

Kazuo Ishiguro's Persistent Dream for Postethnicity: Performance in Whiteface

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“Why, Mr. Stevens, why, why, why do you always
have to *pretend*?”

—*The Remains of the Day* (154)

ALTHOUGH SOME CRITICS MAY FIND it devilishly inappropriate, even unprofessional, to confuse fictitious characters and the fiction writer, surely no one would dispute the simple fact that being figments of the imagination, characters could be viewed as a novelist's projection of his or her unique conditions of existence, ethnicity being one of them. Therefore, just as a desperate Miss Kenton poses this question to Stevens, who has managed to ignore her love for years, I ask Kazuo Ishiguro the same question concerning his own performance, a career that barely touches on his Anglo-Japanese ethnicity. This is to assume, in an essentialist manner, that there is such a thing—a particular kind of ethnicity—to be represented. But to assume otherwise is a luxury enjoyed by “the haves,” who have moved beyond the basic struggles for civil rights, whose ethnicity is no longer an impediment to success, whose ethnicity, in an ironic twist, is the key to success in a West fond of tokenized minorities. Moreover, though there appears to be only one Anglo-Japanese character in Ishiguro's corpus of four novels, he may very well be dealing with his own ethnicity all along. That he never locates the central consciousness of his novels in Anglo-Japanese but vacillates between Japanese and English characters testifies to the intangible subject-position of minorities in the West, a position so laden with minority dis-ease that one rushes to join seemingly wholesome, well-integrated, and immutable identities. As such, the likes of the butler Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and of the pianist Ryder in *The Unconsoled* (1995) suggest not only *reaction* against readers' ethnic stereotypes generated by Ishiguro's two earlier “Japanese”

novels, but *reactionary* cooptation into a dream world of postethnicity. The minority complex over how one's differences are being perceived and received by others is projected by Ishiguro onto the majority, specifically Stevens and Ryder, whose professions consist of public performances which put private selves under erasure. Yet the suppression of ethnicity, as any suppression goes, is attended by tremendous tension, which in turn is cloaked by the increasing stylization of Ishiguro's four books. Stylization seeks to generalize and ritualize, hence minimizing individual variations. The behavior of a butler or of a renowned musician then proceeds in accordance with idealized social codes. While Ishiguro's characters always suffer from concealment of secret lives, his English protagonists have grown obsessed with mannerisms and public personae. His characters' denial of emotions parallels a minority writer's innermost neurosis, a deep-seated anxiety over identity. In terms of language, the perfect, precise British English in which every character speaks, Japanese included, and with which every scene is laid out totalizes the novel, so much so that characters and scenes become no more than mouthpieces and backdrops for Ishiguro's overarching concern for the human condition. Any commentary with so sweeping a scope betrays a desire to exceed one's limitations, such as ethnicity. It is worth noting that all of his books explore the failure of such a desire.

Subversive Whiteface Reacting Against Orientalism

Kazuo Ishiguro's career destabilizes one of the most pressing issues of our time—ethnicity, underscoring at once its gravity and fleetingness. Intrinsic merits of his novels aside, minority concerns in England and the industrialized First World in the 1980s catapult into prominence the Ishiguro of the two “Japanese” novels—*A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986). Without the apparently ethnic themes and characters, without Ishiguro's own Japanese name and face on the book covers, the novelist speculates in an interview that he would have had a much tougher time breaking through.¹ However, Ishiguro's ethnicity is attributed to him on the essentialist premises

¹See Ishiguro's interview with Vorda and

of the Japanese culture he inherits from his family and the Japanese fictional universe he in turn creates. His third novel *The Remains of the Day*, by contrast, appears almost Conradian in its being more English than the English. As if taunting his readers' assumption of race and ethnicity, Ishiguro conjures up an idealized England of the past decades from the eyes of a British butler, rather than those of Etsuko, the Japanese immigrant in the British Isles in *Pale*, or of Masuji Ono, the Japanese painter in Japan in *Artist*. Indeed, *Remains* proceeds almost entirely devoid of any Asian reference, with the exception of the porcelain Chinaman adorning the staircase at Darlington Hall. *The Unconsoled* outdoes the de-ethnicized *Remains* by anchoring itself in the dreams and nightmares, not even in the daytime interior monologue, of an Englishman. An ethnic writer's persistent desire for *postethnicity* is eventually realized in *Unconsoled*, cast, ironically, as a dream, one which emanates minority anxiety because it pretends to be its opposite—the majority. The very form of *Unconsoled* suggests that *postethnicity* is a wish-fulfillment and that the deracinated dreamscape a reaction against Orientalist readings of his “Japanese” novels. But could it not be possible that Ishiguro's ethnicity is as much an ideological construct of our own making as *postethnicity* is of Ishiguro's? Does it not stand to reason that the Japanese-ness perceived in the novelist in fact resembles the English-ness in Stevens and in Ryder?

Herzinger, especially pp. 133-4.

Such mutual dreaming of fictitious characters, of fiction writers, and of fiction readers brings to mind the Chinese philosopher Chuang-tzu (fifth to fourth-century B.C.) who “dreamt that he was a butterfly...Suddenly he awakened, and there he was, veritably Chuang Chou [Chou was his personal name] himself. Now he does not know whether the butterfly is a dream of Chuang Chou or whether Chuang Chou is a dream of the butterfly” (Liu 41). Chuang-tzu problematizes the Self by shifting subjectivity from the human to an insect, hence to the entire world. But the fact that we attribute such erasure of Self to Chuang-tzu rather than to a butterfly highlights Chuang-tzu's personal philosophy. The abandonment of the Self can only derive from a Self strong enough to be aban-

done. Similarly, Ishiguro's Stevens and Ryder appear to be divorced from the author's background, but they only materialize, like sculptures on a totem pole, on the shoulders of Etsuko and of Ono. Ishiguro's persistent dream for universalist parables beyond identity politics arises from his firm grounding in the literary scene via his ethnic "stage." Postethnicity seems to be an excess indulged in only by those who have already made it, partly by virtue of their ethnicity.

To be fair to Ishiguro, the critical side of him in various published interviews and colloquiums has vehemently resisted being categorized as an ethnic writer. He has cautioned against the comparison with his contemporaries such as Salman Rushdie and Timothy Mo, two among many English writers of non-English descent.² He has repeatedly pointed out the absurdity and racism of being associated with Japanese writers like Mishima and Tanizaki. Yasujiro Ozu is perhaps the only Japanese master to whom he regularly pays tribute. But he has credited not just Ozu's post-war films of *shomin-geki* (domestic drama) but Chekhov's plays for his daring experimentation in the sluggish movement or utter plotlessness of his stories.³ Most significantly, he has emphasized his creative drive of shuttling between the specific and the metaphorical, between realism and allegory, between the matter-of-fact details and the universal. In other words, Ishiguro has insisted throughout his career to be regarded as postethnic *as well*. Though never disavowing the ethnic-specific nature of some of his works, he tirelessly brings up their universal aspect. It is intriguing to note that such persistence would culminate thus far in the surrealist *Unconsoled*, whose dreamscape evokes the modernist angst of Kafka, the surrealist paintings of Salvador Dali, the maze-like lithographs of M. C. Escher, and a host of other, for lack of a better term, "universalist aestheticians." To be sure, scholars have explored, among other subjects, Kafka's Jewish background and Dali's roots in the devastation of the Great War. The fact remains, however, that these artists had opted for an artistic expression that was deliberately abstract and universal, supposedly above and beyond the mundane world which they critiqued. The three melted timepieces in the bleak waste-

²See Vorda and Herzinger, pp. 135–6.

³See Gregory Mason's "Inspiring Images" and his interview of Ishiguro, p. 336. See also Vorda and Herzinger, especially pp. 147–8.

land of Dali's 1931 "The Persistence of Memory," for instance, try to deny memory but eerily revalidate it. Time is suspended, distance warped, intentions thwarted, all of which echo perfectly the mood of *Unconsoled*. But by merely distorting and not annihilating time, distance, and intentions, Dali and Ishiguro in effect call attention to these mutations. Despite one's attempt to undo memory, it returns with a greater force. The corpses of timepieces no longer tell the time; they haunt it. Each of Ishiguro's protagonists is likewise locked in the prisonhouse of memory, the web of which constitutes and arrests the Self. All his male characters tried or continue to try to rise above mediocrity, or the confines of the self, for the noble cause of ameliorating the human condition. Ono, Lord Darlington and his shadow, Stevens, and Ryder were once or still are trapped by delusions of grandeur, forced in the end to confront the tragic consequences of their own actions. Their failure has a certain tragic dignity to it, reflecting Ishiguro's own dream for transcending ethnicity.

But before pronouncing dead(end) the postethnic text of *Unconsoled*, we need to reassess exactly how his first two novels come to be characterized as "Japanese" and why *Remains* comes off as a huge success with its equally postethnic theme. Despite the universalist claims in his interviews, Ishiguro's first two books are thoroughly stamped with ethnic markers. Both Etsuko and Ono are coping with their personal transgressions deeply intertwined with Japan's recent past. Etsuko neglected and even abused her own daughter in the post-war Nagasaki, resulting in the daughter's alienation and eventual suicide in England.⁴ Ono dedicated his artistic talents to Japanese military expansionism, thus personally responsible for the disaster of World War II. Ishiguro, nevertheless, did not compose these stories solely from first-hand experiences of Japan. He left Nagasaki with his family for England in 1960 when he was five- or six-year-old. Images of homeland retained by a young child are bound to be vague and limited, yet Ishiguro finds a way to capitalize on what is presumably a weakness in fiction writing. By having his protagonists explore their shaky recall of the past, Ishiguro ingeniously justifies the fuzziness of Japan in his own creative mind.

⁴See Sheng-mei Ma's "Immigrant Schizophrenic in Asian Diaspora Literature" in *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (1998) for a close analysis.

Consequently, the hills near Nagasaki as well as the past associated with it, remembered by a guilt-ridden mother, become a “pale view” with indistinct outlines. The retired painter Ono, far more admirable than Etsuko in acknowledging his mistakes, rambles on, apparently indiscriminately, about a world in constant flux. Despite the appearance of sharp rifts in his own career and in Japan’s history, the novel is an amazingly coherent jumble of images and sounds, one interweaving into the other to formulate a complete lifestory, a mosaic of sorts of muted tones and smudged contours. Ono’s “flow” through an ever-changing world comes through in the thematic repetitions of betrayals. The young artistic Ono rebels against his businessman father by joining an art company that mass produces Orientalist kitsch for foreign consumption. But such a revolt continues the family tradition of merchantilism. Ono subsequently deserts art-as-a-business for Mori-san’s art-for-art’s-sake, indulging himself in the ephemeral “Pleasure District.” Awakened by patriotism and social concerns, Ono abandons his sensei’s principles and unwittingly joins the fascist militarists. In this process, he betrays to the authorities his own less royalist disciple, Kuroda, who languishes in prison during the war. It is significant that both the partings with Mori-san and with Kuroda are set in the same pavilion, accentuating the pattern of repetition in his life. In fact, in his old age, Ono increasingly speaks and thinks like Mori-san, whom he discredited in his youth. The antagonism Kuroda’s student, Enchi, exhibits toward Ono parallels Ono’s earlier resentment against Mori-san.

It is in such duplications of events within a vaguely ethnic context that one must see the kindling of the postethnic impulse, for repetitions signal a general condition rather than unique characteristics. Indeed, Ishiguro, for autobiographical reasons, could not afford to be otherwise. Part of him is English, even international, and decidedly un-Japanese. He seeks to extricate himself from identity politics by means of not only the recurring events in Ono’s life but by having characters like Ono resurrected as a British lord, a butler, and a pianist, not to mention his previous reincarnation in the father-in-law, the equally nationalist Ogata-san, in *Pale*. What Ono experiences re-

sembles what many characters undergo, regardless of racial difference. In addition to the string of aging, self-deluded males, young boys likewise take after one another. The spoiled, whiny Japanese boy Akira of *Pale* finds his own mirror image in the grandson Ichiro of *Artist*, subsequently transformed into the overweight, sulky Boris of *Unconsoled*. Characters are carry-overs from one book to the next because the fundamental human emotions explored through them are identical, namely, that of an unconsolable guilt and emptiness. Despite Etsuko's whitewashing of her past, despite Ono's courage and good will toward the new Japan, despite Stevens's bracing for the remains of his days, despite Ryder's keeping up of appearances, their lives are revealed to be irrevocably void of human warmth. To some extent, this preoccupation with the shared human condition accounts for some reviewers' complaint of the lack of individuality in Ishiguro's characters, who are likened, rather mean-spiritedly by Louis Menand, to "papier-mache animations" (3) operating according to some technical manual on gradations of human emotions.

This thematic refrain culminates and intensifies in Ishiguro's most recent novel, a refrain that so irritates certain reviewers that they parody the title as "uncontrolled," "unrelenting." Jeff Giles describes it as "dull, repetitious, long-winded, long-winded, repetitious, dull...It's as if he got sick of reading about how compact his prose is—how he's the poet laureate of the unspoken and the unexpressed—and suddenly retaliated with his dense snowstorm of words" (92F). Will Blythe agrees that "fatigue sets in because *The Unconsoled* is curiously one-dimensional...The novel successfully embodies the dream logic of the unconscious, but that seems to be all it does" (65). This damning assessment is echoed by Ned Rorem: "The situation, a bad dream from which Ryder will never awake, is Kafka in reverse...But at least Kafka is concise and visionary, whereas Ishiguro is directionless and undifferentiated" (157). Other reviewers see this, nevertheless, as an accomplishment. Tom Wilhelmus maintains that "Ishiguro has created a monument to boredom, accident, indifference, obtuseness, pretension, and misunderstanding—a great negative adventure that is at once darkly humorous and a striking moral

commentary...The effect is Kafkaesque, a swirling mixture of inexplicable guilt and dislocation in time” (322). Francis Wyndham likewise reports that the book is “not easy to read, but, surprisingly, its overall effect does contain an element of consolation. The muddle, panic, embarrassment, and dread that surface in our secret dreams do also, needless to say, feature in our daytime lives, and it is some comfort to be reminded by Ishiguro that they are universal” (94).

If one disregard the differences of opinion in these reviews and focus instead on the evolution of Ishiguro’s postethnic concerns, then the novelist has largely succeeded. To contextualize *Unconsoled*, reviewers draw from Kafka, Lewis Carroll, Luis Bunuel, and no longer Mishima, Tanizaki, Ozu. It is perhaps not surprising that *Remains* and *Unconsoled*, their shared postethnic world notwithstanding, would elicit such different responses, with reviewers overwhelmingly in favor of the former. *Remains* won the Booker Prize in 1989 and was turned into a Merchant-Ivory film starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson. Evidently, the realistic *Remains* proves to be a far less disorienting read than its surrealistic successor. The irony is that whereas the England of *Remains* may appear to exist comfortably in time, the book’s appeal stems from the public’s nostalgia for a bygone era imagined to have existed. On the other hand, though the restless nightmares of *Unconsoled* seem to occur outside time, they in effect reflect much of the reader’s life experiences—a colossal exercise in futility, anticipation followed, almost without fail, by disenchantment. Ultimately, it may be the lack of anchoring or contextualizing in *Unconsoled*, which is of course Ishiguro’s whole point, that dooms the novel. And yet, one can argue that it is precisely because Ishiguro moors his book too securely in life that the reader refuses to endorse the vision of “Horror! Horror!” The circular, continuously frustrated motion of Ryder’s itinerary, or the lack thereof, reminds the reader, rather disturbingly, of M. C. Escher’s 1951 “House of Stairs,” where interconnected flights of stairs lead into one another, on which crawl and roll centipedes, Sisyphuses labotomized and robbed of even the consolation of existentialism. Ishiguro’s expression is

understandably even more difficult for the public to accept than that of Escher's lithograph or, for that matter, Kafka's "Metamorphosis." Whereas his predecessors cast their commentaries in explicitly allegorical terms, those of centipedes or a beetle, Ishiguro never deviates from the human world and never provides any sense of insulation. Ishiguro gives, in the words of Carlton Lake in description of Dali's "paranoic-critical method," "the most incongruous or unbelievable material such detail and precision that it acquired, in the process, a life of its own and became almost plausible" (68-9). What dooms the reception of his novel may well be that the "detail and precision" is such that it becomes too plausibly the reader's own life.

Reactionary Whiteface Subsuming Differences

Yet neither *Remains* nor *Unconsoled* is truly postethnic. The English-ness of Stevens and Ryder is, in theory if not in practice, just as ethnic as the Japanese-ness of Etsuko and Ono. That one could only claim this on the theoretical plane bears witness to the growing realization, best embodied in George Lipsitz's essay "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness," that whiteness has long remained invisible in, and thus beyond, racial discourse. This invisibility derives from the whites' majority status and their control of discourse and material resources. The ethnic group in power is usually less inclined to examine the correlation between its race and its power. Therefore, Ishiguro's shift to English characters and postethnicity may suggest problematics much more troubling than a minority's reaction against identity politics pigeonholing him as nothing but an Anglo-Japanese. Ethnic writers can conceivably imagine ways to become more, not less, ethnic. Why does ethnicity have to make way for postethnicity, an illegitimate heir probably one's own yet alarmingly white? Why should the ethnic community accept one writer's flirtations with postethnicity, perhaps a code word for "whiteness"?

One hastens to add that it is undoubtedly subversive for a minority to perform in whiteface. Given the long history of blackface minstrelsy in North America and its permutations in Europe, it is heartening to see an Anglo-

Japanese assumes whiteface. More specifically, given the Fu Manchus, the Charlie Chans, the Madame Butterflies, the Dragon Ladies, and other stereotypical Asian characters impersonated by whites, Ishiguro has rendered an invaluable service in expanding the repertoire of imagination for minorities of Asian descent. This potentially revolutionary act, however, is compromised by the fact that the 1990s' postethnic bent is so removed from the utopianism and activism of previous decades that it has acquired a color-blind, postmodernist flatness that is tantamount to blindness itself. If one were to take Ryder's English-ness as the signifier of postethnicity, or in Ishiguro's own phrase, of universal parable, the novelist is then caught in a double bind: his reaction against Orientalism has turned reactionary by subsuming racial differences. To defy Orientalist characteristics imposed on him, Ishiguro passes as white. Fundamentally a performance on stage or in real life, such passing can be undertaken by all sides of a multi-racial society. But the multi-directional passing does not betoken an egalitarian society; rather, it reflects how slanted the socio-economic relationship is. When Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, Mickey Rooney, and others—many of whom Jewish and Irish—perform in blackface, they do so to entertain the white audience, often at the expense of African American images.⁵ When Charles W. Chesnutt writes about blacks passing for whites, blacks conceal their race to obtain better opportunities in a white-dominated society. Passing for minorities has historically meant a precarious passage into a semblance of power.

⁵See Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrant in the Hollywood Melting Pot*.

To further explore the temptation of passing for minorities, I draw from Jennifer DeVere Brody in "Hyphen-Nations":

[T]he hyphen *performs*—it is never neutral or natural. Indeed, by performing the mid-point between often conflicting categories, hyphens occupy 'impossible' positions....Hyphens are problematic because they cannot stand alone: in fact, they do not 'stand' at all; rather, they mark a de-centered if central position that perpetually presents readers with a neither/nor proposition. Hyphens locate intermediate, often invisible, and always shifting

spaces between supposedly oppositional binary structures. (149)

Despite Brody's somewhat negative description of hyphenated identity, one lacking in subjectivity, her argument unveils the seemingly insignificant yet richly ambiguous hyphens. The destabilizing of race and ethnicity can indeed germinate from the sliver of space between races, a void belonging to neither, a moment pregnant with infinite possibilities. If attributes supposedly innate to one race can be faked by hyphenated, hybridized individuals, then the intrinsic-ness of those attributes is subject to question. Racial passing thus highlights how an exterior display rather than some immutable "essence" lies at the heart of the construct of race. In the same deconstructive spirit, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) views gender as a series of public acts. Yet unlike homosexuality which could choose to remain closeted or to "come out," ethnicity, except in the case of mixed-blood, can never mask itself.

Fiction, of course, is something else. Ishiguro has so far masqueraded as Japanese (Ono), Anglo-Japanese (Etsuko), English (Stevens and Ryder), and vaguely Central European (the townspeople in *Unconsoled*) characters in Japan, England, and an unidentified part of the Continent. The novelist inhabiting that hyphen has emerged in many roles, but never once as an Asian minority living in the West, or, to put it in unabashedly essentialist terms, in a subject-position similar to his own. The closest Ishiguro gets to his own life experiences seems to be Etsuko, a schizophrenic Anglo-Japanese widow in England. Yet even there, Etsuko's narrative hardly ever touches on her experiences in England. The identity of a minority writer receives, in other words, only one oblique treatment through the split personality of Etsuko, as if a talented novelist, confronted with a task most akin to self-representation, resorts to pop psychology, or the banality of minority's divided self. Even more tellingly, Ishiguro's criticism of *Pale* concentrates on the technical crudeness of his first novel rather than the shallowness of the immigrant protagonist. Describing the moment toward the end of *Pale* whereby Etsuko and Sachiko come to overlap, Ishiguro finds it to be "a shock" and "baffling" (Mason 338) because that finale is ill-pre-

pared by the novel's flashbacks. Ishiguro attributes his discontent with the novel to flashbacks so clear-cut that they are devoid of the "murkiness of someone trying to wade through their [*sic*] memories, trying to manipulate memories" (337–8). The fusion of the two protagonists appears too artificial and contrived due to, in Ishiguro's own words, his lack of "technical sophistication" (338). It is intriguing that with Ishiguro's acumen, he fails to discern the fundamental flaw of *Pale*, namely, a protagonist poorly-delineated in her present surrounding because this would entail building part of the narrative on the slippery pinhead of a hyphen—Ishiguro's own. Ishiguro's career indicates that pins are better used to puncture other bubbles of existence, other constructs of identity.

If Ishiguro's self-diagnosis of unrefined craftsmanship were accurate, he has been remarkable in avoiding similar pitfalls in subsequent novels thriving on the nebulous "texture of memory" (337). His later virtuosity is increasingly accompanied by a distancing from the minority's *specific* positionality, schizophrenic or otherwise, replaced now by everyman's *shared* dilemma between social role and private self. The two English protagonists live a life based on highly stylized public roles, utterly detached from their own feelings and their loved ones. This is not to suggest that public performances do not take place in the "Japanese" novels. But by contrast, both Etsuko and the retired Ono are less of public figures, whose subconscious confession of her guilt to the daughter Niki and whose brave admission of his militarist past during the *miai*, family meeting in a marriage negotiation, for the second daughter are spontaneous acts to bring the family closer together. If these acts were performance, Etsuko and Ono do so in order to go on living—by reaching out to their family and family-to-be. Stevens and Ryder, on the other hand, come to engage in performances for the sole reason that their lives are but a series of public functions; they perform in order not to live, not to experience the passion and the pain of any human relationship. The growing sense of atomization and alienation in Ishiguro's whitefaces reflects, in a roundabout way, a minority's schizophrenic un-ease, despite or because of his disguise in fiction. To rephrase Sartre in *Anti-Semite*

and Jew, a minority is someone whom others call a minority. Masking as a member of the majority demonstrates at once one's competence and deficiency, which calls for masking in the first place. Ishiguro's dream of postethnicity turns out to be a veiling and an intensification of his minority complex.

This minority anxiety festers into the unconsolable hollowness beneath Stevens's and Ryder's public personae. Indeed, they wear the mask so religiously that it grows into their flesh; their total abandonment to social roles arises out of the fear that once the mask is removed, a hole, not a face, would gaze back. Hence, Stevens's fixation on exteriority or appearance. As he contemplates a trip to the West Country to visit Miss Kenton, the first thing that comes to mind is, of course, "cost," followed by "costume" (10), or "suitable traveling clothes—that is to say, clothes in which I might be seen driving the car" (11). Paramount in his consideration is propriety, which, for a "gentleman's gentleman," must strike a delicate balance between being seen and staying unseen. Required to dress and behave properly in order to provide services, a butler must, nonetheless, render his presence unnoticeable and unobtrusive. He would look like, but would remain readily distinguishable from, a gentleman. The resemblance to his masters dictates that he must somehow announce himself as a fake. The best way to achieve this is to ape a gentleman while underscoring the inadequacies of such an imitation, an undermining of facade that is bound to be parodic and comical. As a result, Stevens worries about expense and clothes in terms of his material conditions; socially, he is forever concerned with public perception; linguistically, his formal English—phrases like "that is to say"—proclaims its own contrivedness.

Yet in this excursion in search of Miss Kenton, Stevens, for the first time in his life, travels alone, not in the company of a "genuine" gentleman. In the absence of the authentic, the simulacrum not only considers wearing the suit passed on to him by his former employer, Lord Darlington, motors with the Ford lent to him by his present employer, Mr. Farraday, but momentarily assumes an identity close to that of Lord Darlington. Despite the best at-

tempt at masquerade, everything goes awry. Lord Darlington's dress is too formal and old-fashioned. Stevens is stranded twice because he allows the Ford to go without water and then gasoline. In the second stop at a rural small town, he subconsciously poses as an influential figure once active in "foreign policy" (who has known Churchill, among other celebrities). But his disguise is quickly exposed by Dr. Carlisle, a one-time socialist and a self-exile.

To convince himself that there is more than exteriority, Stevens engages in sophomoric speculations as to the inner quality of a great butler—dignity. Such sporadic intaking of the opium of the mind is submitted, ironically, in the same analogy of a gentleman's suit.

And let me now posit this: "dignity" has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits...The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost...They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit...he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. (42-3)

That Stevens must reiterate key words illustrates how hard he is trying to convince himself of the validity of his belief, one which has become dated and irrelevant with the decline of the British Empire, with the sale of Darlington Hall to an American businessman, and with Stevens's own aging. Moreover, even that alleged rupture in a butler's invincible rampart proves to be beyond reach. Miss Kenton has twice tried to approach Stevens when he is alone in his pantry, bringing fresh cuttings and prying into his reading of romantic novels; twice, she is roundly rejected. The mask has imperceptibly grown into his face.

In Stevens's definition of greatness in butlers, the repetitious and circular diction points to a narrow mind. Stevens is imitating the rhetoric of the high society such as Lord Darlington's. Indeed, Stevens's "dignity" is derivative of the Lord's "honor," the motto by which the self-appointed diplomat conducts himself. It is no surprise that Stevens would flounder, when the real thing, Lord Darlington, his best intentions of honor and fairness not-

withstanding, is amateurish, meddling in foreign affairs, being manipulated by Nazi Germany, as Mr. Lewis, the United States senator, declares.⁶ In part a social satire, *The Remains of the Day* derides the hierarchical pyramid based on a descending order of authenticity and greatness. Even the paragon of honor turns out to be a Nazi sympathizer and a pawn of Adolf Hitler's.

Just as Stevens is by nature a parodic figure, a clone or duplicate of idealized images, the acclaimed pianist Ryder in *Unconsoled* proves himself to be as paltry as the servant. Unlike Stevens who spends his entire career at Darlington Hall, Ryder, true to his name, tours from one metropolis to the next. Like Lord Darlington, Ryder attempts far more than his capabilities allow—he resolves local disputes tangentially related to music. Most importantly, Ryder, like Stevens, is so engrossed in performance that he fails to develop any intimate personal relationships. The purported grace of a world-class performer, the equivalent of Stevens' dignity, has permeated Ryder's life to the extent that he could no longer cease to perform, that is, to begin to function at the dictates of his heart. This cancerous hollowness infects every relationship in *Unconsoled*: that of Ryder, Sophie, and their child Boris; that of the grandfather Gustav the hotel porter, the daughter Sophie, and the grandson Boris; that of the hotel manager Hoffman, his wife, and their son Stefan; that of the alcoholic conductor Brodsky and his ex-wife Miss Collins. In each of these relationships, couples as well as father and daughter have not spoken to each other for years.

Even the professional façade seems a hoax. When Ryder does perform, he invariably flops. Called upon to identify himself to two provincial women boasting of having met Mr. Ryder, he struggles to pronounce his name until his "face had become bright red and squashed into pig-like features" (240). About to address a large audience, Ryder discovers that his "dressing gown was hanging open, displaying the entire naked front of my body" (143). Standing on a chair to attract attention at another occasion, he is distracted from his speech by Miss Collins. Taking leaving of a gallery reception, he mistakes a broom cupboard for the exit, with household mops tumbling down and

⁶The Merchant-Ivory film merges Mr. Lewis and Mr. Farraday into one. The senator played by Christopher Reeve not only attended the international conference at Darlington Hall but purchased it years later, hence highlighting the passing of an old era. The man who criticized Darlington became the owner of Darlington Hall.

falling “with a clatter onto the marble floor “ (278). Rehearsing his much-awaited pieces, Ryder tries in vain to repair the latch of the practice room, finally hanging up a rag for privacy. His rehearsal at the annexe turns out to supply the requiem for the funeral of Brodsky’s dog, an event taking place outside the annexe unbeknownst to him. By the time he goes on stage, the auditorium has long been cleared and chairs put away. As his authoritative comment on music is solicited, Ryder gives an absolutely ludicrous response, which he judges to be sagacious and well-received. *The Unconsoled* is written in such a parodic mode: an elevator ride which allows Gustav to talk non-stop for five pages to a sleepy Ryder⁷; Hoffman’s secret hand gesture to Ryder; the townspeople’s proposal of a bronze statue in memory of Brodsky’s scraggly dog; the amputation of Brodsky’s prosthetic leg and his use of an ironing board as a crutch on stage. With these and other episodes squarely in the absurdist and surrealist vein, Kazuo Ishiguro has indeed journeyed far from the intimation of minority subjectivity in his first novel, but the landscape has grown unrecognizable, depressingly dark. One can only wish him well.⁸

⁷This ascent in an elevator resembles Alice’s fall through the rabbit-hole in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Both the ascent and the descent occur in slow-motion that freezes time and warps space, hence justifying the surrealist episodes to follow.

⁸The concluding sentence is a rephrasing of the last sentence of *An Artist of the Floating World*.

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