed he could be the almighty John Wayne that young Ichiro in *Artist* pretends to be or the ninja/carpenter that Boris plays at, so Ishiguro “took responsibility for keeping the family together,” since he understood British culture the best within a recently emigrated Japanese family. In fact he developed what he calls “a wildly exaggerated sense of responsibility,” a burden Ryder certainly displays as he attempts to assuage every single character’s petty need to the point of unbearable anxiety (Mackenzie 12).

Dreams, as a kind of autobiography, provide a review of our lives, distorting particular anxieties and intensifying others, as though refracted through a prism. In his nightmare, Ryder reveals his anxieties regarding the integrity of the reputation surrounding his artistic creativity. About his own creative drive, Ishiguro has said to Maya Jaggi

> You start to wonder why you write novels—sitting alone in your study, giving up your free time. People are prepared to wreck their relationships. For many creative people...the drive comes from something that’s out of line, equilibrium that’s been lost.

> When you’re talking about things that go fundamentally wrong, it’s usually to do with the family early on—emotional bereavement or deprivation—or simply childhood coming to an end. It’s not an overtly psychoanalytic view—I’m not a great subscriber to Freud—but it’s based on observation of myself and people around me. (28)
Displacement from his home country and his family caused his own “lost equilibrium.” In *The Unconsoled*, he shows that it is too late for Ryder to “fix or heal what he wanted to.” Brodsky thinks he can find consolation for his wound in music or the love of a woman. But for artists the most that success can provide is consolation, never a cure. Just as previous Ishiguro protagonists practice what Page calls “a mixture of self-deception and self-justification,” such as the artist Ono and the butler Stevens, Ryder too visits his past and future selves in his dream (although he never becomes conscious of their identity as his alter egos) in order to frame his predicament of isolation and insignificance (166).
III

Fluctuating Dreamscape: The Terrain of Ryder’s Mind

Space and time fluctuate in this novel according to Ryder’s state of mind and according to his memory. A fifteen-minute drive to a party will stretch out for days, seemingly, while a party of several hours occupies a few minutes. The center of the old town can contract into a tight mass of tunnels and turns, whereas a small meadow can expand into a desolate plain in just a sentence or two. These wild transformations intensify the atmosphere of anxiety surrounding Ryder the dreamer, underscoring the Lacanian self-message that he is out of control in his waking life. Furthermore, that Ryder’s memories of his childhood and of his life in England encroach upon his perception of his environment in this middle-eastern European city, suggests that neither he nor any of us can ever experience any space/time sequence without the influence of our past.

Landscape, architecture, and climate, as components of time and space, tend to emphasize the unrelenting solitude of Ryder, impede his attempts to act, and counteract the order he tries to impose onto his world. Furthermore, as a stylistic accent, the minimalist description of the landscape complements the absurd action by at times lending an austere quality not unlike that created by the solitary tree on the stage during Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. Yet the landscape also serves the opposite capacity by at times lending baroque convolution to a novel that might otherwise be considered dull and sparse. Essentially, space in this novel fluctuates between the frightfully suffocating and the eerily open. While writing this novel Ishiguro admitted to trying to find
some territory, somewhere between straight realism and that kind of out-
and-out fabulism, where I can create a world that isn’t going to alienate or
baffle readers in a way that a completely fantastic world would.

(Vorda 16)

If we treat the entire novel as a nightmare constructed within the mind of the
protagonist, a proposition encouraged by the bizarrely hypercontinuous\(^2\) narrative
sequencing, then the detours Ryder meets may be recognized as symbolic trials
specifically disturbing to the narrator. For example, that cupboards connect opposite ends
of the city and that rooms shrink or swell unpredictably demonstrates the nightmarish
unreliability of space. Ryder of course takes these impossible occurrences in stride since
the temporal, spatial, and logical monitors of waking life have been disconnected. In
Ishiguro’s previous, less dream-like novels, he subordinated a sequential notion of time to
the idea of “shuttling” through time “so frequently and so subtly that the sense of
distance, along with that of reality...dissolves into a unique narrative of timelessness,”
according to Fumio Yoshioka in reference to the many flashbacks in \textit{A Pale View of Hills}
(75). He repeats his trick even more boldly in this text.

In tandem with the thematic treatment of landscape and architecture as a
projection of Ryder’s mind, is the manifestation of chaos in patterns of Ryder’s travel
across geographical space. What seems to be nonsensical, pointless meandering actually
contains a specific pattern, and a path central to the growth of his character. In the first

\(^2\) I use the term hypercontinuous to signify a particular narrative technique in which events tend to flow
into one another. Joyce employed this effect in \textit{Ulysses}, and Ishiguro uses it even more fully in this novel.
There are no indications that time has elapsed outside of the narrative. In fact, Ryder seems not even to
sleep. No sooner does he lie down, than does a knock on the door or a ringing phone rouse him.
section of the novel Sophie is a perverse Beatrice accompanying Ryder through his personal purgatory—the town—except that she’s a saint of chaos without the soothing presence of Beatrice. She injects disorder (Ryder’s nemesis) into his situation and extracts emotional dependence from him during his nightmarish journey. She leads him down narrow alleys, and loses him in dark, downtown neighborhoods.

In the opening scene in which Ryder enters the hotel, a rack of magazines in different languages is conspicuous. The multi-lingual rack—German, French, and English—establishes the setting as the heart of Europe, recalling the old world’s artistic sensibilities and its traditional claim to be the cultural capital of the world. The town itself is a microcosm for Old World Europe and its modern displacement as the primary producer of great art. The town scrambles to reestablish itself as the cradle of creative genius, but clearly its attempts fail. The twisted, illogical alleyways and idiosyncratic neighborhoods seem a liability to the town, rendering it unknowable to outsiders. The town’s peculiarity seems to alienate outsiders, an unaffordable cost according to Hoffman, who worries that touring companies would just as soon visit a newer city with better venues and a more reliable infrastructure. Put simply, the old world is dangerously old-fashioned in this novel.

In this same scene, finicky Ryder observes that the “ceiling was low and had a definite sag, creating a slightly claustrophobic mood, and despite the sunshine outside the light was gloomy” (3). The dull levels of light inside the hotel, in contrast with sunshine outside, plant the idea that even though Ryder’s outer persona is vibrant, his inner psyche lacks a certain clarity and optimism. The low light also suggests that he does not know himself and that he cannot see his fatal flaw. Part of his flaw deals with the
Claustrophobia he persistently experiences because he simultaneously abhors and craves other people, an ambivalence that produces an unreconcilable tension within him when swarms of people congregate around him, such as when he would make an appearance at a performance. He needs the support of other people, both public and personal, and yet fears they could potentially suffocate him. His preoccupation with personal space prompts him to carefully note how much room lies between the lobby’s coffee tables. In scenes such as these, this novel confronts political and psychological manipulations of space, as will be shown by the piano practice scene in particular.

An example of space altering according to his memory, as Ryder lies on his hotel room bed he realizes—by applying a fuzzy sort of dream logic—that the room is (not is like) a room from his childhood, though everything has been considerably altered. He slips into a reverie of a time when he would play with plastic soldiers while his parents carried on a terrible row. Young Ryder had always despised a torn patch of the carpet, until he realized it could be used as a bush terrain. He refers to the patch as “the blemish that had always threatened to undermine my imaginary world” (16). Adult Ryder too bears a torn place that threatens his imaginary world of being a great artist: parents who never accepted him. He incorporates this patch into his fantasy as well, just as he did while a child, by scripting them to appear in a “first-class carriage” driven through a “central avenue in the woods,” as though they were the good and kindly king and queen from a fairy tale (379). They do not, of course, ever make an appearance, let alone accept their son because of one single, spectacular performance.

From the hotel he ventures to the Old Town, past glassy office buildings, over a humpbacked bridge and toward the colorful awnings of the historic district. Modern life
encroaches on the older section of town with its “streets noisy with late afternoon traffic,” an analogue to the encroachment of modern art forms (31). Even though the town cringes at the newer composers with their complicated discordant syncopation, the newer music must be approached and accepted if the town wants to revive itself as a center for creative impulse. But they instead ignore the newer sound, and likewise ignore the steel and glass of newer ideas of structure. But for a while yet, the stubborn town is safe to live in the past, in spite of “a chilly breeze which every now and then caused a flutter to pass through the parasols surrounding the café” (31). That same brisk wind, which picks up quite a bit, often chills Ryder, casting him not as a hearty, impervious star, but as a vulnerable, skinless (or at least overcoat-less) human being, unsure of who he is.

At times the nightmare seems on the edge of exposing what could be the very core of Ryder, a private part not subject to the control of the public, but the story line stops short of such a revelation, because Ryder has donated his identity to the public, and they, not he, largely determine how he shall be known. At one point, for example, he meets Sophie and follows her through the convoluted alleyways of the Old Town, past dingy, windowless warehouses and towering brick walls, additional symbols for Ryder’s obscured vantage point into his own psyche (40). He can’t see himself because of all the windowless walls of his self-constructed identity as performer. He receives little help from the other characters; Sophie proceeds to lose him and young Boris-Ryder when she slips into a side alley, “whose entrance was little more than a crack in the wall” (43). The crack tantalizes the reader’s sensibilities, which crave a definitive taste of Ryder’s identity, in the same sense that the visitor to the house of Usher descended into the house of his mind, which then collapsed under the strain of having a split personality of
creativity and rationality. The alley represents the catwalk into his dis-eased mind. This crack in the wall invitingly appears to be a way into his mind, but on the other side of the alley, we find only more city.

It descended steeply and appeared so narrow it did not seem possible to go down it without scraping an elbow along one or the other of the rough walls to either side. The darkness was broken only by two street lamps, one half-way down, the other at the very bottom.

Boris gripped my hand as we began our descent, and soon his breath was coming with difficulty again.

To the extent that Boris is his child-self, it seems appropriate that he should accompany Ryder on this pilgrimage. Sophie, if we understand her to be Ryder’s nemesis in many ways, must be the one to guide him through his affair, since it is she who wants him to commit to their family, develop meaningful bonds, to accept his son (who really isn’t his son, just as it is suggested that Ryder wasn’t his father’s son), and to accept a little chaos in his life as inevitable and even enjoyable. The process of self-discovery is an arduous one for Ryder as evidenced by Boris-Ryder’s shortness of breath.

The hotel persists as a conduit for the symbols of Ryder’s internal crisis. Mr. Hoffman, who, like many of the townspeople, at times becomes a mouthpiece for Ryder’s neuroses, admits that he becomes “Obsessed, yes, obsessed, with one room or another” (121). He attacks these rooms with a renovating fury, doing them over according to a precise, intricate vision. Unrelentingly oriented toward detail, he must either recreate his concept exactly or risk being awash in anxiety. Furthermore, he insists that he match the
guests to the appropriate room, and he insists Ryder move to a more distinguished room.

And Ryder does indeed display what he calls "an unseemly attachment" to his first room—more evidence that this novel is indeed a dream entirely revolving around Ryder’s idiosyncrasies (156). Ryder’s sensitivity to form and detail reflects itself in Mr. Hoffman’s obsession with appearances.

The hotel continues to antagonize Ryder, drawing him into chaotic spirals. At one point he travels miles to a dinner at the Countessa’s residence, but ends up reaching only the atrium of the hotel. In fact, it’s almost as though he goes nowhere but the hotel, in spite of hours of confused wandering. The scenes in which he realizes he is still in the hotel usually go something like this:

Then, as I looked past the clusters of standing and seated dinner of standing and seated dinner guests, past the waiters and the tables, to where the vast room disappeared into darkness, it suddenly dawned on me that we were in the atrium of the hotel. (162)

The trip to the atrium from the lobby requires an extensive car ride through thick forests to the dining room of the Countessa, into her drawing room, which becomes the atrium. Geographical and chronological disorder in Ryder’s environment undermines the meager semblance of control he desperately scrambles for. In the anxiety dream, the manipulation of space has been thought to intensify our fears of disorder, being lost, or out of control, so that we engage them at their most terrible degree and to enable us to work through the frightening possible reality that we have no agency and are worth very
little. Or the possibility always remains that anxiety dreams are merely projections of
our psyche and serve no ameliorative purpose.

My running comparison to *The Trial* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* demonstrates the taxing effects of fluctuating dreamscapes on the dreamer. The all-encompassing hotel bears a strong likeness to the court in *The Trial* and to the rabbit’s house in the Lewis Carroll story. At one point Ryder must choose between several doors in an art gallery for the one that will lead back into the hotel. He reasons that the most imposing, decorous door will be the correct one. He thinks that even if it does not open into the hotel, it will at least go to “somewhere of significance from where we could work out our route, away from the public gaze” (278). Ever so painfully aware of the public, Ryder grows anxious as he prevaricates in choosing a door. Finally he yanks open the largest one “whereupon, to my horror, the very thing I had most feared occurred: I had opened a broom cupboard” (278). Ryder abhors being made a fool, for such judgments scrape away at the foundation of his self-concept, since he had never built his sense of self as much on his own opinion of himself as he did on the opinions of others. Social psychologists might say that his hypersensitivity to the opinions of others is a sign of low self-esteem, though cultural psychologists argue that group-dependent individuals are actually stronger in the long run. Regardless of what Ryder’s other-oriented self-concept says about his self-esteem, the tumbling brooms and mops deeply embarrass him, and he yanks open another door, which does indeed open into a corridor of the hotel. Sophie then leads them through a cupboard into a narrow passage with bare pipes and dim electric light, and finally into the refuge of the night air.
The archetypal notion that doors in dreams represent opportunities, secrets, or indecision resonates with Ryder’s repeated encounters with them. Through them he explores, though rather hesitatively, his insecurities and self-doubt. He must confront the fact that he can neither control nor know everything, and that certain risks must be taken to discover what is on the other side. Such as, what would happen if I simply did not perform? What would it mean “to open some strange door through which I would hurtle into a dark, unknown space,” he asks when about to step on stage for the thousandth time (518).

In the same way that Ryder never really leaves the hotel, Joseph K. neither ever really escapes from the court. When he visits the painter, Titorelli, for example, he encounters a strange front door, about which the painter talks at length. A pack of young neighborhood girls with a copy of a stolen key repeatedly enter into the painter’s apartment, as though they were groupies infatuated with a rock star (Kafka 113). The painter’s unprotected door corresponds to Ryder’s lack of privacy. Similarly, the entire town in The Unconsoled disregards his personal space, as though by accepting the mantle of artist he has forsaken his right to the separation of public and private. A second door in the painter’s studio expands the implications of doors. Behind the bed, it opens into court offices. Titorelli reveals to Joseph that the court owns everything, even the irritating pubescent girls. Moreover, judges periodically enter through the “little door in the wall;” clearly, there is not only no escape from the public (the whining girls) but neither from judgment (Kafka 122). Kafka’s oft-quoted statement, “only our concept of time makes us call the Last Judgment by that name; in fact, it is a court in standing session,” could apply to Ryder’s trial. Will his listening audience sentence him to being
less than the best? How will they judge his performance? Will Boris judge him to be an acceptable father figure? The last few pages make the conclusions of the jury clear: he is found not to possess an unalienable essence of fatherhood, husbandhood, or artisthood. So both the painter, as artist and Joseph K., as the guilty, parallel Ryder.

Alice too must open doors. Very often she is either too small or too large for them, a poignant quandary given the child’s perpetual plight of either being too old for the pampering and toys of last year or too young for the responsibilities and privileges of next year. Moreover, the mere continual change in physical size can provoke confusion in small children, or at least establish a dynamic of change as the norm for them, while a static dynamic seems, to the child, to persist for grown-ups. That is, adults appear to remain the same, in size, in power, and in knowledge, leaving children to scramble for a stable identity so that they too may earn respect and responsibility. (But of course, most children grow up to discover that a stable identity is myth.) Developmental psychologists note that regular schedules, chores, rules, and ordered spaces aid children in securing a sense of self. But the structure must be one that makes sense to the child if it is to provide a secure platform on which to construct an identity. If it appears arbitrary, unpredictable and harsh, or if it strikes the child as completely unascertainable because it wavers and shifts constantly, as Wonderland seems to Alice, then it only distresses the child.

In the White Rabbit’s house, Carroll utilizes spatial metaphors to describe the psychological turmoil of a child who relatively lacks agency. When Alice swallows some potion from a bottle labeled DRINK ME, she swells so much that she must stick one hand out the window and the other up a chimney. After much fretting she gobbles a
cake that shrinks her to the size of a poppy. She wanders into the garden, and the Caterpillar commands her to explain herself, to which she replies, “‘I can’t explain myself, I’m afraid, Sir...because I’m not myself’” (37). With the naïveté, or sagacity, of a child, Alice suggests a definite link between body and self. Because she has been “so many different sizes in a day,” she feels she cannot comment on who she is. Ryder fluctuates in size, according to how many people recognize him as a star at any given moment. In an argument with Sophie he can be very small, as well as at a reception in which no one recognizes him, but he can be quite large at times such as when the art critics, in homage and deference to his greatness, query his views. Just as Alice can only doubtfully claim to be a little girl, since she vacillates in size so much, Ryder too can only grasp tentatively at any given identity.

Space proves an arbitrary and unpredictable medium for Alice and Ryder. At one point, Ryder realizes the café he sits in is in the same building “in which I had left Boris,” though at this point nothing seems surprising to the reader (203). At that point he ducks into the kitchen and finds a tall and narrow door he thinks might be a broom closet.

I then saw there were three steps—they appeared to be made from wooden boxes nailed one on top of the other—rising from the threshold...As I reached the top step, I saw in front of me a small rectangle of light...I found myself looking through a glass panel into a room filled with sunlight.

(204)

He recognizes Boris and they head north for the artificial lake. Ishiguro charts the path of sunlight throughout the novel. Yet the sunshine rarely comes across as positive. Instead,
the sunlight, as in this passage, seems to serve the harsh purpose of exposing Ryder, making him (the artistic night creature) vulnerable to predators or making visible his failings. Neither does the gloom of the overcast sky provide relief or sanctuary. Instead it usually obscures his path, losing him in a fog of indecision. Ishiguro emphasizes Ryder’s no-win predicament by having him declare that “even with the sky overcast, there was harshness to the daylight falling across the room” (192).

The artificial lake in the hunt-for-Number 9 scene with Boris provides another layer of comment on the strained relationship between Ryder and his son. Ryder partly admires the artificial lake, the “way it proudly announced its artificiality,” and notes that its kidney shape resembled “some gigantic version of the kind of vulgar swimming pool Hollywood stars were once reputed to own” (210). No grass rims the pool, and the trees are confined to steel pots in front of identical high-rise apartments. Trapped by the allure of man-made productions because he himself is man-made, or self-manufactured rather, Ryder might identify with the lake as a uniform, predictable creation. The untamable chaos of nature frightens Ryder; he fears the uncontrollable ramifications of deep relationships: discord, upset schedules, compromise, and deflection of the spotlight. All these things are inevitable when one has a child. Suddenly, when a family enters his life, Ryder cannot spend all of his time being Number One to the outside world; he must subordinate his career—what fuels his positive self-regard—to Boris. Yet he does not allow himself to reap the benefits of having a child: being Number One to one person in a substantial way. In his typical oblivious manner, he does not recognize that Boris’s obsession with the home repair book is in fact an homage to Ryder, a fanship ultimately more salubrious than a thousand Mrs. Hoffman’s put together. And so Ryder blindly and
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destructively admonishes Boris not to mention the trivial book again. Even at the end of the book, after a partial renovation of his ideas, Ryder would still rather swim in the kidney-shaped artificial lake than a wilder, natural river. He wants to construct his inner life and outer environment according to nonnegotiable specifications he thinks will be safe, clean, and orderly, like the artificial lake. In this way, he perches on a brittle twig, hoping the world will conform to the will of one man.

As depicted above in the cases of doors and a swimming pool, specific symbols as they are positioned in space can take on allegorical significance in a Jungian sense. Another example of objects determining or describing Ryder’s psychological state is the episode when Ryder tries to find the concert hall for his early dawn performance: the tangled metropolis bewilders him, particularly a gigantic wall sealing off a portion of downtown. A citizen explains, very unsatisfactorily, “‘You can’t get past the wall. Of course you can’t. It completely seals the street’” (387). The exasperated Ryder stalks off, grunting that the wall symbolizes the preposterous pretenses of the town. He lacks the ability to cognitively decipher additional significance, but we, the readers, might interpret the wall to be yet another manifestation of his frustration at his lack of control over all the variables.

Perhaps the ultimate example of a physical object creating a political and psychological space in public is the use of statuary or monuments. The mysterious Sattler monument embodies Ryder’s desire to be larger than life and demonstrates the self-destructiveness of this wish because its potency ends up driving away his admiring public. The entire episode plays itself out as trap set by the media who, instead of revering him as a hero, exploit him as a headline maker, embedding him in controversy.
The reader can never ascertain entirely what the significance of the monument is, but this is only fitting, since Ryder neither understands what it means, and we are limited to his perspective. That Ryder never presses the reporters to answer his queries concerning the implications of the setting documents one of the more irritating symptoms of his nightmare: no one ever really listens to him as a fellow human being, only as an art object. The sneaky reporters, who seem to specialize in undermining artists, plot to play up to Ryder's vanity and lure him into doing a photo shoot with the monument. They feed him lines about how he was their childhood hero—a scene most disturbing in that Ryder had previously been able to count on sincere support from fans to nourish his ego during the novel.

The steepness of the path up to the monument, "a tall cylinder of white brickwork," tires Ryder, and blasts of wind wear on him (182). The metaphor of height for fame corresponds with Ryder's climb to the pinnacle of piano performance: the greatest feat of his life. As a hint that his steep trek has led to more misery than climactic pleasure, the wind eerily claws at Ryder. The suggestion that Ryder must now defend himself against a host of ills (competitors, mismanagement, or injuries such as tendonitis that would cripple his virtuosic hands) resonates with the fact that the monument, with its single slit of window, resembles a turret from a medieval castle, constructed to repel invaders. He finally comes down off the hill in the company of Christoff, another who had also once been King of the Hill in the musical arena. The "long flight of rickety stone steps" that lead "dizzingly down the hillside" foreshadow Ryder's inevitable deflation (183).
The result of the photo shoot features Ryder as Superman, with his “fist raised to the wind” and “an expression of unbridled ferocity” (267). He cringes at the belligerency suggested of him by the photos that show him presenting the monument proudly. The exact implications of the story never surface, but the point remains that it has somewhat alienated and discredited Ryder in the eyes of the public. At his next social gathering almost no one pays him attention, and when he tries to explain himself some even snub him. At this point, Ryder finally verbalizes the fact that the machine of public recognition, which he as a presumptuous Dr. Frankenstein had created, has now grown out of his control and threatens to disable him. He also wearily complains to Miss Collins, “I have not been able to go about things in quite the way I originally planned,” an understatement in typical Ryder fashion (300). His dense schedules forbid disruption at the risk of compromising his artistic performance, and he barely manages to demand practice time before entirely running out of time and being forced to cancel the show.

Ryder’s ongoing battle with space re-emerges as Hoffman attempts to secure an appropriate practice room. As the drawing room is full, Hoffman directs Ryder to a cramped cubicle. But since the latch does not function, Ryder becomes worried that “some obtuse person” might attempt to enter (339). Like most famous people, he obsesses over privacy, especially while practicing. Practice is for the private; performance for the public. Rigid and neurotic, Ryder cannot let go of this code, and he nearly assaults Mr. Hoffman while demanding a better space: in this case, a wooden hut perched on a small hill several miles from town. The room suffices except that he “had an uneasy feeling that I was about to slide backwards down the hill” (356). This same ominous sense of precariousness hovers in the wings of the entire novel. Just as the
rickety downward steps of the monument signified Ryder’s imminent undoing, so does the tilted piano forecast a debacle.

After his practice session, the novel flows from a funeral for Brodsky’s dog to a funeral for a town person, an example of a narrative technique that avoids transitional paragraphs that indicate events outside the narrative, or, rather, an example of hypercontinuity. Even though Ryder never leaves the town, the novel reads much like a travel narrative, with Ryder, a Moll Flanders, running across his next adventure in picaresque fashion by journeying from one place to the next. Just by merely walking a few steps down “the grassy central path of the cemetery,” he encounters his next trial: the funeral. This scene serves as a tidy microcosm of Ryder’s predicament in life. The mourners clamor around him, inviting him into the most private arena of their lives. They pump him for his opinions, believing that he is indeed extra special. They offer him their best desserts, including a fruitcake that crumbles in his hands, neither nutritious nor substantial. But Ryder’s glorified status disintegrates as the funeral goers realize he does not actually possess any kind of superior core. “A voice from the back” yells out that he is not so special, and that his presence intrudes on what should a private, personal time for the grievers (369). Ryder considers the scene “a miscalculation,” and he dissolves into his next episode, being led away by Hoffman. The funeral scene, a fractal of a larger pattern, shows itself in the novel as whole. Indeed, the town as a whole rejects Ryder at the end. Only genuine connections lead to sincere relationships, which then leads to a sense of being significantly important to others. A kingdom of fans fails to supply Ryder what he lacks. Sophie told Ryder what a lonely place the world can be, but will he ever learn how not to be alone?
Ryder flows from one scene to the next with a hypercontinuity absent of even a trace of downtime, as exemplified by the above uninterrupted movement from the practice session to Brodsky’s dog’s funeral to the town citizen’s funeral. Most realistic narratives in some way account for the necessary, mundane tasks in a character’s life that are superfluous to the plot; typically, chapter breaks, ellipses, or summary sentences will refer to this downtime. Ishiguro eschews this convention of literature while maintaining a commitment to precisely descriptive prose.

Chaos theory may apply not only to the landscape in this novel but also to the narrative structure itself. Like many eighteenth-century novels, such as Tom Jones and Pamela, this work takes on an episodic structure in which many scenes lack a teleological function. Unlike Dickens’s Hard Times, for instance, in which events build upon one another toward a particular set of resolutions, The Unconsoled indulges tangential events for their own sake. For example, his coincidental and drawn-out engagements with Parkhurst, Fiona Roberts, Mrs. Hoffman, and the café intellectuals bear little on any kind of plot intrigue. Yet these events do perpetuate a pattern, a dynamical complex system in which Ryder confronts his next inner anxiety, be it embodied in character or object. Just when it seems as though he has lost Boris in a café someplace, a series of events will coincidentally lead him back to that café. In this way, disaster is avoided just enough to allow the nightmare to continue with Ryder remaining in the borderland between control and mayhem. As Dean Wilcox notes, regarding the relationship between dynamical systems and art, chaos theory offers a methodological approach for examining “the diachronic interaction of elements,” which “takes precedence over the synchronic
examination of fragments” (708). That is, at every level of complexity within a system, such as a novel, patterns emerge that inform that elements of which they are constructed.

Ishiguro in 1993 said that he wanted to produce a book with “a particular setting that would actually take off into the realm of metaphor” (Vorda 16). Considering the scene in which Ryder stands on the rickety balcony observing the concert, Ishiguro’s statement bears itself out. Just before this scene he tells Sophie what tremendous pressure he is under; the electronic scoreboard (from which he’ll read the audience’s questions) signifies to Ryder that he is about to be scored, judged, decided on. He then queues up to climb through yet another cupboard; “it pulled towards me, obliging me to balance precariously on the top step,” and even though “the view was certainly commanding…the whole arrangement struck me as idiotically hazardous” (476-77). The parapet simulates the shaky heights to which Ryder has vaulted himself. Only a thin cord prevents his tumbling from the balcony to the orchestra pit. But what stops him from crashing from the heights of fame? Ishiguro believes that he is “closing in on some strange, weird territory,” edging closer with each book; perhaps this unspecified territory lies just beyond the edge of Ryder’s narcissistic balcony (Vorda 29).
The Public Within: Ryder’s Flawed Celebrity

In *The Remains of the Day* Ishiguro “foregrounds private experience and allows domestic and even trivial events to represent, by synecdoche, historic happenings on a world stage” (Wall 162). But the reverse exists in this novel: the public is largely a projection of Ryder’s psyche, rather than Ryder being a product of the town in any sort of naturalistic way. The sparse historical or regional specificity minimizes any sense that what happens during the two days of Ryder’s visit would impact political affairs or find itself recorded in the annals of world history. Instead, Ryder’s public experience is framed, albeit with elastic, by his psyche, and hence, the town’s unfolding history serves as a supplement to the character’s internal metamorphoses. A secondary function of the town allows Ishiguro to indulge in satire and farce, exposing the cult of culture as an acid that dissolves the health of the community.

The town subscribes to a self-manufactured legend of historic significance that overshadows its current state of urban dilapidation; it believes it was once a hub of learning, politics, and art. For example, Frederick the Great supposedly once spent an evening in Hoffman’s hotel in the eighteenth century, and because of that minimal scrap of lore, the town assumes a mantle of greatness. Since the townspeople offer no other evidence of past eminence, it could be concluded that even though they ask Ryder to reverse a historical trend, in actuality Ryder must produce a mythological ideal that never existed in the first place. For most of the novel Ryder dances a pretty step he thinks will appease them or make them believe they are bound for notoriety, but toward the end, his
efforts fail and his patience (and theirs) withers, leaving a town resigned to comfortable mediocrity and leaving Ryder stripped of his heroic status.

The Citizen’s Mutual Support Group, a collection of people “from every walk of life brought together by their sense of having suffered from the present crisis,” could perhaps signify Britain, a possibility suggested by Ishiguro’s frequent comment that the older British generation has continued to perceive itself as a geocentric hegemony (12). He finds the new generation, the Stephens of Britain, much more lucid concerning their relative insignificance: “...the younger group has this consciousness that Britain is not the center of the universe. There was a time when Britain thought it had this dominant role in the world ...” (Vorda 10). Related to the decentering of the UK, marginalization as a theme has threads woven into all of Ishiguro’s work: the town, as the psychological echo or Greek chorus of Ryder, feels they have fallen from artistic renown; Stevens the butler feels stranded in the legacy of British imperialism; and Ono from An Artist of the Floating World must face the shocking conclusion that his artistic presence made little impact on imperial politics. But I doubt the town represents England as its primary function; rather, the town of course serves the paramount purpose of establishing the ontological climate of Ryder’s nightmare. More than anything he fears not being great, and the town constantly reminds him of such a reality by manifesting a pathetic reality of nobodies who think they are somebodies.

Apparently, throughout Ryder’s career of touring he has catered to the public, humored the pretenses and whims of art critic/socialites, and allowed his followers to build a cultic mystic around him. Having arrived in this phantasmagoric town, he plans to proceed as he always has, giving talks, attending dinners, and taking tours, but because
of his dream-amnesiac state, he cannot recall having requested to meet with citizens of the town, and must regardless attempt to act out the part that his former self has set up for him. His predicament might resonate with the quotidian reality of waking up one day and feeling completely at odds with the scaffolding of lifestyle, occupation, or relationships that we have slowly constructed throughout the years without periodically and conscientiously taking stock of who we are and what we really want. Ishiguro himself mentions often that he feels pigeonholed by literary critics and his reading public in that they expected *Remains of the Day: Part Two*. But rather than oblige everyone (including a part of his own self) and fit inside his partially self-constructed mold, he came out with the dry and esoteric *Unconsoled*. Ryder, too, must confront this pressing issue of breaking out of the expectations based on his self of yesteryear. Because of his amnesia, he literally faces an unfamiliar life, that of his past self, and although he first scrambles to pretend as though he is in sync with his past self, at the end he finally takes the first step to mature beyond it.

Important to the novel’s theme of the hazards of bearing the identity of a performer, Ryder performs other’s artists pieces; he does not compose his own. Though he may give each work his own interpretation, he primarily performs, an act intrinsically bound to the public in a way that private creation is not. Furthermore, Ryder realizes that “clearly, this town was expecting of me something more than a simple recital,” a notion that practically trivializes the act for which Ryder is supposedly great: his piano playing becomes “a simple recital” (15). That is, his talent merely provides a seductive gateway into a social space of larger significance—a dangerous temptation for Ryder because he is a piano player, not a public relations expert. Once he begins to accept acclaim based not
on his artistic skill, but built instead on his stardom itself, then he treads on quicksand. Since public devotion behaves as a complex, dynamical system (parallel to the environment of the town) which can be predicted with no more accuracy than the weather or the postal system, Ryder risks losing any sort of grounding for his identity. Perhaps we could pinpoint his undoing as a need for public esteem, a need caused by his inability to esteem himself highly without constant social comparison.

The town conspires to woo Ryder, through guilt and other pressures, into being their hero. For example, Hoffman manipulates Ryder by saying that he will stand and wait for Ryder while he naps and by constantly reminding the pianist how keenly the town requires his services (19). Ryder bites the bait and neglects his family life for the plastic, hollow sweetness of public adoration; as a defensive explanation to Sophie, he yells

'Some of these places I visit, the people don't know a thing about modern music and if you leave them to themselves, it's obvious, they'll get deeper and deeper into trouble. I'm needed, why can't you see that?...You live in such a small world!'
worth by fortifying intimate relationships, or by executing grand achievements. Most of us aim for a balance, thereby cultivating a healthy psyche, but Ryder intently focuses on public achievement for his source of self-importance.

The above passage also makes salient that only part of Ryder’s energies are devoted to his concert. He is the Oedipus who comes to Thebes, in which the temple is the concert hall, to solve the riddle of the sphinx, nullify the curse of plague, and restore happiness to families. In the second chapter alone, three requests made to him have little to do with his piano performance: to compliment Hoffman’s wife on her albums, to transform Stephen into a virtuoso, and to mend the rift between Sophie and Gustav. Later in the novel, too, Ryder’s childhood friends begin to enlist him in the easement of their own private unrest. For one, Geoffrey Saunders expects him to reminisce about old school days with him over stale tea cakes. A common feature of this novel, characters often make rambling and embarrassingly revealing speeches about their sexual, financial, and social neuroses; Saunders is no exception. As the “golden boy of our year,” Saunders bested all his mates on the playing fields and in the classrooms, but now, a perennial bachelor, he makes do in a nondescript city. His peers and elders had set before him expectations so lofty that, by a contrast effect alone, his achievements appear as failures. As a nervous, awkward youngster Ryder had had a sibylline notion Saunders would end pathetically. Does Ryder fear that he, too, faces a similar impending debacle? Has the public vaulted his reputation beyond his level of skill? Perhaps Saunders represents this pervasive phobia of Ryder’s. But as a hopeful emblem, Saunders refers to an approaching bus as “brightly lit” and “warm and comfortable” (51), a metaphor for communal acceptance, anonymity, and growth.
Ironically, public transportation surfaces as the conduit for a potentially stable and healthful identity for Ryder, so that even though the public audience threatens to undermine his identity, the public cooperative shelters his identity. His next meeting is with a childhood friend, Fiona Roberts, a ticket taker on the same tram that protects Ryder and his son from a chilly wind on their way to the artificial lake. This encounter presses the issue of Ryder’s ability to deliver whatever it is that people anticipate from him, a crisis first introduced in the Saunders episode. Fiona wants to prove to the supercilious women of the town that she knows people of note, in particular, Ryder. Of course, since Ryder has amnesia, he misses their appointment, earning her displeasure, and so he schedules a second engagement with Fiona and the worst of the condescending women of the Welcoming Committee. Only by the most convoluted of circumstances does he actually arrive right on time. At the gathering, he finds he cannot declare his identity. In the typical dream trope of running and not getting anywhere, he repeatedly tries and fails to find his voice and find a break in the conversation that condemns Fiona further and further for her claim to a friendship with Ryder. Time after time he “made another concerted effort to announce myself, but to my dismay all I could manage was another grunt,” inciting panic in both him and Fiona (239). Turning red, he staggers out, glancing at the mirror on his way out, a sight that tears at the fabric of his identity: he can’t even declare “I am Ryder” without experiencing a myocardial infarction. Fiona’s resulting bitterness adds to the evidence that Ryder simply cannot be everyone’s hero.

In tandem with his paralysis of speech, he constantly prevaricates at every turn in events, such as when Brodsky’s performance pitifully crumbles under his wild
conducting, causing Ryder to waver offstage, "preoccupied with the question of how precisely to execute such an intervention" (495).

The final friend that Ryder meets of his childhood triumvirate, Jonathon Parkhurst, also lingers, prevaricates, and wallows, in his case, because a particular identity, that lingers long after the life of its veritable applicability, causes him confusion. Having been the class clown, his friends expect a specific pattern of behaviour from him that he must now force a replication of, or risk alienation from his peers; he wants to act in manner most representative of who he is, but he cannot muster the assertiveness to break the mold. In addition to his mirroring of Ryder’s predicament of an extrinsically bolstered identity, Parkhurst serves to reveal another element of Ryder’s germinating personality during his college days. Oblivious to the jeering of his classmates, Ryder resolutely dedicated himself to incessant piano practice, never allowing himself a social life. He realized that a beer-bingeing crew of pals would ruin any chance of his becoming the best at piano playing, and, because of his "training sessions" as a child when he would resist the comfort of his loved ones, he could resist peer pressure with few qualms. In fact, Ryder doesn’t even care when Parkhurst informs him that his old school chums continue to ridicule him for his prudish fastidiousness.

A larger aspect of fastidiousness in the novel, Ishiguro’s use of language adds a texture of polite euphemism that speaks of a society unable or unwilling to confront frankly particular issues. Both the narrative voice and the dialogue may be described as repetitious, florid, and entirely too plentiful: people continue speaking past the point of necessity, dragging things out, hoping one of the conversants will ask that terrifying thing left unsaid throughout the novel: does our place in the universe have worth? In stead of
addressing that momentous solipsistic crisis directly, Ryder and the others apply their desperation to more petty concerns. For example, he practices his speech to Ms. Stratmann (concerning his mysteriously missing and tightly-packed schedule), though he never works up the presence of mind to actually make it. And with Mr. Hoffman, his internal anxiety over the jostling social expectations put upon him comes out not in protest, but in deferent assurances that he will find the time. But toward the end of the novel Ryder finds a voice for his exasperation and insists on more reasonable expectations; this new voice also unloads on Ms. Stratmann a cathartic dredging of his childhood. Instead of delivering his masterpiece to the world, he turns inward in service to himself. Not only does the audience amazingly not care to have missed the hugely anticipated event, neither does Ryder.

The spoken word in the town occupies a plane of moral and political machination propagated by oblique, polite, and periphrastic speech patterns. In fact, dialogue occupies the majority of the novel, mostly in the form of monologue; often, each person seems to be so starved for attention that once he or she grabs the floor, they either fabricate inciting polemical anecdotes or divulge scandalous personal information in order to keep it. The narrative voice (Ryder’s) amplifies this elliptical effect by talking around issues and events, rather than describing them directly, just as one of Ishiguro’s primary literary influences, short story writer Raymond Carver, styles his prose. As all of Ishiguro’s narrators have related their tales in tortuous spirals, we may consider this trait as either a sign of authorial infiltration into character, or, more likely, a sign that Ishiguro picks and designs characters who conduct themselves in this manner. He has said of his style that
The language I use tends to be the sort that actually suppresses meaning and tries to hide meaning rather than chase after something just beyond the reach of words. I'm interested in the way words hide meaning. I suppose I like to have a spare, tight structure because I don't like to have this improvised feeling remain in my work. (Mackenzie 12)

Whether or not we can consider this novel to be tight or spare does not alter the fact that he clearly has projected his desire for sculpted elegance in words onto Ryder. Furthermore, Ishiguro explores the ramifications, negative and positive, of an entire population employing a sophisticated and sometimes cumbersome etiquette of speech. On the negative side, the town ends up suppressing meaning to a perilous degree. The most obvious irony of the situation involves the definition of politeness as a form of selflessness, and so the town's deployment of it for the purpose of self-advancement implicates them in a collective hypocrisy; indeed, most of the townspeople use polite speech as a venal means to maneuver those around them into "useful" positions. For example, Inge and Trude of the welcoming committee, an organization devoted in principle to serving visitors, claim to have met Ryder, when in fact they did not even see him, in order to boost their social status. Also, Miss Stratmann relays to Ryder how "witty and entertaining" everyone says his after dinner speech was, when in reality it was a dismal two sentences. The town's lies stem in part from a desire to buy into the idea of Ryder as a King Midas and in part from their need to belong to the most fashionable scene.

Most of the characters do not lie outright, but instead talk circles around the truth, just as Mr. Hoffman does when he verbally waltzes with Ryder using statements such as
“Really, I couldn’t bear to think I was adding further pressure to your schedule” (21). Of course Hoffman wants to expend the last ounce of Ryder’s energy to raise the spirits of the town and his wife, but Hoffman’s dedication to style and class allows him only subtle verbal tactics to manipulate Ryder. Amidst the anagnorisis of the end, in which Ishiguro inverts and unveils the psyche of the town and Ryder, Hoffman decides that verbal modes of diplomacy irritate him; but still he lacks the lucidity and sensitivity of Miss Collins. In an interesting inversion of Hoffman’s statement above, he now yells at Ryder for proclaiming Stephen a budding maestro. He screams, “Please don’t insult the frank intimacy into which I’ve taken you with such banal expressions of courtesy!” (354).

Though of course Ryder’s comment about Stephen was both sincere and accurate, he typically employs a soothing and contrived rhetoric to present an image of precise control not only to others but to himself as well. So, in a sense, he lies to himself. Like the very British Mr. Stevens of Remains, he exercises what Ishiguro calls the “ability to keep down turmoil and emotion” (Vorda 17). Ishiguro previously made the same comparison between Stevens and Ono, of Artist, that I make between Stevens and Ryder: “both seem to be about men who have an extraordinary capacity to lie to themselves while presenting themselves as very precise and cautious truthtellers” (Vorda 29). The suppression of the emotional part of one’s self jeopardizes the possibility of procuring an accurate identity, a dangerous place for a man who lacks anyone intimate enough to pry inside his emotional interior for even a few moments a day.

And others, still, do not lie, but instead talk without talking. Mrs. Hoffman somehow “let it be known” that she wanted Stephen to play Glass Passions instead of Dahlia, for which he had been practicing for weeks. She had been letting things be
known in place of telling them for the duration of her marriage, as though direct contact would damage a pristine part of her: her secret wishes, pleasures, and personality. She can open up to Ryder because he exhibits the same polished metal as the heroes of her daydreams. She listens to him, because she and the rest of the town believe, in the words of Gustav, that “one word from [Ryder]...would alter the course of everything” (296).

As though he were God creating the universe with his words, Ryder ostensibly can provoke sweeping responses in first and second hand listeners of his propaganda. At first this aura surrounding Ryder empowers even his most awkward speeches, such as the after-dinner speech, but his nakedness in this scene, exposed when his dressing robe falls open, reveals his actual, unpolished self to Miss Collins, and the open robe also portends the imminent disillusionment of the rest of the town. As familiarity and time degenerate his power and aura, and a few people even begin to criticize and argue with him—a healthy sign that the town realizes it is happy being a town, and feels comfortable dropping the pretense of being a flashy metropolitan.

At first, only Miss Collins speaks candidly, and for this she is granted the special status of counselor in the town. Beleaguered souls find refuge in her doily-draped parlor and patiently await her grandmotherly attention. Always a source of candid advice and a patient listener, she provides a clarity of communication sorely absent in the rest of the community. During Ryder’s rather disastrous after-dinner speech she offers him her services on the grounds that Ryder has been “making the same mistakes over and over” in his life, but Ryder of course sternly denies that he has any sort of problem (146). But in the end, he breaks down with Miss Stratmann, a woman who has a reputation of never making mistakes, perhaps because he identifies with her meticulous and calculating
personality, and by confronting her, he confronts himself in a way. Her perennial absence from the scene of action marks her as another one of the dysfunctional communicators in the novel, but because she has designed Ryder’s schedule, the rules of the game, so to speak, she must be the one Ryder finally confronts. Finally, he relinquishes his urbane persona and shares with someone his grief over never getting unconditional love from his parents.

With the dispelling of Ryder’s mystique, the town, as a reversed synecdoche for Ryder’s self, also takes the first step to come to terms with its own lack of greatness. To stage their ever so slight development into a less ostentatious society, Ishiguro employs parody and exaggeration, poking fun at them throughout, even staging the people as animals during the zoo scene with Brodsky and Miss Collins. The giraffes watch the attending fans and magistrates who in turn watch Brodsky and Miss Collins who in turn watch the giraffes.

Part of the town’s problem lies in the fact that they wish for something they do not possess a capacity to handle; they have not the authentic interest, the infrastructure, nor the “training” to deal with properly and truly appreciate top billings such as Ryder, just as Ryder hasn’t the sense of intrinsic self-worth necessary to handle life. Twice, members of an audience commence a card game, disrupting the show at hand, one time at a showing of *Space Odyssey: 2001* and another time at a poet’s performance the night of the concert. Like an attention-starved adolescent child, the townspeople try to turn every occasion into a dramatic backdrop for their personal lives, even if it means juxtaposing a grand exhibition of the fine arts and a round of poker. Indeed, at the concert the rowdy players disturb the other listeners with their antics, but their crude disregard spreads, and
soon most of the audience begins to banter across the auditorium (485). Their terrible
dearth of manners deflates the pretense to graceful politeness that Hoffman and others
made through their flowery words.

Another case in which the town's surface does not match its interior concerns is
their philosophies of art. Their discussions on art demonstrate our need to build on what
we have naturally, and they speak of our impetus to create a new rhetoric as a means of
propagating ourselves and as a means to lend existential significance to our lives.
Ishiguro emphasizes the artificial nature of art by having Ryder play pieces with titles
such as *Asbestos and Glass*. Art belongs to the urban in this novel. The notion of
masterpiece and virtuosity comes under scrutiny; masterpiece, a term somewhat
abandoned in the postmodern era, assumes there is a general standard for good art, and
virtuosity privileges the Western notion of the division of cultural labor which prescribes
that some subset of people devote themselves entirely to the creation of art, providing
entertainment for the rest of us who maintain various other institutions of society. The
high brow critics in the novel undergo a more scathing satirical treatment than high art, as
they waste emotional and intellectual energy on pointless arguments. This group of
people form factions and abuse each other over trifling points of theory, and the utility of
art comes under fire in this novel, as the absurdities of the cultured crowd aggravate
rather than facilitate human understanding. In an interview with Graham Swift in 1989,
Ishiguro said that "writers, and artists in general, occupy a very particular and crucial role
in society. The question isn't 'Should they or should they not?' It's always, 'To what
extent?' What is appropriate in any given context?" (23).
The town, with the fervor of a cult, surrounds the one who it considers to be a great artist, and then stringently adhere to what the chosen artists practice and promote in the art. Artistry to them seems to be an essential quality or a binary characteristic: if you have it, you and everything you do has it, and if you don’t then what you think and do is inherently wrong.

They essentially created Christoff, their most recent Messiah, and then enslaved themselves to his ideas. After a resident painter and composer had died, the town had scrambled to find their new artistic idol, flattering Christoff into becoming it. But Christoff eventually began to disseminate ideas about art with which the town felt uneasy, and fifteen years later they finally admit that they find his work “cold,” “functional,” and “dry,” a realization that leads to their dispossession of him as their cultural leader (102). Christoff’s wife Rosa, a vixen with an eye for superstars, represents the town’s obscene love for the high arts, their willingness to prostitute themselves for a figurehead, a reality that leads one town member to say that the town’s soul is not just sick, but dead. They want someone who shares their values, whatever those may be, and at this point they try to revive decrepit Brodsky, using Ryder as his celebrity spokesperson in order to sell Brodsky to the rest of the town.

Christoff has a chance to plead his defense with Ryder, a case predicated on the town’s immature refusal to undertake the complexity of modern musical forms; according to him, they are an “untrained, provincial people,” who cannot hope to grasp the difference between a “crushed cadence” or “a struck motif” or a “fractured time signature” (186). Perhaps Ishiguro describes what has happened with a subset of postmodern artworks. Having created multi-perspective art, some artists paradoxically
alienate large portions of their potential audience while at the same time wishing to
represent it. Ishiguro could even be commenting prophetically on his own highly
complex novel that would be denounced by mainstream readers for its inaccessibility and
lumbering fullness. Christoff introduces Ryder to those elite few who are able to
understand and appreciate great art, a cluster of bohemians who sit around café tables
arguing in irritating circles of sophistry. They exhaust the far stretches of their
vocabulary, posing questions such as "...is it truly the case that pigmented triads have
intrinsic emotional values regardless of context?" (197). Perhaps the most explicitly
satirical section of the novel, the café scene exposes the inflated heroism that the café
patrons inject into their discussions. When Ryder comments on one of the debates, they
react as though he had just solved the riddle of the Sphinx.

The pudgy-faced man was looking at me with something close to awe. A
woman in an anorak was muttering: 'That's it, that's it'... Dr. Lubanski
was also nodding, but slowly and with his eyes closed as if to say: 'Yes,
yes, here at last is someone who really knows.' ”

(201)

The majority of the town does not engage in such tangled critical analyses of their
artists, and they want instead an elegant puppet to provide a particular aesthetic of
unabrasive pleasantry; they hope Brodsky might be molded into their ideal social animal.
But when he departs from a recognizable rendition of his concert piece, the town turns on
him, calling his piece immoral and grieving as though a sudden disaster had just
destroyed their homes. Their project for societal advancement having failed, the event's
producers and promoters abandon their tool, Ryder and his performance—such a sharp
and quick deconstruction of the scaffolding of Ryder’s identity that it poses doubt in his ability, as a public persona, to have any control in manufacturing his identity, as portended by the Sattler episode.
Conclusion: Who is Ryder the Dreamer?

In writing of *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro recognizes that he may have been writing about himself.

Stevens was obsessed with control to the point of his life being stifled, and that novel led me to question myself as a writer: to what extent do you open yourself, take risks when you write, dig around in the messier, more uncomfortable parts of yourself? I wondered, am I afraid of losing control?

(Jaggi 28)

His next novel does not deal with the messier parts of a writer because Ishiguro wanted to avoid the pressure of postmodern critics to include some sort of metanarrative comment within the work. So he uses a pianist to explore the destructiveness of creativity when used as vehicle for controlling one’s life and the people in orbit around that life. The upshot of trying to control a world “in which what you expect to happen next generally doesn’t happen next” lets loose a protracted nightmare of acute anxiety and disappointment (Ishiguro to Mackenzie, 12). Malcolm Bradbury calls Ishiguro “an extraordinarily perfect writer,” a feat born of a casserole of circumstances: a Samurai middle class background that values emotional control, his abrupt departure from Japan, a thwarted dream of breaking into the world of rock n’ roll, a new multi-cultural family, and finally, fame. The junction of fame and art can precipitate a crisis of personal
identity around which Ishiguro knows he must skirt cautiously, providing one possible solution to the question of who is dreamer of this nightmare.
Works Cited

Primary Texts


Secondary Texts


