Kazuo Ishiguro

Wai-chew Sim

"I sometimes feel that if I had written a book like Kafka's Trial, people would say to me, 'What a strange judicial system the Japanese have.'"

—Kazuo Ishiguro, qtd. in Bryson 44

In a discussion of the professional restrictions besetting cosmopolitan writers, the critic Timothy Brennan suggests that they are "unable to enter the scene of letters as innovations in the way, for example, that a talented North American novelist without ethnic baggage might be packaged as the rude boy or girl of a new generation" (203). This is a simple fact of life for some artists, and it has certainly been a constant in the authorial reception of the Anglo-Japanese writer Kazuo Ishiguro, as his comment above suggests. Faced with the peremptory demand that he explain a birth-culture deemed ineluctably alien, Ishiguro has had to be nimble in a variety of ways. In his early works he fends off straitjacket culturalist assumptions even as he wrestles with compelling questions of identity. He writes from the exigencies of his location within and between two cultures, but he also refuses to make a fetish of difference, to pander to demands for exotica and titillation.

But what is interesting about Ishiguro's early fictions is also their close attention to form, the way they probe received wisdoms, and how they lay the groundwork for future development. For in his recent mature writing Ishiguro can justly be said to have expanded the possibilities of the novel as an art form. He has increased the range of the high-modernist European novel associated with Kafka. His troublesome pen has mounted trenchant, illuminating critique-cum-adaptations of certain popular genres—in particular, the country-house novel and the detective novel—exposing their formal structures as agglomerations of certain readerly demands with prohibitive aesthetic and social costs. And yet, because of that, he also extends their intellectual and emotional scope.

The outline above gives an idea of Ishiguro's range, and, for me, one of the most exciting thing about his work is just this refusal to stand still as a writer, this desire to push the envelope. This attribute can be seen in the shift from realist to fabulist writing in his recent fiction, although that assessment itself needs to be qualified, since even in his first novel Ishiguro deploys psychological realism only to undermine it in the denouement. Another key attribute is
his scrutiny of the tropes we use to describe ourselves and others. To use a term popularized by critics from the reception-aesthetics school, Ishiguro confounds the horizon of expectation that readers bring to his fiction, and thus he also helps us to see the world in all its multihued complexity.

Ishiguro's characteristic stylistic and thematic concerns will be discussed in greater detail below, but we can get a sense of how he operates if we turn to his short story "A Family Supper." An elucidation of this story allows us to appreciate the modus operandi underwriting his five published novels to date.

"A Family Supper" opens with an account of the narrator's mother dying a painful death after eating Fugu fish—a dish that requires careful preparation to deactivate the poison inside—at the home of an old school friend. All through this period the narrator has been living in California estranged from his father. He learns the gruesome details surrounding his mother's death only when he returns from the States, in what is also an attempt to mend fences. Father and son have not talked in over two years; the narrator's sister, who has been away at university, has also returned for the occasion. Before the meal, however, several things suggest that a seemingly innocuous event is about to go badly wrong. The father declares that his wife's death "was no accident" (439). He calls his former business partner, Watanabe, "a man of principle and honour" while recounting his suicide following the collapse of their firm (435). When the father goes to attend to the cooking, the sister reveals what he omitted to say, namely that Watanabe had killed his entire family before taking his own life. As the siblings talk, a parallel is drawn between their deceased mother and a female ghost said to be haunting their garden, which then echoes the narrator's recollection that his father had once beaten him for "chattering like an old woman" (435). And finally we are told that the main course is an unspecified fish dish. By the time the father mentions how he used to envy fighter pilots during his navy days because, unlike a stricken vessel, a plane could always be used as "the final weapon" (440), we therefore have a strong presentiment of approaching disaster—it appears that a mass suicide or suicide cum homicide of some kind is about to take place.

My synopsis doesn't do justice to the skill with which the story builds up dramatic tension, but the implication is that the father blames his son for failing to take over the family business and also for the mother's death. He appears intent on emulating his former business partner, which suggests that the supper they have eaten is their last. Yet against the run of expectations, he declares that Watanabe had made a "mistake"; his "judgement" had been "weakened" by the collapse of their firm, and, moreover, "there are other things besides work" (442).
It is in this vein then of a bathetic ending disrupting our customary assumptions that Ishiguro calls the story "a big trick"; the Japanese "love . . . melodramatic stories where heroes commit suicide," he says, but they "don't go around killing themselves as easily as people . . . assume" (qtd. in Mason 343). While the concern in this case was to enjoin a wider conception of Japanese sociality, and the slightly strident note needs to be contextualized perhaps against the corporatist-state nostrums dominating the popular zeitgeist of the eighties when "A Family Supper" first appeared, the story nevertheless helps us to appreciate what Ishiguro sets out to do in his writing.

The characteristic features are a spare, elliptical style where everything works by inference and insinuation, an extraordinary control of pace, and a focus on psychological minutiae rather than external action. Effects are achieved by understatement and the skillful deployment of material. As mentioned earlier, Ishiguro confounds the horizon of expectation that we bring to his texts. He unsettles our familiar picture of the world, always posing the question of what is left out in any representation of experience. Up until the incorporation of fabulist elements in his recent fiction, these would also be the hallmarks of an essentially minimalist writing style, with Ishiguro content to work within self-imposed limits and where control and economy are the main watchwords.

Whatever the stylistic variation, however, the world of his novels is always suffused with a gut-wrenching melancholia. Ishiguro mentions in many interviews that he took up fiction-writing in order to preserve childhood memories of Japan before they disappeared. In one of them he confesses to "very strong emotional relationships . . . that were severed at a formative age," especially the one with his grandfather, and how perforce, "the creative process for me is never about anger or violence, but regret and melancholy." In the same interview Ishiguro adds that he had only recently become aware of that "other life" he "might have had," that "whole person" he was "supposed to become," all of which appears to have shaped his understanding of what the writing life amounts to (qtd. in Jaggi 28). In his estimation, writing is "a kind of consolation"; writers "write out of some part of themselves" that he wouldn't exactly say is "unbalanced," but where there is "a kind of lack of equilibrium" (qtd. in Vorda and Herzinger 30-31).

It is easy to see how these essentially exilic considerations find their way into Ishiguro's fiction. They appear to fuel the melancholic tenor of his novels, to explain his preference for first-person narrators gripped by the hermeneutics of memory. What often happens is that differences residing in geographical space are turned and turned so that they become differences residing in developmental
historical time. Separated by half the length of England from the woman he had loved—and still loves—the narrator in one of Ishiguro's novels journeys to visit her. But everything he does during the trip prompts a flashback. Everyone he meets initiates a recollection of that period some two decades ago before they were separated, when things might have gone differently, when he might have had another life.

In such a situation it is perhaps not surprising that the uncertainty and the malleability of memory features so strongly in Ishiguro's books, for the truth is both concealed and revealed by it. At the same time his novels are full of individuals who are unconsolled, who look back on their lives and realize that they had spent the bulk of it mired in self-deception. Coming to terms with the past becomes for that reason a pressing concern. All they can do is to retrieve a measure of dignity from what is left, to face the fact—honestly and bravely—that, indeed, the past is a foreign country. The results can be surprising—and deeply unsettling.

Born in 1954 in Nagasaki, Ishiguro came to England in 1960 when his father, an oceanographer, joined a British government research project in the North Sea. His family settled in the affluent London suburb of Guildford where he grew up receiving what he later described as a "very typical middle-class southern English upbringing" (qtd. in Bryson 40). At home he was raised in the Japanese style. The expatriation was originally intended to be short-term and well into his adolescence his family apparently had plans to return to Japan. With the passage of time, however, the sojourn became permanent.

Following his secondary school graduation in 1973, Ishiguro served for a brief period as a grouse-beater for the Queen Mother at Balmoral Castle, Scotland. He also hitchhiked around the United States and Canada during his "gap year" before taking up study at the University of Kent in Canterbury in 1974. During his studies he took a year out and also worked as a community worker at a housing estate in Scotland (1976). After earning his B.A. (Honors) in English and Philosophy in 1978, Ishiguro went back to social work, working with the homeless in London for an organization known as the Cyrenians. In late 1979 he enrolled in the creative writing Master's program at the University of East Anglia, where he was taught by Malcolm Bradbury and Angela Carter. He obtained his M.A. in 1980, having secured a contract from Faber and Faber for a novel in progress.

That work, *A Pale View of Hills*, was published in 1982. A precocious first novel, it tells the story of a woman who looks back on her days in postwar Japan before she came to England with her second husband, an Englishman. The novel won the Winifred Holtby Prize
from the Royal Society of Literature in 1983 and was translated into thirteen languages.

This was followed in 1986 by *An Artist of the Floating World*. Set in postwar Japan, the novel recounts the experiences of a painter who had supported militarism in the 1930s. It won the Whitbread book of the year award and was short-listed for the Booker prize. It subsequently appeared on best-seller lists in both Britain and America.

Ishiguro's most popular novel, *The Remains of the Day*, was published in 1989. It won the prestigious Booker prize that year and was made into a successful film in 1993 by Merchant-Ivory Productions starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson. The movie eventually garnered eight Oscar nominations.

Ishiguro's fourth novel, *The Unconsoled*, was published in 1995 to mixed reviews. Its formal experiments, lengthy dream sequences, and opaque construction left many critics nonplussed. A reviewer from the *Guardian* declared that it "invents its own category of badness" (Wood 5). In contrast, the philosopher Richard Rorty was convinced that Ishiguro had "expanded the frontiers of the novel," although he found the work itself obscure, suggesting that "sometimes all a reviewer can do is express appreciative puzzlement" (13). In the same year Ishiguro received an OBE from the Queen for his services to literature.

*When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro's most recent novel, was published in 2000. Set in London and Shanghai, it relates the experiences of a celebrated detective who tries to unravel the mystery of his parents' disappearance in Shanghai in the early years of the previous century.

In addition to several short stories, Ishiguro has also written two original screenplays for Britain's Channel Four television, *A Profile of Arthur J. Mason* (broadcast in 1984) and *The Gourmet* (broadcast in 1986). The latter is a black comedy about the plight of the homeless in London. More recently, Ishiguro was involved in a movie by the Canadian filmmaker Guy Maddin, titled *The Saddest Music in the World*. The movie, about an international music competition set in Depression-era Winnipeg, originated in a script that he wrote.

Ishiguro also wrote the screenplay for *The White Countess*, a Merchant-Ivory production slated for release in fall 2005. Set in Shanghai in the late 1930s, the movie stars Ralph Fiennes as a disillusioned former American diplomat who has lost his sight but who creates a nightclub for the title character, an exiled Russian noblewoman played by Natasha Richardson.

Ishiguro lives in Golders Green, London, with his thirteen-year-old daughter Naomi and Lorna Anne MacDougal, his Glaswegian wife and partner of over twenty years.
A Pale View of Hills (1982)

A Pale View of Hills is a novel whose themes and concerns resonate throughout Ishiguro’s oeuvre. Among them, it questions certain commonplace assumptions about Japanese sociality. More strikingly, it underscores the interestedness of memory and recall. Through the main protagonist, it points out that these processes are never neutral. It shows that they are always subjected to the exigencies of the present, which is to say of our need to fashion a usable past out of incongruent, often disparate material.

The novel opens with Etsuko, the narrator, receiving a visit by her second daughter at her home in an English village. Uppermost in Etsuko’s mind is the compromise she had reached with her second husband, Sheringham, over the naming of their daughter:

Niki, the name we finally gave my younger daughter, is not an abbreviation; it was a compromise I reached with her father. For paradoxically it was he who wanted to give her a Japanese name, and I—perhaps out of some selfish desire not to be reminded of the past—insisted on an English one. He finally agreed to Niki, thinking it had some vague echo of the East about it. (9)

Niki’s visit operates in turn as the frame story for Etsuko as she traces her memories of postwar Nagasaki before she came to England some two decades or so earlier. It also emerges that the multiple flashbacks between her days as a young pregnant wife in the suburbs of Nagasaki and her widowed life in the English countryside are part of Etsuko’s efforts to come to terms with the recent suicide of Keiko, her daughter from her first marriage: “Keiko, unlike Niki, was pure Japanese, and more than one newspaper was quick to pick up on this fact. The English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide, as if further explanations are unnecessary; for that was all they reported, that she was Japanese and that she had hung herself in her room” (10).

Together with the intricately nuanced opening paragraph, which registers in the valences of the word “thinking” Etsuko’s opposition to the “vague” echo perceived by Sheringham, the direct address to the implied reader’s stock beliefs here suggests that Pale View sets out to be contrarian. I described above how “A Family Supper” tackles the suicide-instinct canard, and in this respect the offer to provide “further explanations” continues, we might say, that strand in Ishiguro’s writing that is concerned with the critique of essentialist assumptions. Although Etsuko spends the rest of the novel circling around the incident, Keiko’s death is never satisfactorily explained. Textual gaps abound over this issue. At the end, the novel suggests that she had found her new home alienating, and thus her death cannot be
attributed to anything ethnically distinctive. Like "A Family Supper," that is, Ishiguro lures readers by offering to affirm essentialist verities, but he never delivers. Instead, the textual gaps over this issue enjoin an examination of the stock beliefs elicited by the opening.

Such, at least, is one layer of the novel’s multiple levels of meaning. It sets out to confound expectations, to make available alternatives to the seamless quality of culturalist descriptions. Despite the many reviewers engrossed with the “Japaneseness” of Ishiguro’s early fiction, therefore, his main concern is in some ways preliminary to that, meaning that he firsts clears space for a genuine cultural encounter, one worthy of the name. It is through this, I feel, that Ishiguro attends to the exigencies of his location within and between two cultures. For with the critique of those descriptions, he also fashions a usable past out of that double patrimony.

For most readers the most intriguing part of *Pale View*, however, is likely to be the shocking disclosure in the denouement. The enigma involves Etsuko’s friend and alter ego, Sachiko. While Etsuko’s father-in-law (Ogata-San) and first husband (Jiro) feature prominently in her flashbacks, their main focus is the progress of her friendship with Sachiko over the key summer months haunting her recollections. We first meet Sachiko after the death of her husband and with her having a hard time looking after her troubled young daughter, Mariko. Sachiko has an American boyfriend named Frank and has set her heart on going to America with him. When she goes off to be with Frank, Mariko is often left in the care of Etsuko. By the close of the novel, it appears that Sachiko will not get to fulfill her dreams, and thus symbolically it is Etsuko who accomplishes the overseas move, but to England rather than America, which she now balances against the decision to take Keiko with her when she left. From other parallels between the two women their relationship begins to take on doppelgänger inflections, and this is then confirmed in a haunting climax when Etsuko lets slip her use of Sachiko to stage her misgivings over the past.

The revelation follows Sachiko’s drowning of Mariko’s pet kittens, an incident that prefigures Keiko’s death. Mariko runs away in distress into the waste-ground near their riverside cottage, and it is in this psychically suggestive setting, therefore, that Etsuko finds Mariko and urges her to be sensible. Before coming to Nagasaki, Mariko had witnessed a young, apparently deranged woman drown a baby in the war ruins of Tokyo. She appears to be traumatized by the incident because she sometimes talks about a woman—probably imaginary—whom she meets near the riverbank. Her fears about abandonment and resentment against Frank for displacing her in her mother’s affections are projected onto her kittens, over which she is especially protective. And, additionally, our sense of forebod-
ing is heightened by newspaper revelations that there is a child killer loose in the neighborhood.

But what is most shocking for us is that, without anything in the way of obvious signposting, Etsuko suddenly shifts into her own familial reveries. Ostensibly, she is trying to persuade Mariko to be sensible, to go home. Yet she suddenly says that, “If you don’t like it over there [overseas], we’ll come straight back” (173). Speaking to Niki right at the novel’s end, Etsuko also refers to Keiko once going on a day trip to Inasa, the hill-park overlooking Nagasaki bay, and of how she had been “happy” there (182). However, the only Inasa day trip recounted in the novel is undertaken by Etsuko, Sachiko, and Mariko. Keiko thus surfaces in place of Mariko, and what lends the narrative its compelling poignancy, therefore, is our realization that Etsuko has all along been thinking about her eldest daughter—and on her recent suicide in Manchester.

We understand as such that Etsuko’s narrative combines pain and self-reproach over her decision to begin a new life overseas, as well as an unvoiced plea asking what else she could possibly have done. The implication is that Etsuko’s recollections were designed all along to converge on her exchanges with Keiko prior to their departure for England, to that promise to bring her back if she wasn’t happy. The novel does not say how Etsuko’s first marriage ended or how she met Sheringham, only that he had once worked as a journalist in Japan. However, it suggests that Etsuko had lost her entire family during the nuclear destruction wrought on Nagasaki. She had lost her lover as well and had been mourning him when Ogata-San took her in. In her own words, she was like a “mad person” during the immediate postwar (postbomb) period, all of which adds to the plangency of the narrative moment (58). The loss of Keiko appears to be layered over memories of earlier, even more unspeakable losses and of the survivor guilt they induced. Significantly, the novel’s title refers to “a pale outline of hills visible against the clouds” that had given Etsuko “a rare sense of relief from the emptiness” of long summer afternoons spent in her apartment (99). It transpires that the view is of the hills of Inasa, and thus Etsuko’s psychic investment in misremembering Keiko’s happiness is linked to the succor they had once provided. As a vista from an apartment window—perhaps as a symbol of durability amid shattering change—that “pale view” had helped her find the courage to rebuild her life. In the frame story she returns to it again, but this time to collapse Mariko and Keiko into, as it were, a single blurred outline.

Just as poignantly, Etsuko also sees herself writ-large in all the disturbing figures mentioned above. She appears to see herself reflected not just in Sachiko’s treatment of the kittens but also in the child-killer and the deranged woman and also in an American
woman they meet during the Inasa trip. Like the other delineations above, the encounter is imbued with menacing overtones. It acquires this aspect because of the uncanny way they keep running into each other during their passage through the hill-park. But, additionally, the American woman also sees Mariko drawing a “butterfly” in her sketchbook; she describes the butterfly—using broken Japanese—as “delicious” (114), and this then brings to mind an earlier disconcerting episode when Mariko had pretended to swallow a spider.

Through the associative logic linking these images, we infer that Etsuko sees them as “premonition[s]” of Keiko’s eventual demise (156). Her entire narration appears to be colored by that unspoken rebuke, by the idea that she should have heeded the warning they gave, and also by a paradoxical need to find or even to fabricate such warnings. What adds to the ominous mood of the climax is also the curious presence of a piece of rope that Mariko (cum Keiko) spies in Etsuko’s hands when they meet up on the waste-ground. Etsuko protests that she had picked up the rope because it got caught around her ankles. It just happened to be there, she says. But we are also not sure how to respond because the incident repeats an eerily similar episode when Etsuko had gone looking for Mariko after she ran away from home. The reappearance of the rope in the climax could be a genuine repetition or a memory that Etsuko obsessively recalls in the narrative present.

At the level of the individual psyche, then, _Pale View_ underscores the interestedness of memory and recall. It shows how memory reworks the past in response to current needs. Just as we often talk about ourselves through an imaginary friend, Etsuko approaches her deepest fears through Sachiko. A strategy of seeing herself in Sachiko appears to form part of a necessary accommodation to Keiko’s death, but the process is also tinged with ambiguity. Up till the merger of the two girls, _Pale View_ appears to follow the conventions of narrative verisimilitude. The plot is constructed according to a plausible Cartesian logic of cause and effect. There is consistent narrative point of view, lifelike characters, circumstantial detail, and convincing dialogue. All of the novel’s technical ability to provide a particular sort of bourgeois credibility has been deployed. But with the emergence of Keiko at the waste-ground everything changes. A great mystery ensues. The design of the novel does not suggest that Sachiko is merely a mental projection. However, our realization that Sachiko and Mariko are in some sense doubles suggests that Etsuko has great psychic investment in her version of events. Her need to see in the past a pattern of ill-omened incidents obviously drives her recollections. And this means that her narration is radically unreliable.

Among other things, what engages our interest about _Pale View_ is the craftsmanship attendant on such a configuration: the great
skill through which readers are drawn in via the conventions of realistic fiction; the instant deflation of those conventions following the emergence of Keiko; the frisson of the uncanny evoked by this development; the mystery surrounding the nature of the psychogenic relationship between Etsuko and Sachiko. These all stem from that design. We are blindsided by the switch in persona. But as my account above shows, it is also a fitting one, given that already in the opening paragraph Etsuko confesses to a “selfish desire not to be reminded of the past,” meaning that she can only approach it tangentially (9). As a result, the novel also reveals in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, which is to say that it underlines the human need to distort or to conceal the latter. This is, I feel, its primary concern, for at its deepest level Pale View bears out something universal. It reveals the pathos and the sorrow of the stories we tell ourselves to cope with reality, including those we tell ourselves to keep other stories at bay, stories concerning, for instance, the unspeakable destruction unleashed at Nagasaki. Our ability to tell the difference between truth and falsehood within the imagined world of a novel is fundamentally compromised here, but it is done for a purpose.

What is worth mentioning, finally, is the way Ishiguro rewrites the Madama Butterfly (1904) story in Pale View. He does this through Sachiko, whose plight mirrors Cho Cho San, the woman abandoned by her American lover in the opera. In this regard Frank calls to mind Puccini’s protagonist, Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton. Befitting the story’s marine associations—Pinkerton is a naval officer—Frank is offered a job aboard a cargo ship. Like Pinkerton, he goes home promising to return later to bring his lover over. Pale View in set in Nagasaki, where the opera is set as well, and even the Inasa locality is suggestive, for the Encyclopedia Britannica tells us that a mansion located there was the home of a nineteenth-century British merchant reputed to be the inspiration for Puccini’s fictional Pinkerton. What Ishiguro does as such is to modify the opera’s desertion plot for his own writerly concerns. In the opera Cho Cho San kills herself because Pinkerton returns, not as promised to bring her over, but to claim their child for himself and his new American bride. For Pale View, in contrast, the focus is on the child, on Keiko, and on Etsuko’s attempt to come to terms with her suicide years after the accomplishment of that dream of an overseas move. Through such a modification Ishiguro attends, it would seem, to the “melancholy” from which he self-professedly draws creative inspiration. We might say that he modifies the desertion plot to voice exilic and diasporic concerns, to explore the hermeneutics of memory in tandem with the aesthetic possibilities opened up by unreliable narration, as outlined above. And this would also be typical of what Ishiguro does in his writing,
something to watch out for. For in his subsequent work the same pattern persists, meaning that the raw material and the tropes available in the general culture will be taken up, and something unique will be fashioned out of it.

**An Artist of the Floating World (1986)**

*An Artist of the Floating World* picks up and develops the Ogata-San subplot in *Pale View*. Ogata-San's revanchist views about the war are suggested by the language he uses when he plays chess with his son. While Jiro plays half-heartedly and is indifferent when he loses, Ogata-San is quick to rebuke him for “defeatism”; Jiro should be “planning” his “defence” so that he can “survive and fight” again, he says (129). Nevertheless, Ogata-San's recidivist proclivities are censured in no uncertain terms, for *Pale View* takes pains to establish his culpability in the sacking and imprisonment of five teachers who had opposed the war. His role in the incident is revealed by an ex-pupil who rebukes him at one point in the novel, and in the end Ogata-San’s acceptance of that rebuke is suggested by his decision to end his summer visit with Jiro and Etsuko, the telling point being his acknowledgment that he shouldn’t “sit here [in their apartment] thinking about chess all day” (155).

Unlike *Pale View*, however, *Artist* is set entirely in Japan. Composed in four narrative sections stretching between October 1948 and June 1950, it tells the story of a retired artist named Masuji Ono who had supported the rise of militarism during the 1930s with propaganda art pieces. At one point he denounces one of his pupils, turned dissident, who as a result spends the war in prison. When the novel opens, Ono's wife and only son are dead, the former from an allied bombing raid, the other from fighting in Japan's expansionist ventures on the Chinese mainland. Over a number of months Ono is visited by his eldest daughter, tries to arrange a respectable marriage for his second daughter, revisits an ex-colleague, drinks at a bar with a former pupil, and attends a monster movie with his grandson.

Behind these quotidian events, however, the scale of postwar changes, the ideological desertion of his ex-pupils, and, more immediately, the desire to secure his younger daughter’s marriage causes Ono to examine his past. Afraid that any disclosure of his misdeeds will derail the nuptial arrangements, he tries without success to initiate reconciliation with Kuroda, the pupil he had betrayed. He also confesses his misdeeds before the family of the prospective groom, but his behavior strikes us as self-serving: his so-called confession seems to be aimed merely at forestalling possible qualms on the part of the groom’s family about the marriage. It is only after further self-scrutiny, coupled with the unremitting impact of
disturbing social change, that Ono gains a limited insight into the contours of his life. He understands eventually that he had spent the bulk of it mired in self-deception, and thus the novel ends on a note of resignation as he gazes at the pleasure district he knew as a youth, now converted into a business quarter. Ono consoles himself with the thought that a younger generation will "make a better go of things" (206). If his generation made ruinous mistakes, the hope is that others will learn from them, and from that he tries to retrieve a measure of dignity for himself as well.

As suggested by the foregoing, the focus of *Artist* is the meaning of Ono's artistic career. More obviously than with Ogata-San, *Artist* draws compelling parallels between Ono's private experiences and conduct and the direction of public events. His acknowledgment of blameworthiness acquires, that is, emblematic significance, for with him, more general questions about responsibility and guilt during this contested period of Japanese history are also raised. It is in *Artist*, moreover, that Ishiguro develops his favorite theme, namely the limits and the difficulties of self-knowledge. Through Ono's flashbacks and meandering first-person narration, the details of his training and working conditions before the war are revealed. In the process he moves ever closer to understanding the magnitude of his errors. The idea that we can spend huge parts of our lives pursuing goals that matter little in the greater scheme of things is forcefully brought across, and with that the attendant question arises of how we come to terms with such a past.

More specifically, Ono realizes that his betrayal of Kuroda was analogous to his own expulsion from an artists' colony prior to his enrollment in the ultranationalist body that commissioned his artworks. As the influence from that organization grew, Ono had strayed from the aestheticist nostrums championed by the head of the colony, a man named Moriyama or Mori-san. As a result he had been kicked out. As Ono plumbs the depths of his memories, he realizes that his betrayal of Kuroda was compensatory behavior for his own hurtful treatment at the hands of Mori-san. He realizes in addition that an earlier banishment of another pupil by Mori-san for pursuing unsanctioned artistic experiments had foreshadowed the two subsequent events. From this attainment of a capacity to see the self in others, Ono gains insight into his own behavior. Self-reflexivity is made coeval with his attainment of that capacity, and thus the link between the two is emphasized.

At the heart of the novel, then, is Ono's deliberation over the pivotal moments of his career. In chronological terms it goes through three stages. Ono starts as an artist-illustrator at a commercial studio run by a man named Takeda. He joins Mori-san's outfit after that and is subsequently recruited by the previously mentioned
ultranationalist organization (known as the Okada-Shingen or "new life" society); sometime later he also sets up his own artists' colony espousing promilitarist views. As Ono deliberates over the past, the unstated but obvious implication is that he should not have left Mori-san's establishment. Narrative wisdom appears to lie in an amplification of this idea, and hence, for many readers, the colony also takes on the mantle of a sanctuary. It appears to represent the halcyon times of proverbial allusion. Descriptions of its communal life suggest purposeful, unalienated labor, and in fact the whole place seems to be a refuge from the world of practical affairs and unrewarding toil.

The reading outlined here is reinforced by the title of the book. The floating world appellation refers to a tradition of Japanese art named *ukiyo-e* (literally, *floating world pictures*). Popularized by the famous Tokugawa painter and printmaker Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806), the genre emphasizes the depiction of sad, transitory events, oftentimes the stylized world of the Japanese pleasure quarter and its demi-monde denizens. But significantly, Mori-san is also labeled "the modern Utamaro" because he seeks to "modernize" the Utamaro tradition in his work (140). When Ono gazes at the pleasure quarter he had known and painted as a youth, the poignancy that arises from his acknowledgment of waste is therefore linked to a consideration of what he lost when he broke away from Mori-san. And this is also to say that the closure of *Artist* invites a consideration of the differences between the bohemian lifestyle promoted by Mori-san and Ono's subsequent pursuit of militarist objectives through his art.

Such, at least, has been the focus of much of the commentary on *Artist*. The common strand in most responses has been a tendency to cast Ono's departure in prelapsarian terms. In a review of *Artist*, Anne Chisholm states, for example, that, "One would like to think . . . that it is always the Floating World, the world of love, beauty and art, that endures, and that the 'real' world of action, of politics and war, turns out to be treacherous and temporary. But the Floating World, in Japan as elsewhere, is always under threat; the old man's longings for his past become a universal lament for lost worlds" (162). Separately, Brian Shaffer describes the Mori-san outfit as the "stereotypically bohemian world of the postromantic artist cut off from an inhospitable, materialistic, aesthetically shallow, mainstream society" (52). When he breaks from the school, "it is precisely the 'real world' in general, and Japanese economic and military aspirations in particular, that Ono hopes to shape and reflect" (53). In similar terms Wendy Brandmark argues that the "central irony" of the book is Ono's rejection of "the art of the floating world"; he breaks away from the colony because he finds their work too "ephemeral"; but what he discovers after the war is that
the political ideals through which he sought intransigence "were indeed transitory" (1).

In order to appreciate the rhetorical setup of Artist, however, we need to highlight what these readings leave out. For what a close reading of the pertinent sections shows is actually the opposite. Instead of being a variant on the fall-from-paradise trope, Ono's artistic development is from the beginning coeval with national developments. The novel maintains an isomorphic fit between the two realms, and this makes problematic any attempt to cast the Mori-san outfit as some embodiment of the authentic, or some autochthonous, proto-Edenic locale threatened by change and corruption.

At no stage of Ono's career is he, in fact, free from foreign or worldly influence. Already at the Takeda outfit we are told that Ono and his colleagues sometimes have to paint "around the clock" (66) to complete commissions for "geishas, cherry trees, swimming carps" and the like, the "essential point" being that these pictures must "look 'Japanese' to the foreigners to whom they were shipped out" (69). In the sections devoted to the Mori-san sojourn, what is even more revealing is that he seeks to modernize his art form according to declared "European" precepts. Although Mori-san uses "traditional device[s]," his work is "full of European influences"; he abandons the use of the "traditional dark outline to define his shapes, preferring instead the Western use of blocks of colour, with light and shade to create a three-dimensional appearance"; and just to press the point home the novel reiterates that Mori-san "had taken his cue from the Europeans in what was his most central concern: the use of subdued colours" (141).

What Ono crucially retains when he leaves Mori-san is, in fact, this European-initiated use of color. The propaganda piece for which he retains a recidivist affection in the narrative present is titled "Eyes to the Horizon"; Ono tellingly addresses an implied interlocutor—us the reader—as being possibly "acquainted" with it because "as a print in the thirties, [it had] achieved a certain fame and influence throughout this city" (168). And this piece, we are told, had received fulsome praise precisely because of its "powerful use of colour" (169).

It seems, then, that Artist highlights not so much "the Utamaro tradition" per se but the attempt to modernize it. It underscores the progression between the use of "subdued" hues at Mori-san's establishment and the use of more "powerful" ones after that. But in this way Artist also invites a consideration of a key episode in the novel when a recruiter from Okada-Shingen tells Ono to leave Mori-san: "Listen, Ono, Japan is no longer a backward country.... We are now a mighty nation, capable of matching any of the Western nations. In the Asian hemisphere, Japan stands like a giant amidst cripples
and dwarfs... It's time for us to forge an empire as powerful and wealthy as those of the British and the French" (173-74). Despite the appeal of prelapsarian themes, therefore, *Artist* precludes such a reading. It is not so much that Ono undergoes a sea change when he leaves Mori-san but that he develops his notions from seeds sown earlier. The idea of Mori-san taking "his cue" from European artists and Ono's subsequent elaboration on that color palette is made analogous to Japan's emulation of the Great Powers using, in fact, the same social-Darwinist rhetoric deployed by them. The historical subtext here is Japan's attempt to make up for its late-developing status, namely its seizure of colonies in Korea and China prior to the launch of the Pacific war.

If, as argued above, the novel directs attention at Ono's career, what it highlights is therefore the fit with wider developments. Instead of being a refuge from the world, art shadows it. The associative logic here suggests that Japan's Second World War aggrandizement was in some respects emulatory. And this is connected with Ono's dim recognition that he was both emulatory and culpable when he betrayed Kuroda. What Ishiguro tries to do here is, I think, the presentation of alternatives; he tackles the seamless quality of culturalist descriptions, something that he does in *Pale View* as well. Moreover his efforts need to be contextualized against the decade in which *Artist* first appeared. As a perusal of the relevant news reports will show, this was a period when the referent "Japan" was a figure of danger within the social and political imaginary, when the general culture was awash with images of double-dealing business warriors and samurais-in-suits. Where references to its economic arrangements were made, Japan's neomercantilist policies were often portrayed as straightforward revanchism, and hence its overall image was that of a corporatist-state out to destroy "our way of life."

In other words, this was also a period when the twin metaphors proffered by the American anthropologist Ruth Benedict held an all-encompassing sway. Benedict's influential book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* was a best-seller when it was published in 1946. As the double metaphor in its title makes clear, Benedict offers hyperaestheticism and militarism as timeless attributes of a posited Japanese ethnonational character. Despite the passage of time, its perdurable influence can still be seen in its endorsement by Barry Lewis, who in his recent book on Ishiguro calls it a "seminal" anthropological work, "many of [whose] observations still hold true" (155). But if Benedict offers in effect the trope of paradox to explain things—art and war belong together—*Artist* offers something different, something less obscurantist and objectionable. Through the associative logic outlined above, we might say that both planks of
Benedict's double metaphor are given a temporal dimension and denaturalized. In this way, alternatives to purely culturalist descriptions are opened up. Against the grain of ethnicity-based explanations, we get the clarification that Japan committed itself to war for intelligible if condemnable reasons of self-interest. Rather than timeless attributes, we see actions located in history. To that extent they are changeable and hence the relevance of Ono's wish that a younger generation will "make a better go of things." Together with the focus on the difficulties of self-understanding, the exorbitance underwriting essentialist tropes is also targeted, and this means that any recourse to prelapsarian notions needs to be rethought if we want to do justice to this book.

**The Remains of the Day (1989)**

*The Remains of the Day* tells the story of a butler named Stevens who spends the bulk of his professional life in unquestioning service to Lord Darlington, who, at the time of the Nazi rise to power during the 1930s, had been a fascist sympathizer. In the name of duty Stevens fires two young Jewish refugee girls hired as maids, spurns his dying father, and fails to realize a relationship with Miss Kenton, the housekeeper. Like Ishiguro's earlier novels, *Remains* deploys a recognition plot tracing Stevens's growing realization that his life has been overwhelmed by self-deception. These hesitant apprehensions develop in the course of numerous flashbacks as he undertakes a motorcar journey from Darlington Hall to meet Miss Kenton (now Mrs. Benn) in Cornwall some twenty years after she left Darlington's service. In the frame story set in 1956 Darlington has died and the estate has been bought by an American businessman named Farraday. Ostensibly, Stevens undertakes the trip to ask Miss Kenton to rejoin the Hall to relieve a staff shortage. However, the novel suggests they had been in love and that Stevens hopes to rekindle their relationship.

Despite Stevens's use of a formal language riddled with special pleading, *Remains* secures the pathos of that loss as an instance of continuing pain, intensified by his failure to attend to his father as he lays dying. Both events occurred because Stevens chose duty over personal feelings and responsibilities, the two key occasions coinciding with two diplomatic conferences held at the Hall, one in 1923 and another in 1936, when Darlington had tried to get Britain's political elites to pursue pro-Germany and then profascist policies. On his journey, however, Stevens reexamines his idolatry of Darlington. When he finally meets Miss Kenton and learns that her marriage had been unhappy and that she too regrets their failure to make known their feelings for each other, Stevens's misguided
investment in an ethos of self-abrogation becomes abundantly clear to him at the same time as he realizes that the past cannot be retrieved. By the end of the novel, Stevens appears to appreciate that in internalizing a rationalization of his role, he had not only truncated his life but also achieved stability at the expense of conscience and principles. However, the novel’s use of unreliable narration—the fact that his insights emerge tacitly and against the grain of a first-person account—means that the depth of his self-understanding is not reliably established.

Remains is a powerful and disturbing book. Despite or because of his persistent denials, it secures effectively our empathy for Stevens. It underscores the sense of waste, tragic in its intensity, that he wrestles with as he reassesses the choices he made in life. This idea that we can unknowingly waste large portions of our lives is reinforced additionally by its structure, by the fact that it takes the form of a *journal de voyage*. Thus the culmination of Stevens’s trip coincides with a kind of muted epiphany. Stevens sits on a pier in Weymouth, southern England, pondering his recent meeting with Miss Kenton. The pain from that encounter brings home what he lost in adhering to his professional codes. He realizes that despite his adherence to rigid class nostrums, he was merely an auxiliary figure in an exclusivist setup. And hence we get the Sartrean moment where Stevens gives in finally to tears. On the pier he falls to talking with an ex-butler (who happens to be there on a bench). He admits that for all his faults Darlington at least “made his own mistakes,” whereas he had entrusted that key responsibility to Darlington—“Really,” he wonders, “what dignity is there in that?” (243)

In this way, Remains asserts Ishiguro’s favorite theme, namely the limits and difficulties of self-knowledge. Ishiguro’s first two books are set wholly or partially in Japan, and the fact that he returns to this theme even when he switches his field of vision to Britain is significant. It underscores, I feel, the anti-Manichean sensibility underwriting his novels. Stevens’s experience obviously parallels those of Ogata-San in *Pale View* and Ono in *Artist*. All three men have to come to terms with the fact that they led self-deceiving lives; their private experiences also reflect and refract major historical events. But given these parallels, what needs to be emphasized is the continuity of theme between the three books, for read within the context of an extended corpus, Remains might be said to stress similarities, not differences. Authorial development undercuts, it would seem, those commentators who tend to read Ishiguro’s early works as convenient exposés of Japanese sociality—and nothing else.

Apart from the above, two other things need to be highlighted about Remains. The first concerns its topicality. As mentioned earlier, part of its allure stems from the way it garners sympathy for Stevens.
His plight is poignant because it is linked with the demise of an entire way of life, with the evocation of a bygone era of magnificent villas, posh parties, and high-born fin-de-siécle elegance. Such is the impression gleaned from any initial encounter with the book, and this is also to say that its topicality is sometimes unappreciated. Unfortunately, much of the commentary on *Remains* fails to contextualize it adequately against the decade in which it was published, which means that its status as a condition of England novel has also been overlooked. I would like to address that shortcoming here.

The other feature that needs to be highlighted is its acutely self-conscious construction. In a review of *Remains*, Salman Rushdie called it “a brilliant subversion of the fictional modes from which it at first seems to descend” (244), and, expanding on his comments, I would like to draw attention to its examination of generic conventions. More specifically, its antipastoral and demystificatory thrust will be elaborated.

To appreciate these two dimensions, we need to pay some attention to the British cultural landscape of the eighties. In particular, we need an awareness of the identity politics proffered by conservative ideologues. Among other things, they sought to characterize organized labor, immigrants, and the countercultural movement as a kind of incipient fifth column. These were demonized and labeled “the enemy within” so that the hegemonic notion of a homogenized, national “we” could be peddled to the public—and this was also how the Conservative Party in Britain sought to mobilize its historic voting bloc. Related to this were frequent invocations of past historic triumphs, as epitomized by Margaret Thatcher’s call to Britons throughout the eighties to emulate the Victorians.

As Ishiguro lucidly states in an interview, however, these are precisely the things that *Remains* wishes to interrogate:

*The Remains of the Day* is not an England that I believe ever existed.

... What I’m trying to do ... is to actually rework a particular myth about a certain kind of England [consisting of] sleepy, beautiful villages with very polite people and butlers and people taking tea on the lawn. ... The mythical landscape of this sort of England, to a large degree, is harmless nostalgia. ... The other side of this, however, is that it is used as a political tool. ... This can be brought out by the left or right, but usually it is the political right who say England was this beautiful place before the trade unions tried to make it more egalitarian or before the immigrants started to come or before the promiscuous age of the ’60s came and ruined everything. (qtd. in Vorda and Herzinger 14-15)

Elsewhere, he identifies the demystificatory, antipastoral thrust of the novel as an attempt to “rewrite P. G. Wodehouse”: “I wished
to set this book in a mythical landscape, which to a certain extent resembled that mythical version of England that is peddled in the nostalgia industry at the moment. . . . I felt it was a perfectly reasonable mission on my part . . . [to] say that there is a shadowy side to it. . . . I wanted to rewrite P. G. Wodehouse” (qtd. in Kelman 73-74).

In the light of the above, Remains might be said to contest the way in which imagery of the stately-home milieu and countryside landscape are used as floating metaphors for a certain kind of fundamental Englishness. Remains criticizes the unthinking veneration of a prelapsarian, organicist England because it tends to be socially exclusivist. As many commentators have observed, the vision of the past proffered by the dominant conservative discourse of the period emphasized Victorian “greatness.” In a speech during the 1978-79 general election campaign, Thatcher vowed to restore the appellation “Great” to Britain. This subsequently became a mainstay of her oratorical repertoire, and, additionally, the same concept was used in the 1987 general election campaign, where the conservatives deployed the slogan “putting the Great back into Britain.”

But given the semantic loading of the term “Great” what is striking is to find it doggedly anatomized in Remains. This occurs in two key passages at the start of Stevens’s journey when the conjoining of toponym and topography invites us to question those Arcadian invocations, one of whose chief components was the tagging of the countryside as the true repository of a pristine, unadulterated national identity. The first passage comes during the evening of Stevens’s first day of travel when he muses on the view of the “rolling English countryside” espied earlier from the top of a knoll; he asks what constitutes “Great” in the appellation “Great Britain” and suggests that the answer lies in the landscape (28). More specifically, it is the “lack of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of [the] land apart” from other more ostensibly spectacular formations (28). At the same time, this national greatness question is “akin” to something that has “caused much debate” in his profession, namely the “question” of what makes a butler “great” (29). A while later Stevens returns to this topic, and by now it is clear that he is trying to shore up his crumbling self-image, to convince himself that his sacrifices were not undertaken in vain. He needs, in short, to bolster his notions of vocational “greatness” (28), and it’s telling then that his language betrays its own intemperance. While other countries have “manservants,” only England has “butlers”; other races “are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English” can muster; they cannot “maintain a professional demeanour other than in the least challenging of situations”; and hence the “dignity” that Stevens valorizes is “beyond” them (43).
What Stevens tries to justify here is his lifelong commitment to a principle of vocational greatness. Nevertheless, the contemporaneous allusions are unmistakable. If, as Peter Riddell contends, the ruling political vision in Britain in the eighties was "a world of Victorian values and Samuel Smiles" (231), Stevens obviously adheres to the tenets of Smiles's Victorian best-seller *Self Help* when he tries to improve his English and when he pledges to learn how to banter in order to please his new American employer. When he chooses duty over personal well-being at the two diplomatic conferences held at the hall, he adheres to the Victorian tenet of self-denial. And in fact his entire bearing and demeanor is almost a caricature of the proverbial stiff-upper-lip ethos.

But if the entire movement of *Remains* points out that formality, repression and self-effacement have truncated Stevens's life, then his story is also a forceful interrogation of the formulations above. His super-Victorian configuration becomes, as it were, a reductio ad absurdum of those clarion calls to return to Victorian values and to restore national "greatness." To use the term deployed by Ishiguro, Stevens illustrates the "shadowy" side of such invocations. Through him, Ishiguro points out that certain groups have been made scapegoats for the distempers of the time. And this means that *Remains* also enjoins an expansion of the cultural and semantic perimeters of Britishness. Its call for a more inclusivist view of society would be the sense in which *Remains* operates as a *condition of England* novel.

Related to this aspect of the book is its critique of heritage consumerism. At first glance, as Rushdie suggests in the quotation above, *Remains* strikes us as a conventional product of the country-house novel form; it appears to descend straightforwardly from that generic mode. However, two key incidents reveal Ishiguro's wariness about that lineage. The first involves Stevens's ritual humiliation by a houseguest for his lack of knowledge about international affairs. Despite Stevens's professionalism, Darlington colludes through inaction in this humiliation, and thus his advocacy of decency to "German[s]" (73) is shown to be merely part of that confraternity of diplomatic and governing classes still drawn in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s from the old aristocracy. Inasmuch as plot and character development traces Stevens's painful acknowledgment of the magnitude of this betrayal, the intellectual background of *Remains* is, therefore, consonant with a critique of the stately-home order. The designation of a narrow sliver of culture as national heritage par excellence is thereby prohibited.

More strikingly, *Remains* also opposes its own arrogation to any discourse that sanctifies patrician privilege. This aspect is forcefully established in the humorous episode where Darlington entrusts
Stevens with the task of conveying to his twenty-three-year-old godson, Reginald Cardinal, information about human reproduction, about what he calls the “facts of life” (82). Reginald’s father, a friend of Darlington, has failed in this endeavor; he has requested Darlington’s help, and hence Stevens is roped in as well. Stevens ultimately fails in his mission, which underlines his inexperience in this arena. But the telling detail is that Darlington assigns Stevens the task while clutching in his hands a copy of “Who’s Who” (81).

The reference to Who’s Who here is important, for with it Remains demonstrates an awareness, we might say, of how social reproduction operates. Insofar as the country-house novel participates in social reproduction when it uncritically offers “country-house England” as a distillate of national or communal life, which is to say that it perpetuates status-quo conservatism, this episode shows Remains’ acute self-consciousness about its own pedigree. It demonstrates its aversion to any discourse that might, like a copy of Who’s Who, work to reproduce an elitist form of life. Metacritical in its ambit, Darlington’s assignment draws a link between human reproduction and the way the country-house novel genre perpetuates patrician privilege. Ishiguro’s declared wariness about the “nostalgia industry” emerges most strongly here, for in effect Remains distances itself from that lineage through an allusion deployed as a mise en abyme—it draws attention to its own conditions of possibility in order to criticize them.

Apart from the fact that we get to hear the servant’s side of the story, the metacritical gloss above suggests that Remains is not an innocent product of a particular generic form. Instead it mounts a trenchant critique of that form and in the process enhances its aesthetic reach. I pointed out earlier that Ishiguro often revises the raw material and the tropes available in the general culture. In Remains he does basically the same thing but taken one step further. He appropriates the country-house novel for his own purposes, and it is entirely characteristic, then, that the same essentially metacritical lens gets trained on other genres as well in his subsequent works.

**The Unconsoled (1995)**

The Unconsoled is strikingly different from Ishiguro’s earlier work. Like the first three novels, it utilizes a first-person narrator who is radically unreliable. There is a shared tone of regret and melancholy, but that is where the similarity ends. Long, opaque, and disorientating, the novel is set in an unnamed central European town. Its narrator, a feted English pianist named Ryder, arrives to give a classical concert. He is waylaid by a succession of townspeople with a host of inane demands. In surrealist fashion he lurches from
one outlandish errand to another. But everything he does is a false start. He doesn't complete anything because he is always off again on another errand. His inability to refuse the requests thrown at him means, moreover, that he is unable to prepare for his concert. Over the course of three days, Ryder judges musical recitals, tries to reconcile estranged families, pleads the cause of a disgraced former conductor, and even causes a public scandal when he accidentally intervenes in local politics. He also serves as the guest of honor at the funeral of a complete stranger. Behind all these requests is the omnipresent expectation that he will transform the cultural life of the city. In the same move he is expected to restore the morale of a community gripped by a profound despair. Yet the reason for that despair and that exorbitation of his role is never reliably established.

In the interim, odd slippages in time, place, and person keep occurring. Ryder drives out to a mansion in the countryside and wanders around in it and is suddenly back in the hotel left behind in town. Near the beginning of the novel, he falls in with a woman and a child who are ostensibly strangers but who turn out, inexplicably, to be his wife, Sophie, and his son, Boris. Later in the novel Ryder and Boris stop at a coffee shop in the center of town for a snack. Ryder goes off for an interview with two journalists in the courtyard outside. In the middle of the interview they go for a photo shoot, and he eventually fetches up in a roadside truck stop apparently miles away from town. But then the very next moment he walks through a door at the back of the truck stop and is promptly back with Boris.

The elasticity characterizing the novel's geographical terrain extends to its temporal arrangement as well. Ryder's childhood friends and university acquaintances have a disconcerting habit of popping up all over the place, but their presence in the town is never explained. We are expected to accept that they just happen to be there, for when Ryder meets them, he never expresses astonishment. What heightens our disorientation, therefore, are such odd slippages between past and present, for Ryder may be lying on his hotel bed gazing at the ceiling, and yet somehow it gets transformed, assuming the contours of his aunt's home "on the borders of England and Wales" (16).

In any event Ryder never gets around to giving his performance. Predictably as well, none of the townspeople expresses surprise about this. The detail is merely one of many in the book that advertises its inconsequentiality. At the end of the novel, Ryder fails to dissipate the mysterious gloom hanging over the town, to mend its many broken relationships, or even to mend his own. Throughout the sojourn, he indulges in blame displacement, projecting onto Sophie responsibility for various things. Despite repeated attempts, their efforts at reconciliation come to naught. And thus as the novel ends,
Ryder is on his way to Helsinki, apparently choosing a nomadic existence over meaningful familial attachments.

In my opinion, a sound understanding of The Unconsoled requires an appreciation of the commentary that Remains attracted. Earlier I noted that reviewers had an idée fixe on the Japanese-ness of Ishiguro’s early fiction, and unfortunately, we might add that this tendency was carried over to Remains as well. Thus for some critics the book’s examination of the stately-home milieu was merely a dissimulation of Ishiguro’s continuing interest in the question of Japanese identity. Despite the lack of a single reference to things Japanese, for instance, Pico Iyer labels Remains “the most revealing” among the genre of books “purporting to explain Japan to the West” (585), the novel achieving this distinction because its portrayal of Stevens “lights up the Japanese mind from within” (587). To Gabriele Annan, Ishiguro’s first three novels are “explanations, even indictments, of Japanese-ness” (3). On the road, each of the “specimens of ordinary, warm-hearted, decent humanity” encountered by Stevens are “an argument for spontaneity [and] openness,” which means that, for Annan, the “message” of Remains is its appeal to national identity, its appeal to “be less Japanese, less bent on dignity . . . less restrained and controlled” (4). In similar terms David Gurewich is struck by Stevens’s “insistence on ritual” and his “loyalty to his master that conflicts with his humanity,” these being, for him, “prominent aspects of the Japanese collective psyche” (80). And finally we get the ne plus ultra of this mode of analysis with the inanity of Rocio Davis’s praise for Ishiguro’s “Japanese subtlety”: Ishiguro “revisions Japan in a novel that is not even set in Japan but has as its theme six unexceptional days in the life of that most English of characters, a butler”—hence the approbation (144).

The counterpart to this fixation with some ineluctable, dyed-in-the-wool Japanese-ness was the astonishment over the veracity of the novel’s portrayal of English culture. Thus Gurewich himself confesses that “one would never suspect” had Ishiguro published Remains “under an assumed Anglo name” (80). And Paul Gray is astonished at Remains’s “uncanny” verisimilitude, for to him, England’s culture has always been “notoriously impervious to outsiders and immigrants” (qtd. in O’Brien 798). As a result, however, the book’s critique of generic conventions was completely glossed over. As Steven Connor correctly points out, the dubious idea that “the alien eye of the Japanese immigrant writer” had disclosed “a once-present but now lost essential Englishness” appears to have gained ground (111), and from that perspective, I would add, Remains appears to have been kitschified. Grasped in a manner directly opposed to its primary concerns, it seems to have been transformed in some readings into a paean for a lost way of life.
There are many layers to The Unconsoled, but given the summary above, one of its most important features becomes clear. The novel challenges, it would appear, Ishiguro's commodification as a supplier of English and Japanese authenticity. It asserts the right to address the universal rather than the particular, as the necessarily lengthy citation below makes clear:

If there is something I really struggle with as a writer . . . it is this whole question about how to make a particular setting actually take off into the realm of metaphor . . . If you make it too concrete . . . people start saying, "Oh, that's what it was like in Japan at a certain time," or, "He's saying something about Britain in the 1930s." . . . I'm 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 . . . [that] isn't documentary or . . . isn't history or . . . isn't journalism. I'm asking you to look at this world that I've created as a reflection of a world that all kinds of people live in. (qtd. in Vorda and Herzinger 16-17)

Together with the epigraph at the head of this essay, these comments suggest that The Unconsoled's aggressive push into the realm of Kafkaesque expressionism comes with a purpose. The move underscores Ishiguro's determination to circumvent the literal-mindedness that had plagued the reception of his earlier works. He adopts in Ryder the pattern of unconsummated actions, false starts, and general paralysis of will typifying Kafka's protagonists in order to evade the culturalist nostrums underwriting that reception. The German critic Theodor Adorno observed that in Kafka's fiction, "each sentence says 'interpret me' " (246), and in that respect we might say The Unconsoled strives after the same thing. It dissolves geography in Kafkaesque fashion to elicit closer attention to the substance of its argument and its design; it gets rid of setting so that the symbolic and the allegorical can be accentuated.

Such a reading allows us to make sense of two things apparent in The Unconsoled. It explains first of all the self-referential undertones arising from what is arguably its most conspicuous feature, namely that it is one long delineation of an artist failing in what he sets out to do. It suggests that at one level the novel is a wry self-burlesque, a parodic rendition of Ishiguro's own experiences of artistic emasculation. In that interpretation the telling detail—mentioned once in passing—would be the moment where Ryder tells Sophie, "I still have more trouble with French than I do with Japanese. Really. I get by in Tokyo better than in Paris" (249).

Reading The Unconsoled like this also sheds light on those sections where a pastiche of Remains takes place. It explains why The Unconsoled takes a special delight in deflating expectations,
in disappointing those who wanted it to be, as it were, a second helping of kitsch. And in fact it makes fun of these expectations. Thus Ryder's first encounter in the town is with Gustav, a hotel porter who launches into a lengthy declamation on his luggage-handling policy. The parody of Stevens extends to Gustav's account of his actions following the death of a pet hamster belonging to his daughter. His inability to express solicitude as his daughter lies crying in her room recalls Stevens's inaction following the death of Miss Kenton's aunt. In turn, the masochistic inflections of such deep-set affective ineptitude culminates in an extraordinary set piece in which, together with other members of an association of hotel porters, Gustav stages a dance-cum-weight-lifting display that eventually kills him. But Gustav's death also recalls the death of Stevens's father, apparently from overwork; and even his porters' association appears to be a send-up of the "Hayes Society" (31) of butlers eulogized in *Remains*.

But beyond the self-burlesque and the assertion of authorial autonomy, there is also the astonishing innovations introduced by Ishiguro. The attempt to evade culturalist sequestration gives, that is, only part of the picture, for what *The Unconsoled* provides is also a whole new approach to plot and to characterization. It provides in this regard an alternative way to write a novel, one that Ishiguro calls "appropriation": "This way of telling a story was something I've been wanting to do for some time. . . . I wanted to have someone just turn up in some landscape where he would meet people who are not literally parts of himself but are echoes of his past, harbingers of his future and projections of his fears about what he might become" (qtd. in Steinberg 105). Put another way, "This character appropriates people, the people he runs into stand for various parts of his life. They exist in their own right but they are also being used to tell the narrator's story. . . . It's just a different way of telling someone's life and if people don't grasp it the book will seem to be directionless or disparate" (Smith 17).

In the light of the above, the nature of Ryder's interaction with the townspeople becomes clear, for in doppelgänger-inflected fashion it seems they are telling the story of his life. They "exist in their own right" and also "stand for various parts of his life": Stephan, a young musician whose recital Ryder evaluates, is a version of the young Ryder trying desperately to win the approval of his parents. Brodsky, the disgraced drunk conductor whom Ryder fails to rehabilitate, is a projection of his deepest fears. Sophie and Boris are Ryder's wife and son, but they are also the daughter and grandson respectively of Gustav. And, additionally, Boris's loneliness helps to elucidate Ryder's unhappy childhood. In the same way that Sachiko illuminates Etsuko's dilemma in *Pale View*, the various "echoes" of
Ryder help to weave in, that is, the background to his struggles. The recognition plots of Ishiguro's first three novels always contain moments where the protagonist sees himself in another character. So what he does is simply to multiply those moments. He gives us a "recognition" plot with a twist.

In effect, Ishiguro does something intriguing and puzzling. It is a truism that the placement of flashbacks is one of the most difficult parts of a writer's job. The expectation first of all is that background details will be weaved in unobtrusively. Where flashbacks occur they should not impede the forward momentum of the story. But in peopling his novel with doppelgängers, Ishiguro has also obviated the need for flashbacks. Memory comes alive and is articulated together with the narrative present. The conventional signposts between the two are eliminated so that we get purely imagistic transitions between them. That narrative logic permits, among other things, Ryder's "realisation," as he peers into a home in an estate he visits with Boris, that he is looking at the "parlour" of a house that he had lived in long ago in Manchester (214). In the same manner Ryder's hotel room morphs into something completely different, and the town center can be reached from the back of a truck stop. Ishiguro basically renders time as space.

As a result, plot also operates in a unique manner. Anita Brookner said in a review of The Unconsoled that the "logic of [its] procedure is never in doubt" (40), and, expanding on her comment, we might add that its plot is driven by a kind of oneiric or associative logic. A good example here would be the way in which the storyline takes up Ryder's recollection of his aunt's home as he gazes at the ceiling of his hotel room. Later in the night, Ryder is awakened by the hotel manager, Hoffman. Without explanation, Hoffman drives Ryder to the previously mentioned country mansion. Hoffman reveals during the journey that he likes to redecorate rooms. His favorite hobby is, in fact, the renovation of hotel rooms to "match" the "vision" in his "head"; he confesses that he is "obsessed" with redecoration once he sees "the potential of a particular room," and then he asks if this might be a "defect" in his "nature" (121). What we get, as such, is a train of events linked by the logic of association. Ryder's "flashback" as he gazes at the ceiling of his hotel room develops into Hoffman's confession that he likes to redecorate them, and this in turn makes plausible the journey to a country mansion (a room "writ large" as it were). To use a musical analogy, a motif is played, and from that brief melodic or rhythmic formula, longer passages are developed; the plot repeats these motifs or figures in a different key.

Without exaggeration, it has to be said that all this is quite extraordinary. While the account above might give the impression that The Unconsoled is systematic and orderly, a large part of the
writerly pleasure we get as readers stems from the surprising permutations that Ishiguro offers using this new emplotment technique. In stressing how we appropriate others to tell our life stories, Ishiguro suggests that the defense mechanisms of the ego—repression, denial, projection, introjection—are always in full play. He develops his favorite theme concerning the limits of self-knowledge. But he also does this with an extraordinary array of technical innovations. He offers us a fictional world with its own unique rules, and thus he also extends the range of the high-modernist European novel.

**When We Were Orphans (2000)**

*When We Were Orphans* tells the story of a celebrated detective named Christopher Banks and his efforts to unravel the mystery of his parents’ disappearance in old Shanghai. It begins in London in the 1930s but soon circles back to Banks’s expatriate childhood in Shanghai’s International Settlement in the early years of the century. There are ructions at home because his mother is a vociferous opponent of the opium trade, from which his father’s company obtains its profits. First his father and then his mother disappear, kidnapped it seems and probably murdered by shadowy figures connected to the trade. Young Christopher is repatriated to the care of an aunt in Shropshire. He attends school and university and decides to become a detective. He forms a tentative liaison with a woman named Sarah Hemmings, an orphan like himself. After setting up an office in London, he also begins to notch up some notable investigative successes.

Despite increasing fame, however, London society holds little attraction for Banks, and in 1937 he sets off for Shanghai for what will be his biggest case yet. With the narrative taking an increasingly surrealistic turn, he moves from the glitter of the Shanghai nightclubs to his former home in the settlement to the slum warrens in the Chinese quarter of the city. Against all odds, he believes that his parents are still held captive in an abandoned house in the quarter. As he makes his way there he finds himself caught in the confused warfare between the Chinese communists, Chiang Kai-shek’s army and the invading Japanese. In the shell of a house he finds and rescues his childhood friend, Akira, now a soldier in the Japanese army, and then, after further meanderings, they eventually find the house and enter it.

As we have long realized, however, Banks has been living a debilitating fantasy life. Instead of his parents, they find a young Chinese girl, her family lying dead beside her from the shelling, who pleads with them to revive her injured dog, upon which he breaks down sobbing. Despite taking on the mantle of a novel of adventure, therefore,
the narrative focus is heavily psychological, where against the grain of Banks's first-person narration, Ishiguro reveals how he had, as it were, mummified his childhood to cope with the trauma of parental loss. It appears that Banks had embellished the hostage "rescue" games (113) devised and played with Akira in the months following his father's disappearance into a kind of alternative universe, so that as readers we get a purchase on the wounds of childhood as they drive and distort adulthood. The psychological climax of the novel is thus the episode where Banks enters the abandoned house, for with it he takes the first step toward confronting those deceptions.

Subsequently, the mystery of his parents' disappearance is cleared up in a key denouement chapter that is structurally analogous to the disclosure scene of a detective novel. From "Uncle Philip," a man once considered to be a family friend, Banks learns that his father had not converted to the antiopium cause, that he had not sabotaged his company's shipments and fallen victim to ensuing criminal intrigue, as Banks had long believed. Instead, he had eloped with his mistress and had died two years later from typhoid in Malaya. His putative kidnapping was merely a tale concocted by Banks's mother to conceal a painful event from him. More importantly, Banks learns that in the course of her antiopium campaigning, his mother had crossed a Chinese warlord who planned to muscle in on the trade. In response, the warlord had kidnapped her with the help of Philip, and later she had reached a "financial arrangement" (313) with her captor so that Banks would be richly provided for. As a result, however, she suffers enslavement, humiliation, and concubinage.

In this way the novel reveals itself to be a variation on Charles Dickens's Great Expectations (1861), a development explicitly sign-posted in Banks's encounter with a Japanese colonel during his trek through the slum warrens, who declares that he is "especially fond of your Dickens" (296). In Dickens's novel the hero, Pip, is rocked by the discovery that the patron responsible for his ascension to gentility is not the elderly gentlewoman Miss Havisham but the ex-convict Magwitch, and similarly in Orphans Banks learns that his real benefactor is the warlord Wang Ku and not his aunt. As Philip puts it, Banks's schooling and his place in London society are all owed to Wang Ku or rather to his mother's "sacrifice" (313). And this means that the chief revelation of the denouement chapter—the novel's penultimate one—is of a life built on drug money, on tawdry spoils.

The final chapter recounts Banks's reunion with his mother in a Hong Kong sanatorium in the fifties. She had survived the anarchy of the warlord era, invasion, war, and revolution but had lost her mind, somehow fetching up in an asylum in Chungking before being shipped to Hong Kong when China closed its borders. In a quietly moving coda Banks fails to penetrate through her mental fog but
experiences a kind of compensatory epiphany. He realizes that she had always loved him and that her love had not been conditioned on him performing heroics. Banks’s search for his parents is sometimes couched as an oddly monumentalized desire to save the world, to fight “encroaching wickedness” (31), and to “combat evil” (22), and now it becomes clear that these were the consequence of the trauma he had to endure.

At the same time the novel’s romantic interest is tidied up. In the interim between their tentative courtship and Banks’s decision to return to Shanghai, Sarah had married an ex-diplomat and had set off for the city as well. Sarah’s husband ill-treats her, and after reestablishing ties there, Sarah and Banks decide to elope. When Banks fails to make their agreed rendezvous—he is off searching for his parents—Sarah sets off alone for Macao, where she meets the man she considers the true love of her life. Faced with the loss, Banks consoles himself with the thought that, in setting off for Macao, Sarah too had been searching for her parents, that their fate was always to “face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadows of vanished parents” (335-36). Like Stevens in Remains, Banks seeks reconciliation with the mistakes of his life. But unlike Stevens, he is accorded a more rejuvenatory denouement; he gets to enjoy a degree of solace in an adopted daughter, Jennifer, also an orphan, with whom he has a close and abiding relationship.

As the foregoing makes clear, the two issues crucial to any elucidation of Orphans are its rewriting of Dickens and its deployment of the detective narrative form. While its use of a stilted, mannered language echoes, as one reviewer puts it, “the stiff world of 1930s detective fiction” (“Back to Basics” 12), the fact that Ishiguro glosses over the details of Banks’s work suggests that it is not a conventional crime caper. A striking feature of Orphans, in fact, is the way it defies genre conventions. Despite his gumshoe appellation, Banks never gets to exhibit ratiocinative brilliance or to engage in intricate spadework. We are told that he gets increasingly famous as he solves bigger cases. References are made to “the Roger Parker murder” (31) and “the Studley Grange business” (32). But the distinctive readerly pleasures of an orthodox detective thriller are conspicuous by their absence.

Given that Orphans rewrites Great Expectations to highlight the tainted provenance of Banks’s wealth, we might say that it operates at one level as an indictment of the opium trade. It helps to restore a notable historical trespass to our cultural archive. And, interestingly, that aspect of its design did have an immediate impact, for when the novel first came out, the London-based trading group John Swire & Co. quickly took offense, accusing Ishiguro and his publishers of blackening its name. Orphans had used the name of
its former Shanghai subsidiary, Butterfield and Swire, to designate the company employing Banks’s father, and hence it had written to Ishiguro’s publisher, Faber and Faber, expressing its outrage. Eventually, an “amicable settlement” was reached such that all future editions of *Orphans* would replace the disputed title with an entirely fictitious alternative—Morganbrook & Byatt—but by then this aspect of the book had already been heavily underscored (Milmo).

But more than that, Ishiguro’s rewriting of Dickens needs to be understood, I feel, in the light of a distinction between the nineteenth-century novel and its modern-day epigones. Ishiguro turns to Dickens because it offers, I think, a different cosmography, a different take on man’s relation with the world and with society. For Dickens, we need to remember, injustice was typically represented as an occurrence in a social matrix, one that was still improvable. Oddness and eccentricity of the kind that Banks exhibits in spades were treated sympathetically by Dickens as evidence of an implicit and sometimes explicit recommendation that society at large should also show sympathy. The outcast and the odd and the orphans of the world could still at some point be gathered into the extended embrace of the (social) family. And it is in this respect, therefore, that Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850) presents itself as a literary precursor of *Orphans*. Both books chart the efforts made by orphans—they’re filled with them—to find their way in the world.

With the fiction that comes later, however, that cosmography begins to change, so that the convictions that the nineteenth-century novel still harbored (for instance in the work of Jane Austen and George Eliot) are no longer available. In tandem it seems concerns about anomie and alienation take center stage. The realization is that our basic emotional and spiritual needs are no longer comprehended nor nourished by society. And hence the plangency that suffuses the work of, say, D. H. Lawrence or a novel such as E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*, which begins with the epigraph “only connect . . .”

This perhaps explains the enduring popularity of Dickens in the cultural zeitgeist. But in the same way I think Dickens’s trademark sentimentality finds its way into *Orphans* because of that enjoinder to establish deeper connections between self and other. At one point in their wanderings through the slum warrens, for instance, Akira tells Banks that “When we nostaligic, we remember. A world better than this world we discover when we grow [up]” (282, sic). In an earlier episode Akira quotes a Japanese monk to the effect that children are the “twine” that keep together the “slats” of a window-blind, that they bind together, “not only a family, but the whole world” (73). And again it is striking that the Japanese colonel responsible for the Dickens allusion also quotes from the works of an ancient Japanese
"court lady," lamenting that "our childhood becomes like a foreign land once we have grown" (297).

At its deepest level then Orphans is about such connections, about the need for them. Childhood is seen as the embodiment of something vital we lose when we grow up, of that instinct, which is usually found only among the young and the eccentric, to establish an immediate and vital connection between self and other. As Ishiguro explains it, the orphan metaphor in the title "refers to that moment in our lives when we come out of the sheltered bubble of childhood and discover that the world is not the cozy place that we had previously been taught to believe. . . . Even when we become adults, something of this disappointment, I think, remains"; Banks represents a naive and innocent part of us that wants, accordingly, "to go back, to fix things" (qtd. in Mackenzie 17). The assertion in the title that we are, all of us, orphans is therefore linked to that imperative to "fix things," for as Ishiguro adds, there is "nothing wrong with nostalgia. . . . It is a much maligned emotion. The English don't like it, under-rate it, because it harks back to empire days and to guilt about the empire. But nostalgia is the emotional equivalent of idealism. You use memory to go back to a place better than the one you find yourself in. I am trying to give nostalgia a better name" (qtd. in Mackenzie 17).

One of the strengths of Orphans is the way it gets us to invest in the libidinal dynamic of Banks's search for his parents, of his desire to fight "encroaching wickedness" (31) and to "combat evil" (22). Ishiguro's wager appears to be that, by so doing, the novel can get us to grasp a slice of the (economic) logic connecting metropolitan society and what lies outside its everyday consciousness, to move from the rarefied world of the London social set into the urban purgatory of a remote slum quarter blighted by poverty. In the process the narrative acquires quasi-allegorical significance. It seeks to enlarge our vital sympathies and imaginative capacities, our sense of what fellow-feeling amounts to. If The Unconsoled gives us the self-alienated urbanite of Kafkaesque derivation, Orphans explores an alternative moral and spiritual terrain. In his earlier novels Ishiguro sets himself a largely "negative" task. In essence he trains a metacritical lens on the tropes and genres of the general culture. In Orphans the same thing happens with detective fiction, but a more "positive" development also occurs, where surprisingly it might seem Ishiguro asserts against the grain of an all-embracing Kulturpessimus that society can be sympathetic, that it is still improvable. The melancholy that suffuses his fiction is still there, but this desire to "give nostalgia a better name" is definitely a new turn.

In a critique of the novels undertaken before the publication of Orphans, Sheng-mei Ma took Ishiguro to task for writing what he
calls “universalist parables” (74). It was all very well him highlighting the difficulties of self-understanding through protagonists such as Stevens and Ryder, but, as a result, Ishiguro also fails to delineate his position within British sociality, which is to say his position as “an Asian minority living in the West” (81). As my account shows, however, Ishiguro operates on a wider canvas, or, at any rate, a different one. He offers a cosmography that is still recognizably modernist and Kantian, where the appeal to the “universal” is not immediately parsed as guilty or as stillborn from inception. In rewriting Dickens as detective fiction, he draws together the emotive and the ratiocinative realms, with memory (nostalgia) providing the catalyst to initiate a remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude. In this way Ishiguro asserts that the imagination is the source of the good, and that art can offer that.

The implication in all this is that a writer's job is in some respects a metacritical one, his function to cast a jaundiced eye over certain cultural forms—the country-house novel, the high-modernist European novel, the detective novel—to highlight their depredations and their embedded utopian impulses, to perform something akin to ideologikritik. In the process he also helps to extend our intellectual and aesthetic frames of reference, allowing us to see the world in all its complexity.

From The Unconsoled onward Ishiguro also appears to have found his voice. What began as an attempt to evade culturalist sequestration grew into something more, an innovative ontological and fictional terrain that is replicated in the Surrealist tenor of certain plot sequences in Orphans. Among them, we have Banks's interminable trek through the slum quarter where he finds Akira and meets the previously mentioned Japanese colonel. Taken as a whole this evocation of a world uneasily poised between the literal and the solipsistic clearly contains a key hermeneutic function for Ishiguro. It plumbs the depths of memory for succor and relief, but it also contains the conditions of possibility of a transcendent future—it opens the doors to that. Prediction in art is an inherently risky business, but I would venture to say that these concerns will continue to feature strongly in Ishiguro's work.

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A Kazuo Ishiguro Checklist

Novels


Short Stories


Screenplays


Nonfiction


