

SHAO-PIN LUO

"Living the Wrong Life": Kazuo Ishiguro's Unconsoled Orphans

At some time in the past, I thought, I must have made a mistake, and now I am living the wrong life. Later, on a walk through the deserted town and up to the fountain colonnade, I kept feeling as if someone else were walking beside me, or as if something had brushed against me. Every new view that opened out before us as we turned a corner, every façade, every flight of steps looked to me both familiar and utterly alien.

—W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

Ah, who can we turn to,
then? Neither angels nor men,
and the animals already know by instinct
we're not comfortably at home
in our translated world. Maybe what's left
for us is some tree on a hillside we can look at
day after day, one of yesterday's streets,
and the perverse affection of a habit
that liked us so much it never let go.

.....

Because to stay is to be nowhere.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*

Spaces and Displacements

IN THE WINTER OF 2000, the millennium year, *Critical Inquiry* published a special issue on the concept of space, titled *Geopoetics: Space, Place, and Landscape*, which contains, among others, essays on an Australian beach, a frozen Canadian lake, and

a Nevada desert. As the editors make clear, "These meditations on space, place, and landscape converge at a moment of obsession with *time*."¹ Thus, in his essay in this issue, Edward Said, in tracing the weaving of memory and invention into the place called Palestine, explores the relationship between "memory and geography" and "the question not only of what is remembered but how and in what form."² Kazuo Ishiguro is also a writer deeply preoccupied with the intersections of memory and landscape. His novels are written mostly from the perspective of a narrator looking back at his/her life, remembering and recreating. One reviewer notes Ishiguro's obsession with memory: "Memories, recall, remember. These are the lines of longitude running through his literary geography, words repeated so often in his novels that I stopped counting after the 50th mention."³ Memory in Ishiguro's work seems to bear an intrinsic relationship to landscape, though Ishiguro, in his own words, has been "dogged by the problem of setting, partly because of [his] Japanese ancestry."⁴ Critics insist on Ishiguro's "Japanese-ness," describing his first novels as "done-to-Japanese-perfection,"⁵ as "zen gardens, with no flowery metaphors, no wild, untamed weeds,"⁶ or as "exotic Japanese painting and brush work, carp splashing about in still ponds."⁷ Even *The Remains of the Day* (1989), set in England, is described as a "perfectly English novel that could have been written only by a Japanese."⁸ As if determined to counter such orientalist analysis of his work, Ishiguro sets his next novel, *The Unconsoled* (1995), in an unknown landscape, with a disembodied narrator travelling elsewhere and staying in hotels. Ishiguro explains,

¹ "Geopoetics: Space, Place, and Landscape," Editorial, *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Winter 2000): 173. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Victor Li for his advice and insight; this article is for him. I also wish to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding this project.

² Edward Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Winter 2000): 175, 176.

³ Leslie Forbes, "I Had Lost That Unique Thing, My Japanese-ness," *The Globe and Mail* 3 June 2000: D2.

⁴ Maya Jaggi, "Kazuo Ishiguro Talks to Maya Jaggi," *WASAFIRE: Caribbean, Asian and Associated Literature in English* 22 (Autumn 1995): 20.

⁵ Pico Iyer, "Waiting Upon History," rev. of *The Remains of the Day*, by Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Partisan Review* 59.2 (1991): 589.

⁶ Forbes, "That Unique Thing" D3.

⁷ Suzanne Kelman, "Ishiguro in Toronto," *Brick* 38 (Winter 1990): 13.

⁸ Iyer, "Waiting Upon History" 589.

I was keen to write a book that was so strange that no one could mistake it for anything other than some expression of something that I was thinking or feeling.... It was very late in the day that I decided to use Germanic names. In a way I could change them all to Scandinavian names, or even French names. I'd have to change a few details, the style of certain houses or whatever, but you could almost set that thing down anywhere. It was by and large a landscape of imagination.⁹

Ishiguro's first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), are indeed set in Japan, but it is a Japan of the imagination. There was a very urgent need for Ishiguro to reconstruct that world precisely because it was a world that existed only in his imagination: "This very important place called Japan which was a mixture of memory, speculation, and imagination was fading with every year that went by."¹⁰ Acutely aware that memory, flawed or tainted by the passage of time, may indeed become "memories of memories,"¹¹ Ishiguro, in the guise of the narrator, explains his obsession with memory in this telling passage in *When We Were Orphans* (2000):

I have become increasingly preoccupied with my memories, a preoccupation encouraged by the discovery that these memories—of my childhood, of my parents—have lately begun to blur. A number of times recently I have found myself struggling to recall something that only two or three years ago I believed was ingrained in my mind for ever. I have been obliged to accept, in other words, that with each passing year, my life in Shanghai will grow less distinct, until one day all that will remain will be a few muddled images.¹²

⁹ Dylan Otto Krider, "Rooted in a Small Place: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro," *Kentyon Review* 20.2 (Spring 1998): 151.

¹⁰ Krider, "Rooted in a Small Place" 150.

¹¹ Eleanor Wachtel, *More Writers and Company* (Toronto: Knopf, 2001) 20.

¹² Kazuo Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* (Toronto: Knopf, 2000) 67.

Ishiguro is concerned about the act of remembering and the act of creating and how the two overlap. He emphasizes the "mythical and metaphorical" aspects in his landscape,¹³ and claims to be one "homeless" writer concerned with "universal" themes: "I had no clear role, no society or country to speak for or write about. Nobody's history seemed to be my history, and I think this did push me necessarily into trying to write in an international way."¹⁴ Even when his novels are specifically and historically situated, as Cynthia Wong points out, Ishiguro is using specific locales such as Japan, England, and China "as a starting point to orchestrate crucial themes, such as alienation and suffering."¹⁵

In his most recent novels, *The Unconsoled* and *When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro explores, through the idea of the exile as orphan, these larger themes of alienation and disconnection of the contemporary world. Both Christopher Banks in *When We Were Orphans* and Ryder in *The Unconsoled* are orphans, searching for their lost parents, one literally and the other metaphorically. In *When We Were Orphans*, Banks, a renowned detective, returns to Shanghai, the city of his childhood, to solve the mystery of his parents' disappearance. In *The Unconsoled*, Ryder, a brilliant concert pianist, arrives in an unnamed foreign city to perform a piano recital, expecting attendance and approval from his parents. The parents, however, never show up, and their absence haunts the entire novel. At the end of *When We Were Orphans*, Banks reflects on his life and the lives of those like him: "for those like us, our fate is to face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadows of vanished parents. There is nothing for it but to try and see through our missions to the end, as best we can, for until we do so, we will be permitted no calm" (313).

In his essay "Reflections on Exile," Said makes this connection between exiles and orphans: "Exiles are always eccentrics who *feel* their difference ... as a kind of orphanhood." Exiles and orphans both bear an original loss, and spend their lives trying to "reconstitute their broken lives" by creating narratives of seeming

¹³ Wachtel, *More Writers* 19.

¹⁴ Kenzaburo Oe and Kazuo Ishiguro, "The Novelist in Today's World: A Conversation," *Boundary 2* (Fall 1991): 115.

¹⁵ Cynthia F. Wong, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House, 2000): 10.

coherence in recognition of the loss.¹⁶ In an earlier book, *Beginnings*, Said argues that "the novel is a literary form of secondariness;... the novel makes, procreates, a certain secondary and alternative life possible for heroes who are otherwise lost in society," and he points out that "a whole range of principal characters in fiction are based upon the same premise: orphans, outcasts, parvenus, emanations, solitaires, and deranged types whose background is either rejected, mysterious, or unknown."¹⁷

Thus, in light of Said's analysis in *Beginnings* of Pip in *Great Expectations*, the first section of my essay, "The Wound: The Exile as Orphan," explores how the figure of the orphan becomes for Ishiguro a central means of examining the anguish of displacement and the sorrows of exile. Forever burdened with their original loss, a never-healing wound, both exile and orphan have to invent alternative, fictional worlds with performative identities and substitute families. Therefore, for example, Ryder's story has to take place in a foreign city where he exists without affiliation, context, or history, hence "mysterious, or unknown"; Ishiguro explains, "He had to be away, travelling."¹⁸ However, this desire for and invention of an alternative life and world inevitably lead to the regret and melancholy of "living the wrong life." Further, the memories of an orphan and an exile are inextricably linked with landscape, which invariably becomes evocations of other times and spaces. There is an impossibility of forming intimate relationships or bonds not only with people and society but also with place and landscape. Thus, in the second section of my essay, "Spatial Metaphors," I discuss how Ishiguro emphasizes the relationship between memory and landscape in the characters' attempt to recompense displacement in their search for a house to call home or an international space for sanctuary.

While considering the various spatial metaphors in Ishiguro's work—for example, a flat in London, the International Settlement, the ruins of a battleground in *When We Were Orphans* and the labyrinthian streets of a foreign city, a remembered childhood bed-

¹⁶ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000) 182, 177.

¹⁷ Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975) 93, 92-3.

¹⁸ Jaggi, "Ishiguro Talks" 20.

room, a glimpse of an apartment once lived, scenes of eerie cemeteries, endless corridors, and primeval forests in *The Unconsoled*—it is interesting to note the work of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, namely *The Poetics of Space*, and of the Italian surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico, not only spatially, in terms of the correspondences of the specific images used in Bachelard, de Chirico, and Ishiguro (particularly in *The Unconsoled*), but perhaps more importantly in the psychological and metaphysical qualities all three attach to these physical spaces. One might see a striking affinity between Ishiguro's landscapes and de Chirico's haunting and alienating cityscapes, with their darkened skies, ominous towers and arcades, empty streets and squares, only occasionally dotted with broken and distorted figures. Some of the titles of de Chirico's paintings, possibly drawn from the work of the poet Apollinaire, match the mood and atmosphere of *The Unconsoled*: *The Anxious Journey*, *The Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, *The Enigma of Arrival*, *The Melancholy of Departure*, *Metaphysical Interior*, *The Regret*, *The Purity of a Dream*. There is even a painting titled *Metaphysical Consolation*. One critic describes de Chirico's paintings as "dream writing": "By means of almost infinite escapes—of arcades and facades, of bold straight lines, of looming masses of simple colours, of almost funereal lights and shadows—he ends in fact by expressing this sense of vastness, solitude, immobility and ecstasy which sometimes is produced in our souls by certain spectacles of memory when we are asleep."¹⁹ Then of course, Ishiguro's landscape is also essentially a dreamscape, and Bachelard "reads" and writes about spaces almost purely from a dreamer's perspective.²⁰ In all three cases, spaces are always associated with memory and imagination; as Bachelard writes, "We are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost" (6).

For displaced exiles and homeless orphans, there are only, as in Rilke's poem, what Bachelard describes as "negative" images (42): a tree on a hillside, a yesterday's street, and a habit that never

¹⁹ James Thrall Soby, *Giorgio de Chirico* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1996) 48.

²⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Orion, 1964) 38.

lets go-home is forever elsewhere.²¹ However, Ishiguro's "unconsoled orphan" is neither an exuberant "cosmopolitan" nor really a nostalgic "nativist," but rather a melancholy figure, who shares the larger predicament of the contemporary existential condition with such characters as W.G. Sebald's solitary travellers.²² Forever walking through cities and countryside, burdened with memories of the past, they despair not only of the historical destruction of war and conflict wrought upon humanity but also of the increasing decline and ruin of nature scarred by modernization and industrialization. In the end, the characters in Sebald and Ishiguro feel at home perhaps *only* when in exile or "living the wrong life":²³

Perhaps I had gone the wrong way, as so often in unfamiliar cities. In Schvenningen, where I had hoped to be able to see the sea from a distance, I walked for a long time in the shadow of tall apartment blocks, as if at the bottom of a ravine. When at last I reached the beach I was so tired that I lay down and slept till the afternoon. I heard the surge of the sea, and half dreaming, understood every word of Dutch and for the first time in my life believed I had arrived, and was home.²⁴

"The Wound": The Exile as Orphan

Said discusses in *Beginnings* the search for self-authorization, and thus the figure of the outcast or orphan proceeds to take on importance. The orphan, as does the exile, has no family and hence no immediate filiation or inheritance. He/she has to find affiliation and rely on "intention" or self-will over established family ties or inheritance. Said uses in his analysis the example of Pip in *Great Expectations*. Banks and Ryder share certain characteristics with

²¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Distno Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. A. Poulin, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977) 5.

²² Pico Iyer also refers to this curious connection between Ishiguro and Sebald: "The Butler Didn't Do It, Again," rev. of *The Unconsoled*, by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Times Literary Supplement* 29 April 1995: 22.

²³ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (Toronto: Knopf, 2001) 212.

²⁴ W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions Books, 1995, 1998) 84-85.

Pip. First they all construct pseudo identities for themselves, performing roles they perceive as required of them by their adoptive society and pretending that will, rather than fate, controls their destinies. Then, in their quest for community, they try to appropriate substitute familial affiliations. And finally, all are disillusioned in realizing that the "wound" of the loss of parents and home will never really heal.

In searching for fame and recognition, both Ryder and Banks, like Pip, have "great expectations" for themselves, and paradoxically, the people around them enthusiastically share and support that illusion in looking to them for cultural and spiritual leadership, even though in many instances in the novels when the protagonists are slighted or even ignored, this illusion is constantly undermined. Thus, Banks makes up an identity for himself, playing the brilliant detective, coming to the rescue of Shanghai on the brink of the Sino-Japanese war. As for Ryder, he realizes that his mission is far from merely giving a piano recital, but that the whole town depends on him to save them from a cultural crisis. But he is too embarrassed to admit that he has lost or misplaced his agenda, or is perhaps never given one, hence "a man without a schedule."²⁵ Ishiguro explains, "Ryder is to some extent inevitably a charlatan. These people expect him to deliver all the time, and he is desperately trying to live up to their expectations. He pretends even to himself that he knows more than he does, and that he is more in control."²⁶ Pip also pretends that he is in control of his life, yet "The more Pip believes he is acting on his own, the more tightly he is drawn into an intricate web of circumstances that weighs him down completely."²⁷ The same thing happens to Ryder: He forgets appointments and breaks promises, and people are constantly disappointed and let down. Ishiguro explains that the few days Ryder spends in the city are emblematic of the way people go through their whole lives: "Other people's agendas crowd in on our circumstances and we're just stumbling through. But occasionally we look back and pretend that we actually made the decisions."²⁸ Life

²⁵ Wachtel, *More Writers* 52.

²⁶ Jaggi, "Ishiguro Talks" 24.

²⁷ Said, *Beginnings* 90.

²⁸ Sybil Steinberg, "Kazuo Ishiguro: 'A Book about Our World,'" *Publishers Weekly* 18 Sept. 1995: 105.

in a way becomes a performative act. There are numerous references to performing and rehearsing by many characters. Ryder of course is a "performer," performing his roles and identities and eager to be sympathetic and helpful in any way he can, even though he never actually performs in the concert. He is forever rehearsing his lines and adopting postures for cameras.²⁹ One character Hoffman's moving entreaty to his wife turns out to be an entirely rehearsed, melodramatic affair, devoid of sincerity (120, 126, 426, 459, 507). Even the child Boris knows how to put on an act:

"You have to put one hand in your pocket. Like this. And then you hold your drink, like this." He held the posture for a while, putting on as he did so an expression of great haughtiness.... "And when people come up to you, you just say over and over: 'Quite remarkable! Quite remarkable!' Or if you like, you can say: 'Priceless! Priceless!' And when the waiter comes up with things on a tray, you do this to him." Boris made a sour face and shook his finger from side to side. (249)

In his review of *The Unconsoled*, Pico Iyer thinks that this theatrical mimicry and the "almost crazily self-conscious eagerness to do and say the right thing" are a "natural response of a foreigner suddenly set down in a society he cannot read, and every effect is planned, every emotion made up."³⁰

Secondly, Banks and Ryder are similar to Pip in another sense, in that they also find for themselves, in their invented lives, "substitute families" in their adopted cities. Pip's "irremediable alienation from the family of man" (98) forces him to live, as Said explains, "as an alternative being: as an orphan without real parents," in search of a "substitute family" (96). Said points out further that "This is the novel's most insistent pattern of narrative organization: how Pip situates himself at and affiliates himself with the centre of several family groups, families whose authority he challenges by trying to institute his own through the great expectations that finally destroy him" (96-97). In Banks's fantasy world, his adop-

²⁹ Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled* (Toronto: Knopf, 1995) 136, 169.

³⁰ Iyer, "The Butler" 22.

tive family would include Sarah, Jennifer, and Mei Li, a household of orphans, a family not by blood but by affiliation. In *The Unconsoled*, the three clusters of families play various roles as extensions or variations of Ryder's history: Gustav, the hotel porter, his daughter Sophie, and her son Boris; Hoffman, the hotel manager, his wife Christine, and their son Stephan; and finally, Brodsky, the disgraced conductor, his ex-wife, Miss Collins, and Bruno the dog.³¹ Ishiguro adopts a method he calls "appropriation" to tell the story of Ryder's life: "He would bump into people who are versions of himself at various stages in his life.... By meeting this gallery of characters, you've covered his life."³² So we meet for example these *Doppelgänger* versions of Ryder—Boris as a child, Stephan as a young man, and Brodsky as the older self. In this secondary world the orphans and exiles inhabit, their identities, families, and communities are necessarily constructions, substitutions, and appropriations.

Finally, Said writes, "The basic scheme I have been describing is the cycle of birth and death. Pip's origin as a novelistic character is rooted in the death of his parents. By his wish to make up for that long series of graves and tombstones he creates a way for himself; and yet, over the novel's duration, Pip finds one route after another blocked, only to force open another" (97). Both Banks and Ryder desperately wish to make up for what they have lost, and the presence, or rather the absence, of their parents, haunts both novels. The parents are forever hovering in the background, though almost always in unhappy episodes of the narrators' memories, which are replayed, in *The Unconsoled*, through other equally anguished relationships between children and their parents—Sophie and her father Gustav, Boris and his father Ryder, Stephan and his parents, and in *When We Were Orphans*, through the narratives of other orphans—Sarah, Jennifer, and more subtly, Mei Li, and Akira.

The Unconsoled particularly addresses the loss of the orphan and connects this loss to the pain of the exile as a never-healing "wound." The first hint one gets of Ryder's unhappy childhood occurs near the beginning of the novel, shortly after Ryder settles in for his first night in the foreign city. Ryder realizes that the hotel

³¹ Brian Shaffer discusses this aspect of the novel in *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1998) 94–95.

³² Wachtel, *More Writers* 31.

room is in fact his childhood bedroom, "the sense of recognition growing stronger by the second" (16): "a memory came back to me of one afternoon when I had been lost within my world of plastic soldiers and a furious row had broken out downstairs. The ferocity of the voices had been such that, even as a child of six or seven, I had realised this to be no ordinary row" (16). As "the voices raged on downstairs," this very bedroom, with its "bedside cabinet with its two small drawers filled with ... little treasures and secrets" provides for the child a "sanctuary" (17). Thus Ryder becomes "peculiarly attached" (122) to the hotel room, and when asked to move to another room, feels engulfed by a "desperate sadness" (155): "Perhaps it was to do with my old room and the thought that I might now have left it behind for ever—a powerful sense of loss welled up inside me and I was obliged to pause a moment" (157). There are similar episodes of alienated familial relationship in his childhood elsewhere in the novel, when, for example, he takes refuge in a "hide-out" (171) under the dining table at a friend's house, conducting a "training session," a ritual that he devises for himself to "fight off the emotions" of "panic and fear" and to overcome the need for the company of his parents (172). Another episode involves the ruins of a car, strangely abandoned in a grassy field outside of a gallery in this foreign city: "I knew I was looking at the remains of the old family car my father had driven for many years" (260–61). The "especially cosy atmosphere inside the car" (262) provides for him another "sanctuary ... while the troubles had raged on inside the house" (264). Oblivious of curious onlookers, Ryder is once again overwhelmed with emotion: "Only then did I realise I was holding the car in a virtual embrace; I had been resting my cheek on its roof while my hands made smooth circular motions over its scabbed surface" (262).

Though they inevitably fail, the children, anxiously and desperately, try to please and win approval from their parents, terrified of disappointing them. Throughout his sojourn in this foreign city, Ryder is preoccupied with thoughts of his parents' coming to hear his performance: He is sure he will show them this time, finally, how brilliant he really is. There are two extended scenes, both imaginary, of the parents' anticipated arrival. The following scene, of the couple arriving in a new city, with the hustle and bustle around them, feeling rather lost and helpless, is perhaps a universal one of immigrants arriving in a new place where they do not know a soul:

I suddenly saw my mother and my father, both small, white-haired and bowed with age, standing outside the railway station, surrounded by luggage they could not hope to transport by themselves. I could see them looking at the strange city around them, and then eventually my father, his pride getting the better of his good sense, picking up two, then three cases, while my mother tried in vain to restrain him, holding his arm with her thin hand, saying: "No, no, you can't carry that. It's much too much." And my father, his face hard with determination, shaking off my mother saying: "But who else is going to carry them? How else will we ever reach our hotel? Who else is going to help us in this place if we don't help ourselves?" All this while cars and lorries roared past them and commuters rushed by. (176)

The second scene, first described by Hoffman, is, in direct contrast to the first, a fantastic mental performance played out many times throughout the novel (379, 398, 435):

Perhaps you can imagine the scene, Mr. Ryder. By that time in the evening the clearing in front of the concert hall will be bathed in lights, and all the prominent members of our community will be congregating there, laughing and greeting one another, all of them wonderfully dressed, much excitement in the air.... And then once a substantial crowd has assembled outside the hall—can you picture this, sir?—there'll come from the darkness of the woods the sound of approaching horses. The ladies and gentlemen, they'll stop talking and turn their heads. The sound of the hooves will get louder, coming all the time closer to the pool of light. And then they will burst into view, the splendid horses, the driver in tails and top hat, the gleaming carriage of the Seeler Brothers carrying your most charming parents! Can you imagine the excitement, the anticipation that will go through the crowd at that moment? (379)

When he finally realizes "just how tenuous had been the whole possibility of my parents' coming to the town," Ryder, with the despair of an orphan, breaks down in front of a stranger: "Surely it wasn't unreasonable of me to assume they would come this time? After all, I'm at the height of my powers now. How much longer am I supposed to go on travelling like this? ... I collapsed into a nearby chair and realized I had started to sob" (512). This desire to please the parents, to not let them down or disappoint them, is similar to the exile's longing to appease the sense of torment for forsaking the past and a homeland; in a sense, the desire for success and fame is also part of the process of making amends.

Brotsky, as a portrait of Ryder in his old age, explains to Ryder that he has a "pain," not "an emotional pain" or "a wound of the heart," but simply "a wound" (308): "When I conducted my orchestra, I always touched my wound, caressed it. Some days, I picked at its edges, even pressed it hard between the fingers. You realise soon enough when a wound's not going to heal" (313). Never healing and "like an old friend" (464), the wound fascinates as well as debilitates. Brotsky's wife bitterly points out that he will never give up his wound: "Me, the music, we're neither of us anything more to you than mistresses you seek consolation from. You'll always go back to your one real love. To that wound!... Your music will only ever be about that silly little wound, it will never be anything more than that, it'll never be anything profound, anything of value to anyone else" (498–99). Indeed, Brotsky does not begin again, and is sent to an asylum as an incurable drunk.

Of Joseph Conrad's work Said writes, "Eventually we realise that the work is actually constituted by the experience of exile or alienation that cannot ever be rectified."³³ The orphan's loss of parents, like the exile's loss of homeland, is a "wound" that never really heals.³⁴ Said sees a common thread in the works of Auerbach, Adorno, Conrad, Nabokov, Joyce, and Ishiguro (xv), all of whom reflect on the modern age as "spiritually orphaned and alienated, the age of anxiety and estrangement" (173). Ishiguro, in his interview with Wachtel, explains that even though he did not experience any particular trauma in his life, nonetheless, the feeling of

³³ Quoted in Seamus Deane, "Under Eastern and Western Eyes," *Boundary 2* 28.1 (2001): 1.

³⁴ Said, *Reflections* 184.

being "unconsoled" "probably has something to do with a sense of having left something unfinished, or having led a different sort of life from the one I should have led—that's to say, not growing up in Japan and turning into this Japanese person, but turning into something else."³⁵ The awareness that "there was this other life I might have had" leads to certain "regret and melancholy."³⁶ This feeling of "living the wrong life" is shared by many diasporic writers. For example, Naipaul's *Half a Life* ends with a character's lament: "Perhaps it wasn't really my life either."³⁷ One could also see similar sentiments in Said's own memoir *Out of Place*: "We hear on one page of 'my starved and repressed hidden self,' 'that underground part of my identity,' 'the other self I was always aware of but was unable easily or immediately to reach' (284). On other pages we meet with similar phrasings: 'the emergence of a second self buried for a long time' (217); 'I could not ... lay the ghosts that continue to haunt me' (137)."³⁸

Spatial Metaphors: "The Mystery and Melancholy of a Street"

In *When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro uses setting—a flat in London, the International Settlement in Shanghai, the ruins of a battleground—to explore questions of identity and belonging. Setting in Ishiguro's novels seems to be a concrete illustration of the way a writer's imagination takes shape. *An Artist of the Floating World* begins with a description of a large building, and the reader enters the world of the novel through that building. In the same way, *The Remains of the Day* begins with a description of a large mansion, Darlington Hall. *When We Were Orphans*, yet again, begins with a description of the narrator's flat—number 14b Bedford Gardens in Kensington, to be very exact, a flat that "evoked an unhurried Victorian past," containing "an ageing sofa as well as two snug armchairs, an antique sideboard and an oak bookcase filled with crumbling encyclopaedias" (3). The narrator, Christopher Banks, has chosen and furnished the premises with care so as to "win the approval of any visitor" (3). The constructedness of the flat is also reflective of Banks's carefully preserved English identity. For him,

³⁵ Wachtel, *More Writers* 35.

³⁶ Jaggi, "Ishiguro Talks" 23.

³⁷ V.S. Naipaul, *Half a Life* (New York: Knopf, 2001) 211.

³⁸ Quoted in Deane, "Eastern and Western" 1.

being English is learned behaviour: He "blended perfectly into English school life" by "rapidly absorb[ing] the ... gestures, turns of phrase and exclamations popular among my peers, as well as grasping the deeper mores and etiquettes prevailing in my new surroundings" (7). But before making this transition the young Banks has asked his Uncle Philip, "How do you suppose one might become more English?", and a moment later, "I wondered, if it's all right, sir, if you didn't awfully mind. I wondered if I might copy you sometimes? ... Just so that I learn to do things the English way" (76-77). Then again, England for the young Christopher is largely imaginary: "usually a house guest would be some young man who brought with him the air of the English lanes and meadows I knew from *The Wind in the Willows*, or else the foggy streets of the Conan Doyle mysteries" (52).

For Christopher and his Japanese friend Akira, home is the International Settlement in Shanghai in the early twentieth century. Ishiguro makes this international community work by giving it its own customs, customs that "all the national groups that make up the community here—English, Chinese, French, American, Japanese, Russian—subscribe to ... with equal zeal, and the inescapable conclusion is that this custom is one that has grown up uniquely here within Shanghai's International Settlement, cutting across all barriers of race and class" (153). Pico Iyer compares Ishiguro's use of this space of an international community with those of other writers of the diaspora such as Rushdie and Ondaatje:

Ishiguro uses the precedent of the International Settlement as a way of highlighting, and questioning, the very mingling of races that is an ever more pressing issue in the global diaspora. Salman Rushdie, in his celebration of the new deracination, looks back to Moorish Spain to show how different cultures can live together in relative harmony; Michael Ondaatje, in *The English Patient*, imagines a desert in which characters spin around one another like separate planets, no national divisions in the sand.²⁸

²⁸ Pico Iyer, "Foreign Affair," rev. of *When We Were Orphans*, by Kazuo Ishiguro, *New York Review of Books* 5 Oct. 2000: 6.

The International Settlement in Shanghai is nevertheless an idyllic and sheltered space for children like Christopher and Akira, since they are not allowed to roam outside of its boundaries: "I for one was absolutely forbidden to enter the Chinese areas of the city.... Out there, we were told, lay all manner of ghastly diseases, filth, and evil men" (54). And the children's parents seem to be steeped in their traditions and re-create England and Japan in this "international" space. "The thought that he might have to return to Japan was one that haunted my friend," says Christopher of Akira: "The fact was his parents missed Japan badly and often talked of the family returning there" (89). An adult Banks remembers his house in the Settlement thus: "If I close my eyes a moment, I am able to bring back that picture very vividly: the carefully tended 'English' lawn, the afternoon shadows cast by the row of elms separating my garden and Akira's; and the house itself, a huge white edifice with numerous wings and trellised balconies" (51). Akira's house even contains

a pair of "replica" Japanese rooms Akira's parents had created at the top of the house. These were small but uncluttered rooms with Japanese tatami mats fitted over the floors, and paper panels fixed to the walls, so that once inside—at least according to Akira—one could not tell one was not in an authentic Japanese house made of wood and paper. I can remember the doors to these rooms being especially curious; on the outer, "Western" side, they were oak-panelled with shining brass knobs; on the inner, "Japanese" side, delicate paper with lacquer inlays. (72)

For all their fantasy games, acting out "scenes from *Ivanhoe* ... or Japanese samurai adventures" (106), and arguments about things like whether English children cry more easily than Japanese ones (78), the source of their profound unhappiness and terror is that in their parents' eyes, Christopher is "not enough Englishman" (72) and Akira "not enough Japanese" (73), and if they cause their parents disappointment, they would be sent back to England and Japan respectively. Once Akira is indeed sent back to Japan, and "from his very first day, Akira had been thoroughly miserable....

he had been mercilessly ostracised for his 'foreignness'; his manners, his attitudes, his speech, a hundred other things had marked him out as different.... In the end, so profound was his unhappiness, his parents had been obliged to bring him home" (89). And when Christopher, after his parents' disappearance, is told that he is "going home" to England, he is full of indignation and resentment: "It was this last remark, this notion that I was 'going home,' which caused my emotions to get the better of me.... Even then, my tears were more of anger than sorrow. For I had deeply resented the colonel's words. As I saw it, I was bound for a strange land where I did not know a soul, while the city steadily receding contained all I knew" (28).

Christopher and Akira, having grown up in the international settlement, are hybrid creatures, remarks Uncle Philip:

Out here, you're growing up with a lot of different sorts around you. Chinese, French, Germans, Americans, what have you. It'd be no wonder if you grew up a bit of a mongrel.... But that's not a bad thing.... I think it would be no bad thing if boys like you *all* grew up with a bit of everything. We might all treat each other a good deal better then. Be less of these wars for one thing. Oh yes. Perhaps one day, all these conflicts will end, and it won't be because of great statesmen or churches or organisations like this one. It'll be because people have changed. They'll be like you. More a mixture. So why not become a mongrel? It's healthy. (76)

In this "mongrel" world Ishiguro has created, things are mixed. Christopher comments on Akira's family's "eccentric notions regarding the usage of Western furniture": "Rugs I would have expected to see on floors were hung on walls; chairs would be at odd heights to tables; lamps would totter under overly large shades" (71). Years later Banks goes back to their old house in Shanghai and encounters and feels affinity with an old Chinese man who is also "born and bred" in the International Settlement which he nevertheless calls the "foreigner's city" (188). Struggling to remember the exact arrangement of rooms and furniture in the house, Banks

engages in a conversation with the old man on the nature of change, nostalgia, and belonging. The old man says, "My good sir, if you will only consider how much Shanghai has changed over the years. Everything, everything has changed and changed again.... There are parts of this city I once knew so well, places I would walk everyday, I now go there and I know not which way to turn. Change, change all the time" (191). When asked whether he would wish to restore the house to just the way it was when he was a boy, Banks replies, "We would probably not turn it back exactly to what it was then. For one thing, as I remember it, there were many things we were unhappy about.... There's no need to turn back the clock just for the sake of it" (193-94). While the old man reminisces about an orphan girl that his father had taken in, whom he had always regarded as a sister, Banks fantasizes about a family that he might have occupying the house, which would include himself, Sarah, Jennifer, and Mei Li, all orphans who belong to nobody and nowhere. Both Banks and the old man express a longing for a world where, as the old man says, "Blood is important. But so is household" (194). Of course even when they were small, Christopher and Akira vowed friendship and swore that they would live together forever, not in Japan, nor in England, but only in Shanghai (99, 112-13).

Indeed, those were the "splendid days" and the "good memories" (262). But Uncle Philip also tells Christopher that "People need to feel they belong. To a nation, to a race. Otherwise, who knows what might happen? This civilisation of ours, perhaps it'll just collapse. And everything scatter" (77). In the second part of the novel, Ishiguro describes Shanghai, now shattered by the Sino-Japanese War, as "some vast, ruined mansion with endless rooms" (240), and in the character of the Japanese colonel he demonstrates that it is precisely this insistence on drawing distinct lines of belonging and the claim to pure nationality and racial superiority that led to a devastating war. For all his appreciation of literature and music—Dickens, Thackeray, *Wuthering Heights*, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Chopin—the colonel claims that "if Japan is to become a great nation,... [war] is necessary. Just as it once was for England" (278).

Banks then undertakes a nightmarish journey through the ravaged, deserted streets of Shanghai, abandons Sarah in the music shop, gets angry with the cab driver for getting him lost, and even-

tually ventures alone into the "heart of darkness" in search of the house where he thinks his parents are being held captive. In the ruins, all reason, logic, and faith are lost. There is only complete darkness: occasionally illuminated by a torch are scenes of horror and devastation. Banks hears the screams of a wounded Japanese soldier: "The scream began full-throated, then tapered off into a strange high-pitched whimper. It was an eerie sound and I became quite transfixed listening to it.... This disembodied voice echoed unnervingly around the ruins" (243-44). Later he hears more screams and assumes it is the same man. Then he realizes that the shouting is in Mandarin, not Japanese: "The realisation that these were two different men rather chilled me. So identical were their pitiful whimpers, the way their screams gave way to desperate entreaties, then returned to screams, that the notion came to me this was what each of us would go through on our way to death—that these terrible noises were as universal as the crying of new-born babies" (259).

Near the end, in their hallucinatory reunion, Christopher and Akira reminisce about their childhood and their "home village" (256) that was the International Settlement. Both illusory and fragile, it remains the only home they have:

"I'll tell you an odd thing, Akira. I can say this to you. All these years I've lived in England, I've never felt at home there. The International Settlement. That will always be my home."

"But International Settlement ..." Akira shook his head. "Very fragile. Tomorrow, next day ..."
He waved a hand in the air.

"I know what you mean," I said. "And when we were children, it seemed so solid to us. But as you put it just now. It's our home village. The only one we have." (256)

The "orphans" in the title refers to the real orphans in the book who are bereft of their parents (Christopher, Sarah, Jennifer, the little Chinese girl) but also to those (Banks, his mother Diana, Akira, Mei Li, the old Chinese man) who are "mongrels" and displaced exiles without homelands and do not belong anywhere. Ultimately the novel is an elegy that expresses an unconsolable sorrow over a

time (childhood) and place (the International Settlement) irretrievably lost.

If there is still a tinge of nostalgia, or even a trace of utopian longing, for a space such as the International Settlement in *When We Were Orphans*, there is only profound disappointment, disillusion, and desolation in the bleak landscape of *The Unconsoled*. What one encounters is the ultimate contemporary condition of displacement: utter disconnection, detachment, and alienation in the exile's relationship with his or her surroundings. There is no coherence to the narrative of an exile's life, and none of the exuberance and exhilaration of transformation in, for example, Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, in which Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta literally tumble out of the sky into an English landscape and promptly set about "tropicalizing" it. Ryder is essentially a solitary traveller. The novel is full of descriptions of rainy, dark, deserted streets (64–65, 88–89, 289–90) and solitary lamps (51, 119, 389, 413) that exist as if only to accentuate the complete darkness that surrounds them. He is forever "walking around in slow circles" (125), "wandering aimlessly around" (133), or "walk[ing] in circles indefinitely" (212), and losing himself "in the network of narrow little alleys" (389). Thus he repeatedly gets lost in the labyrinthian streets of the city, misses appointments and breaks promises, literally runs into walls and goes in circles on a tram, and eventually leaves for Helsinki, "just another cold, lonely city" (107).

The intensely introspective and metaphysical aspects of landscape in Ishiguro find correspondences in Bachelard's spatial theory and de Chirico's paintings. The following episode, on the night of Ryder's performance, seems an exact replica of the "de Chirico city": "As I walked on, the street grew even narrower, while the buildings around me seemed all to be six or seven storeys high, so that I could hardly see any sky, let alone the domed roof. I decided to look for a parallel street, but then, once I had taken the next turning, I found myself wandering from one tiny side-street to the next, quite possibly going in circles, the concert hall not visible anywhere" (386). A few lines on, he comes upon a wall that completely blocks "the entire breadth of the street": "I looked around in bewilderment, then walked the length of the wall to the opposite pavement, unable quite to accept there was not somehow a doorway, or even a small hole through which to crawl" (387). Continuing to walk as "darkness was falling" and feeling utterly

despondent, he is "on the brink of tears": "I looked around me and saw I was sitting on the edge of a square. Although there was a single street lamp at its centre, the square was largely in darkness, so that the figures of the people moving across it appeared to be little more than shadows" (389-90).

Bachelard speaks of the "phenomenology of roundness,"⁴⁰ and one immediately thinks of the circular corridors in Ishiguro; Bachelard considers a series of images that "bear within themselves a kind of aesthetics of hidden things" (xxxiii)—corners, shells, nests—and one is reminded of the series of sanctuaries Ishiguro describes: a childhood bedroom (16), an enclosed car (260), and a space under a dining table (171). In one episode, Ryder, besieged by a barrage of requests and interruptions, realizes that he has had no time to practice the piano for the performance that very night; in frustration and panic, he demands that Hoffman find him a space for "complete, utter privacy" (341). Finally Hoffman takes him to a "little wooden hut" (356) on a hill, where he "became increasingly relaxed, so much so that I found myself playing most of the first movement with my eyes closed" (357). While he begins the "vertiginous opening" of the music, Mullery's *Asbestos and Fibre*, playing through the reflective second movement and "the sublime melancholy of the third" and "enjoying the ease with which the tangled knots of emotion rose languidly to the surface and separated" (357), the music is interlaced with memories of long ago and longings for the distant future. In a chapter titled "The Significance of the Hut," Bachelard's analysis about what he calls the "hut dream, which is well-known to everyone who cherishes the legendary images of primitive houses" seems to reflect accurately Ryder's state of mind: "In most hut dreams we hope to live elsewhere, far from the over-crowded house, far from city cares. We flee in thought in search of a real refuge" (31). Moreover, Bachelard's "drawers, chests, and wardrobes" (74) bring to mind Ishiguro's numerous cupboards (278, 281, 428, 476), winding stairways (211-12), and half-open doors (278), and a childhood "bedside cabinet with its two small drawers filled with little treasures and secrets" (17). The image of the "house" plays a prominent role in both of Ishiguro's novels, and in Bachelard it serves as "a tool for analysis of the human soul": "With the help of this tool, can we not find within ourselves,

⁴⁰ Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* 232.

while dreaming in our own modest homes, the consolations of the cave? Are the towers of our souls razed for all time? Are we to remain, to quote Gérard de Nerval's famous line, beings whose "towers have been destroyed?" (xxxiii).

Just as it stands for the possibility of the construction of a new adoptive family in *When We Were Orphans*, so the "house," or rather the search for a house, is a recurrent motif that runs through *The Unconsoled*. Several characters search for a place to call home. For example, Ryder comforts the disgraced conductor Christoff: "Perhaps you and your wife will find a chalet very much like this someday. If not here, then in some other city" (188). The older conductor Brodsky imagines the reconciliation between him and his wife and dreams of a farmhouse: "We'll find something else, another cottage maybe. Something surrounded by grass and trees ..." (309). The dialogues between Ryder and Sophie, from the very start, consist of a running argument between Ryder's need to keep travelling and Sophie's obsession with finding a house for them. The very first time they meet, Sophie tells Ryder excitedly: "I've got good news. That Mr. Mayer phoned earlier about a house. It's just come on the market today. It sounds really promising. I've been thinking about it all day. Something tells me this might be it, the one we've been looking for all this time.... I know it's taken a long time, but I might have found it at last" (34). Yet once Sophie has seen the "perfect" house, she offers this strange description: "The views are stunning, it's built right on a cliff edge, but it's just not sturdy enough. Mr. Mayer agreed in the end. He thinks the roof could fall down in a strong gale, perhaps even within the next few years.... I am sorry. You're disappointed, I can tell" (224). On the other hand, Ryder tries to explain to the child Boris why he has to keep travelling:

I have to keep going on these trips because, you see, you can never tell when it's going to come along. I mean the very special one, the very important trip, the one that's very very important, not just for me but for everyone, everyone in the world.... And you see, once you miss it, there's no going back, it would be too late.... I've seen it happen to other people, Boris.... And, you know, they regret it for the rest of their lives. They get

bitter and sad. By the time they die, they've become broken people. So you see, Boris, that's why. That's why I've got to carry on for the moment, keep travelling all the time. (217-18)

Ryder keeps travelling, in search of not only fame and recognition, but also a meaningful role and standing in society; his desire "to do something useful that would change the world for the better"⁴¹ implies an idealism which, however misguided and compromised, he shares with many of Ishiguro's characters, Banks and Uncle Philip in *When We Were Orphans*, for example. On the other hand, it has to do with the "wound." As Ishiguro explains, "A central thread is that the book's about a person for whom something has gone wrong way back in his life, and a lot of his energy, the motivation behind his acquiring his expertise and his brilliance as a musician is his thinking he can fix this thing one day."⁴² Yet, Ryder, for all his detachment and aloofness toward Sophie and Boris, constantly expresses weariness in travelling and a desire to settle down: "It's all this travelling. Hotel room after hotel room. Never seeing anyone you know. It's been very tiring" (38, 147). Towards the end of the novel, there seems to be some conciliation in this telephone conversation between Ryder and Sophie: "Look, I promise, I won't be travelling much longer now. Tonight, if it goes well, you never know. That might be it.' 'And I'm sorry I haven't found anything yet. I promise I'll find something for us soon. Somewhere really comfortable.' ... The line remained silent and for a second I wondered if Sophie had gone away. But then she said in a distant, dreamy voice: 'We're bound to find something soon, aren't we?'" (446). At the very end of the novel though, a deeply disappointed and resentful Sophie tells Boris that Ryder will never give up his endless travelling: "He needs to do it," and "he will never be one of us" and will always be "on the outside of our love.... On the outside of our grief too" (532). For the exile, then, there is an impossibility of forming intimate relationships and social bonds with either people or place. The house, a symbol for settled life, familial affiliation, community connection, is never found. Feeling betrayed, disappointed, and even destroyed, all women characters

⁴¹ Wachtel, *More Writers* 27.

⁴² Jaggi, "Ishiguro Talks" 22.

abandon their search for house/chalet/farmhouse: thus Sophie leaves Ryder, Rosa leaves Christoff, Christine leaves Hoffmann, Miss Collins leaves Brodsky. In the end, there is neither reconciliation nor consolation.

While the novel is about, among other things, contemporary anxieties over relationships between private life and public space, individual and community, parents and children, wives and husbands, art and politics, or even reality and unconsciousness, most importantly, it is about a foreigner's traumas and anxieties associated with dislocation and disorientation. Perpetually haunted by echoes from other times and spaces, orphaned exiles are thrust into unknown landscapes and communities with no hope of referring to existing codes, rules, and customs. The protagonist dwells on his original loss, nursing a never-healing "wound." His search for love, for an ever elusive house to call home, for a meaningful role in society, proves ultimately in vain and futile. As Said writes, for Adorno (and perhaps Ishiguro) "the house is past," and "the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing."⁴³ Without recognition, reconciliation, and redemption, Ryder, as Said writes of Pip in *Great Expectations*, "remains an orphan"; alone and unconsolated, he leaves for another city. The word "outsider" appears almost too frequently in the text; Ryder, like the narrator in Sebald's *Austerlitz*, is "oppressed by the vague sense that he did not belong in this city either, or indeed anywhere else in the world."⁴⁴ Even though there may only be imaginary homelands, every place since then is just another place, forever veiled by ghostly shadows and reminders of other places, other memories, other lives.

Here's one last painting, a portrait of Ryder, by de Chirico, via Naipaul, titled *The Enigma of Arrival*:

He would arrive—for a reason I had yet to work out—at that classical port with the walls and gateways like cut-outs. He would walk past that muffled figure on the quayside. He would move from that silence and desolation, that blankness, to a gateway or door. He would enter there and be

⁴³ Said, *Reflections* 184.

⁴⁴ Sebald, *Austerlitz* 254.

swallowed by the life and noise of a crowded city.... The mission he had come on—family business, study, religious initiation—would give him encounters and adventures. He would enter interiors, of houses and temples. Gradually there would come to him a feeling that he was getting nowhere; he would lose his sense of mission; he would begin to know only that he was lost. His feeling of adventure would give way to panic. He would want to escape, to get back to the quayside and his ship. But he wouldn't know how.... At the moment of crisis he would come upon a door, open it, and find himself back on the quayside of arrival. He has been saved; the world is as he remembered it. Only one thing is missing now. Above the cut-out walls and buildings there is no mast, no sail. The antique ship has gone. The traveller has lived out his life.²⁵

It is as if both Naipaul and Ishiguro have taken inspiration from de Chirico. Naipaul has described, with uncanny accuracy, every stage of Ryder's journey, from his initial sense of purpose to his ultimate unconsolable disillusion. It is as if Naipaul had read *The Unconsoled* before it had even been written!

Alternative Worlds, Alternative Lives

Naipaul's traveller, at a moment of crisis, opens a door. Indeed, there is still the final exit door for Ryder to open.

In Chapter 29 of *The Unconsoled*, one encounters this curious passage: "The broad white door was dimly illuminated from above by a single night light. I had to lean my weight on it before it would open and I entered the building with a slight tumble" (420). And with that "tumble," it is as if Ryder had entered a world resembling that of *Alice in Wonderland*; in fact, one thinks one is encountering metamorphosed scenes in the other book, of the white rabbit in a great hurry, murmuring, "I'm late, I'm late," and later of him in court reading charges against Alice from the long piece of paper:

²⁵ V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* (New York: Knopf, 1987) 98–99.

I was in a wide bare corridor lit harshly with fluorescent ceiling strips. From all around came the sound of voices calling and shouting, the clanging of heavy metallic objects, the hissing of water and steam. Directly in front of me was a catering trolley beside which two men in uniforms were arguing furiously. One man was holding a long piece of paper which had unrolled almost to his feet, and was repeatedly thrusting his finger at it.... The corridor curved gradually. I encountered a good many people, but they all seemed very busy and somewhat fraught. Most of them, dressed in white uniforms, were hurrying with distracted expressions, carrying heavy sacks or else pushing trolleys. (420-21)

Another episode that is reminiscent of Alice, especially of her change in size in order to enter the small door leading to the garden, occurs in Chapter 20, when Ryder, Sophie, and Boris crawl on hands and knees through a cupboard door, only to come out in another corridor (281-82). Further on, Ryder enters a room that is really a curving corridor, "lined by doors" (268). Bachelard writes thus on "doors of hesitation" (223): "But then come the hours of greater imagining sensibility. On May nights, when so many doors are closed, there is only one that is just barely ajar. We have only to give it a very slight push! And our fate becomes visible" (222-23). And further on, "If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to reopen, one would have to tell the story of one's life" (224). Indeed, this "choice of doors" (278) presents Ryder with difficulties. He imagines "numerous scenes from movies in which a character, wishing to make an impressive exit from a room, flings open the wrong door and walks into a cupboard" (278). As one expects, this very possibility happens to Ryder, when to his horror, he opens a broom cupboard, and "several household mops came tumbling out and fell with a clatter onto the marble floor, scattering a dark fluffy substance in all directions" (278).

Ishiguro has constructed in *The Unconsoled*, as in *Alice in Wonderland*, an alternative world, with its numerous mirrors and doorways, with alternative rules and random possibilities. This is a

world where the landscape takes on a dreamy quality. As if to remind the reader that all is not what it seems, each section of the novel is framed with a scene in which Ryder invariably wakes up in panic or is roused from sleep by an insistently ringing telephone (18, 117, 155, 293, 413). Even when he is supposed to be awake, he dozes off on numerous occasions, in the middle of conversations, while driving or walking, on busses or in apartments, even while playing the piano or making a speech (38, 44, 79, 147, 191, 209, 263, 357). Indeed, many characters, inexplicably, are lost in their own worlds, as if temporarily exiting this one. For example, Gustav, the porter, would suddenly stop walking and freeze on the pavement: "For a few more seconds, he remained standing quite still. Then opened his eyes and glanced about him, gave a faint laugh and began to walk again" (298, 392). The fairy tale qualities of the novel, with its imaginary castles, horse and carriage, Boris's and the young Ryder's imaginary games and battles, magnificent sunsets and pastoral grassy fields, are juxtaposed with scenes of urban traffic and carparks, identical apartments and artificial lakes, as well as deserted city squares and night streets. Unhappy memories of the past, the weariness and anxieties of travelling, the pressures and demands of society are also in contrast with enticing fantasies of rest, comfort, tranquillity.

Most importantly, however, by providing a "fantasy" world, Ishiguro shows that the "real" world is forever shadowed by the possibility of alternative worlds and alternative lives. Thus Ryder is forever weighing his options, prevaricating (a word used many times and emphasized, 107, 139, 234, 239) and wondering if he has made a mistake or "an error of judgement," or is "guilty of a miscalculation" (375). Commenting on life's missed opportunities, a character muses, "But this man, every now and then, he looks back over this life he's led and wonders if he didn't perhaps let certain things slip by. He wonders how things might have been.... He wonders if he'd taken another path.... 'What if? What might we have become by now if we'd only ...'" (374). Has one been "living the wrong life"? There are no answers, and the most one can do, as Ryder has come to believe, is "to weigh up the evidence available at the time as best as I can and forge on" (375). In the end, perhaps not without irony or even comic effect, Ryder cheerfully moves on, literally embarking on yet another journey: "Things had not, after all, gone so badly" (534). Though the final scene on the tram of

him eating, drinking, and exchanging pleasant talk with the passengers is still only vividly imagined (534), the tram, "running a continuous circuit" (534), "will get you more or less anywhere you like in the city" (533).

The absurdities and nightmarish qualities of the world in *The Unconsoled* not only reflect a Kafkaesque dark world of desolation and alienation, but at the same time provide Ishiguro with opportunities for irony and even hilarious comedy. He has written a novel that is like Ryder's music, which aims "to strike the correct balance between the sorrowful and the jovial" (129) and is "perfectly poised between seriousness and jocularly" (208). It is this poised and balanced approach that saves the characters, and indeed the reader, from total despair. In the end, one has to go back to the "wound" and to Said's *Beginnings*: Is it possible, for an orphan, for an exile, to begin again, even in recognition of the pain and loss? Beginning again is never easy, sometimes risky or even impossible; it takes great effort, determination, and courage. Towards the end of *The Unconsoled*, in the strange but significant scene in the forest, Ryder comes face to face with his future self, Brodsky, by (possibly) nearly running him over with his car: "The thought vaguely crossed my mind that I had caused this wreck" (439). There is however also the suggestion that the completely drunk Brodsky might even have been attempting suicide (440). A grave discussion ensues among the onlookers, regarding Brodsky's wounded leg. All decide that it should "come off" (439), and indeed, a surgeon on hand, using "a small hacksaw" (443) found in Ryder's car, crudely saws the leg off, which incredibly turns out to be an artificial wooden leg to begin with. "The fool didn't even realise it. Calls himself a surgeon!" (464), says a more than irate Brodsky. The "wound," ironically, turns out to be unreal, delusional, a phantom limb, in the first place. Nonetheless, the "accident" has a cathartic, and sobering, effect on Brodsky. With a bleeding leg stump and an ironing board as a crutch, he makes a heroic return to the concert stage: "Brodsky shouted at the mirror with some ferocity: 'I'm fine now! The wound is nothing!'" (464). He explains, "I lost a limb, it's true.... But that was years ago, Ryder. Many years ago. When I was a child perhaps. It was all so long ago, I don't quite remember.... It gets to be like an old friend, a wound" (464). As if determined not to let the "phantom limb" deter him any longer, he declares, "We've been afraid all our lives and now we have to be brave" (457).

Even though Brodsky eventually collapses dramatically on the stage, fails to win back the affection of Miss Collins or the understanding of his audience, and is sent to the St. Nicholas Clinic, a "dark, lonely place" (500) "that takes in down-and-outs" (522), his performance, made "as elegant as possible" (464), is dignified, moving, and impressive, expressing an originality of "vision" (492) and evoking admiration from Ryder: "In my view, he achieved something challenging, fresh, indeed something very close to the inner heart of the [musical] piece" (502). At times, Ryder seems to be describing not Brodsky's performance of music, but Ishiguro's own narrative style: "He was almost perversely ignoring the outer structure of the music—the composer's nods towards tonality and melody that decorated the surface of the work—to focus instead on the peculiar life-forms hiding just under the shell" (492). There is in the novel a running commentary on the contrasting qualities of modern and conventional music, and Ishiguro, in venturing into "stranger territories" (392) in terms of narrative technique, is taking risks inherent in bold and experimental forms. He writes thus of Ryder, the famed pianist, "My name over the years has tended to be associated with certain qualities. A meticulous attention to detail. Precision in performance. The tight control of dynamics" (136). Yet, like Ryder, Ishiguro wants people to think, instead, of "Collapsed curtain rails. Poisoned rodents. Misprinted score sheets" (136). One can perhaps say the same of *The Unconsoled* as Ryder reflects on Brodsky's music: "The effect was unnerving, but compelling" (492).

Is it ever possible to live the "contrapuntal" life that Said describes in "Reflections on Exile" when "both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally"?⁴⁶ Are there alternative worlds of the future? The International Settlement in *When We Were Orphans* may yet provide a transcultural vision for a possible world of redemption. Even as it remains utopian and illusory, and in reality, as an adult Banks realizes, a "foreigner's city" (188) and an imperialist enclave on Chinese territory, an international hybrid space holds the only hope we have in this world, in order to live side by side, in harmony. Such a space may yet strike a balance between a "saving illusion" and a "destructive reality." Thus, at the end of *When We Were Orphans*, there is a

⁴⁶ Said, *Reflections* 186.

kind of acceptance, a kind of moving on. Even as he feels "a sort of emptiness," and however reluctant he may be, Banks acknowledges that "This city [London], in other words, has come to be my home, and I should not mind if I had to live out the rest of my days here" (313). In the end, in spite of everything, Brodsky, Banks, Ryder, almost echoing Samuel Beckett's Malone, will go on: "We'll all keep on trying, just the same" (526).