

Inaudible Sons: Music and Diaspora in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*

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'The exile is a stranger to his mother,' writes Julia Kristeva,¹ and for anyone in pursuit of this idea, Ishiguro's fourth novel may serve as a most complex commentary. In this text, masculinity is portrayed in ways that are, on the one hand, nearly textbook illustrations of certain basic concepts in contemporary studies in human sexuality and, on the other, highly original visions in their tight interlocking with notions of migration, displacement and ethnic difference. Main character and narrator Ryder arrives in an unidentified, presumably Central European town to give a much-awaited recital in his capacity as a world-famous concert pianist, and although he is treated as a visitor, an undecided degree of familiarity with the place also begins to emerge. The musician soon meets Gustav, Sophie and Boris whom he first perceives as strangers, but who turn out to be, uncannily, the story-teller's father-in-law, wife and son (or at least likely candidates for these positions). With these contacts established, a central narrative strand details how Ryder fails to balance his far-reaching public commitments and the domestic responsibilities that are inherent in his marital and parental status. In the end, not only does the planned meeting with his mother and father fall through, but the pianist comes to be rejected by his son and wife as well. Yet the man continues, in an ironically still unshaken spirit, to pursue the compensatory rewards of travel and exile.

As Kristeva's note implies, migrancy eradicates intimacy even in relationships where physical and emotional closeness was once at its maximum. Ryder's inability to connect to his wife and son is supplemented by fantasies and memories about his own parents whom he cannot wait to see at his concert but who, it unfolds piecemeal, abused him as a child, instilled into him a sense of mediocrity, and never actually attended a single recital of his. Thus, ejected from bonds of love and denied parental recognition, the main character figures as an exile not only in the sense of someone actually living an unsettled, globe-trotting life, but also in the sense of occupying a peripheral position in potentially profound and nurturing human relationships. This intertwined emotional and geographical marginality is aptly expressed by Sophie who declares, in the coda of the narrative, to Ryder: 'Leave us. You were always on the outside of our love. Now look at you. On the outside of our grief too. Leave us. Go away' (532).² Away Ryder will go, but he does not feel particularly devastated. For him, the novel's nearly hyperbolic representation of masculine independence reveals the sundering of ties, the newer and newer departures to be a set pattern, with movement invariably privileged over commitment and intimacy, a 'nomadic existence over meaningful familial attachments.'³

Towards Sophie and their son, the allegorically named narrator acts as a stereotypical 'real man' who, numerous theorists of masculinity argue, is indeed a figurative stranger to his mother (or any motherly presences) in that his self-conception necessarily hinges on separation from the feminine and the childlike that motherhood signifies. Such negative definition is hinted at by the

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 5.

² All parenthesised references are to this edition: Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

³ Wai-chew Sim, 'Kazuo Ishiguro,' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 25.1 (2005): 102.

metaphorical quality of a particular childhood memory, emblematically resurfacing in the very first chapter. Looking at the hotel rug from his bed, the narrator recalls

how once that same area of floor had been covered by a worn green mat, where several times a week I would set out in careful formations my plastic soldiers ... 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 realized this to be of no ordinary row. But I had told myself it was nothing and ... continued with my battle plans. Near the centre of that green mat had been a torn patch that had been a source of much irritation to me. But that afternoon, as the voices raged on downstairs, it had occurred to me for the first time that this tear could be used as a sort of bush terrain for my soldiers to cross. This discovery – that the blemish that had always threatened to undermine my imaginary world could in fact be incorporated into it – had been one of some excitement for me, and that bush was to become a key factor in many of the battles I subsequently orchestrated (16).

The recollected quarrel, its gendered dimension and equally gendered resolution are of note here. As shown by his enforced escape into denial and fantasy, Ryder as a child is traumatised by repeated conflicts between his parents. Playing (as it will be in a musical sense, too) is a coping strategy⁴ for him, but it is in retrospect only that the reader can grasp sexualised connotations within the just quoted section. The ‘bush terrain’ and the soldiers around it correspond to femininity and maleness not only because the motifs of hair and warfare are conventionally associated with female and, respectively, masculine identities, but because they are elements within a dynamic in Ryder and Sophie’s marital relationship. Observe how the term ‘irritation’, now describing the tear in the mat returns in comments about Sophie, a cause of ‘intense irritation [and] chaos’ (115). Similarly, in the same woman’s emphatically ‘long dark hair’ (30, 32), one may recognise that hostile area of femininity and mothering, that ‘bush terrain’ which the male protagonist finds it necessary, in the manner of the toy soldiers of his childhood, to evade or circumvent. This strategy is necessary because just like the bushy ‘blemish’ that threatens to ‘undermine’ the boy’s ‘imaginary world’, the disorder associated with Sophie ‘obliged’ Ryder to ‘compromise’ his ‘usual standards’ (115). In other words, a calculated distancing of the feminine is necessary for the preservation of the narrator’s unblemished, homogeneous male imaginary world, a realm, to borrow H el ene Cixous’s expression, of the self-same.⁵

⁴ In *A Thousand Plateaus*, which continues to elaborate on its authors’ key concept of deterritorialisation, Deleuze and Guattari write the following: ‘A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself, with his little song, as best as he can.’ In a broad sense, music is then a form of reterritorialisation, always threatened by the ‘danger of breaking apart at any moment.’ Gilles Deleuze and F elix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987) 311.

⁵ H el ene Cixous, ‘Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays’, *The Logic of the Gift: Towards an Ethic of Generosity* edited by Alan D. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997) 150. Note how closely Cixous’s wording is paralleling the direct, and gendered, militancy in the narrator’s words: ‘there is no place for the other, for an equal other, for a whole and living woman ... she must disappear, leaving [the man] to gain Imaginary profit, to win Imaginary victory’ (Cixous 151). This male program applies only too well to Ryder and Sophie’s relationship.

Indeed, the book's at once powerful and painful theme of 'disconnection'⁶ assumes – as is implicit in the very notion of 'connection', spatially conceived – the narrator's intense awareness of various border zones. It is as if the main character was in some constant need of warding off the unspecified yet imminent danger of the onrush of the feminine and childlike. The related acts and attitudes include denial (so when Ryder first meets the official organiser of his visit, he finds 'There was something about the way she uttered [a] remark that made it difficult for me to respond entirely frankly' [11]) and male inexpressivity: 'for all my resolve to make my feelings known to her, I had remained silent' (96), Ryder reports of his impeded communication with Sophie; and even when he is, towards the end of the story, 'on the brink of tears', he 'made an effort to control [his] emotions' (389, 391). If only in flashes and incomplete gestures, testing and initiation are also a recognisable part of a spatially organised ideal of gender. Ranging from the feat of dancing with heavy boxes in hand through various training sessions to the motif of a book on DIY helping an adolescent into adulthood, a consistent pattern in the novel associates masculinity with some sort of a threshold to be crossed. And what is left behind – that bushy terrain of female, motherly or childlike chaos – is best left forgotten. Ryder's losing his schedule, as well as his failure to remember not only his current appointments but also important scenes of his life with Sophie and Boris (looking at the old apartment 'aroused no memories ... at all' [13]), read as consequences of, and narrative variants on, his compulsion to separate himself from any threat to the carefully, and so narcissistically, constructed contours of his male self-ideal.

There is a type of marital, and especially parental, failure among these insurances to keep a distance that deserves particular attention. In *The Unconsoled*, the theme of male self-sufficiency appears to be intriguingly supplemented with the motif of improper listening. While the portrayed attitudes of calculated deafness and self-separation might be attributed to mere heartlessness or some other deficiency, Bruce Robbins appropriately notes that to blame impeded communication on some general 'blockage of emotion' between the troubled characters – a standard idea in related criticism – allows only limited access to the complexities of Ishiguro's fiction.⁷ Minds fail to meet through a distinctly auditory medium, a phenomenon whose exploration can, in turn, facilitate the understanding of not only the novel's general interest in sound effects, but also its concern with gendered and geographical boundaries.

From such a perspective, speech and music can be treated together because a number of shared conceptual as well as representational traits connect them, producing what Stephen Benson defines as 'literary music' in his identically titled book. One of the most memorable examples occur when, in Hoffman's suggested blueprint for Ryder's concert, the recital is preceded by an absurd questions and answers session on stage. Here, in what has also been read as a parody of contemporary celebrity culture,⁸ Ryder is requested to answer questions from the audience, with the words repeated through an amplifier and even transcribed on an electronic scoreboard. Curiously but characteristically of the novel's tendentious blurring of speech and music, the plan sort of omits the latter entirely in that after Brodsky's briefly mentioned recital

⁶ Pico Iyer quoted in Brian W. Shaffer, *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998) 26.

⁷ Bruce Robbins, "'Very Busy Just Now': Globalization and Harriedness in Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*". *Comparative Literature* 53.4 (2001) 431.

⁸ Wai-chew, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (London: Routledge, 2010) 58.

(‘Mr Brodsky will emerge. He will perform ... he will then perform’ [380; ellipsis in original]), it is clearly the verbal part that is meant to be the highlight of the concert night: after the listing of the most nuanced details on about two pages, Hoffman just stops contentedly, without having said a word about Ryder’s contribution at the piano. In this case, it seems words can completely replace music, while elsewhere, through its traditional and in the novel particularly poignant association with emotions, music becomes a dialogue or ‘paradigmatic communication.’⁹

Relevantly for the novel, Benson finds that such a conversation can take place specifically ‘between parent and child’ (148). One can indeed, consider, in Ishiguro’s work, three parent and son relationships with particularly blocked communicative patterns. Renowned musician Ryder displays symptoms of near-deafness when alone with Boris, and in a central narrative analogy, musically refined Hoffman just does not hear the superior quality of his son Stephen’s playing. These relatively detailed visions then converge in the more sporadically outlined, but for the novel as a whole cohesive, account of how Ryder means to focus all his artistic energies in his upcoming recital in order to please his own parents who have, in fact, never attended any of his concerts, and fail to show up for this occasion, too.

Thus, in an emblematic scene, Boris turns to his father:

‘Which [board game] are we going to play?’ he asked.

I pretended not to hear and went on reading. I could see him at the edge of my vision, first turning towards me, then, as the realization dawned on him that I would not reply, turning back to the cupboard. (285)

Ryder, who is at one point actually derided as being ‘deaf’ (223), does of course have sharp enough ears: his not hearing is part and parcel of his programmatic unresponsiveness. So when he watches Boris’s actions, he finds they are performed ‘For some reason best known to himself’ (34), when sharing the same room with the boy, he ‘decided to say nothing to him’ (284), causing, in turn, Sophie to say, ‘You’re very quiet’ (24). And when Ryder makes occasional efforts to initiate conversation with the adolescent, Boris’s silence is directed at the inconsiderate, mechanic manner in which dialogue is solicited. In the small family, only Sophie can secure flowing, easy communication for the boy (‘I could see Boris explaining something to Sophie and the two of them laughing happily’, 255), but by now, Ryder is so hardened in his lack of empathy that he does not experience even envy at the sight of a harmonious mother and child relationship.

Comparably, when Stephen plays the first few bars of a magnificent recital, Ryder is witness to the following consequences:

there was some surprise when he went into the explosive opening of *Glass Passions*, [yet later] something seemed to catch Stephen’s eye and his playing lost all intensity, as though someone had pulled out a plug. His gaze followed something moving through the crowd ... he was watching a couple of figures leaving the auditorium ... Hoffman and his wife disappearing. (477-8)

The flabbergasted youth first leaves the stage and then returns to complete the piece and earn ‘general astonishment’ (481) as well as ‘enthusiastic applause’ (482), but his parents are absent

⁹ Stephen Benson, *Literary Music. Writing Music in Contemporary Fiction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) 148.

throughout. When he confronts his father, Hoffman wickedly insinuates that although Stephen's playing is good, it is not good enough, a sorry fact he and his wife never had the heart to tell their son. Ishiguro crafts these passages in such a way that they reflect an analogy between the parent's inability to hear music in its full beauty, and to accept Stephen in his full humanity. Thus, emblematically of his own deafness, Hoffman refuses the very possibility of responsiveness in saying: 'No, no, don't interrupt, I'm trying to tell you something I should have said long ago' (479), only to add more bitter words about not being heard properly: 'Why won't you listen to me? Don't you realize this is bringing me great pain? It's not easy to speak so frankly, even to one's own son' (480).

These instances of not listening properly are brought to their logical narrative conclusion through the circumstances of Ryder's own, never actually executed concert. Because the pianist's parents do not attend the culminating event, their withdrawal or symbolic deafness is not shown directly. Nevertheless, mishearing remains a vital part of Ishiguro's preoccupations with absence, family and a defining sense of boundaries. So Ryder explains to Miss Stratmann:

the fact was, I was sure that this time, at last, [my parents] would come. Surely, it wasn't unreasonable of me to assume they would come this time? After all, I am at the height of my powers now. How much longer I am supposed to go on traveling like this? ... They must be here somewhere. Besides, I *heard* them. When I stopped the car in the wood, I could *hear* them coming, their horse and carriage. (512; emphasis added)

By now, the reader senses the ultimate oneness of several male characters in the novel¹⁰ (with special regard to Stephen, Brodsky and Ryder), therefore one knows that the rejection on the part of Ryder's parents is a narrative extension, or completion, of Stephen's parents' walking out of the auditorium. The two incidents are, in turn, a variant on the emotional unresponsiveness and figurative deafness that Ryder displays towards his own son Boris. The apparently contagious inability to hear the manifestations of a unique individuality (whether expressed in music, words or otherwise) erects its walls among the characters who choose, instead of the risks of love or any responsible interpersonal involvement, to turn, walk or simply stay, away.

Yet these scenes of unrealised contact dominate the novel alongside a remarkable variant. A particular rhetorical pattern in the story serves, in its compelling smoothness, not only as a supplement, or counterpoint, to unproductive dialogues, but also as a crucial clue for grasping the simultaneous significance of the auditory, the gendered and the exilic. Paradoxically in a story where so many experience the bitterness of finding no genuinely interested listeners, willing ears and flowing, eagerly received words present themselves with an almost rhythmic recurrence. To take an early example, Miss Collins tells Ryder, immediately after his undelivered speech at the banquet, the following placatory words: 'you'd be welcome to visit me for tea some afternoon. I'd be more than happy to talk over whatever happens to be on your mind. You'd have a sympathetic ear, I can assure you ... I'll listen to you with sympathy' (146). Unexpectedly, even a complete stranger on a bus ride will resort to similar language. For nearly two pages, this man details why Ryder and his son should not worry about finding a lost toy in

¹⁰ It is a standard idea in the criticism of the novel that in Ishiguro's unorthodox scheme of characterisation, several individuals function as reflections and commentaries on one another. In Brian W. Shaffer's formulation, these figures are 'to be understood as extensions, versions, or variations of Ryder himself' (94).

the old apartment that they are about to visit. The speaker's hypnotic discourse reproduces the slow, natural rhythm of breathing through the anaphoric use of the word 'and', confirming thereby the overall message of 'all will be well'. The fellow passenger's final words read as if they had been spoken to pacify a sad or neurotic child: 'Of course, it may not happen precisely like this, but from what you've told me, I feel sure, by and large, that's how things will turn out. So there is no need to worry, no need at all' (209). Hoffman, too, is associated with similar rhetoric when he explains, again in careful details and at some length, how Ryder's parents will be received on the night of the recital:

By that time in the evening the clearing in the 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 ... And then ... there'll come from the darkness of the woods the sound of approaching horses. The ladies and gentleman, they'll stop talking and turn their heads. The sound of hooves will get louder, coming all the time closer to the pool of light. (379).

Towards the close of the narrative, Miss Stratmann also offers her version of verbal consolation. Showing the picture of a building that looks like a 'fairy-tale castle', she explains all the satisfactory details about how practically everybody 'would have immediately gone about helping' Ryder's parents, how the couple sojourned in an 'idyllic hotel' (514). Invariably, these instances of incantatory, soothing discourse succeed in securing, if only temporarily, a tranquillising effect on the dejected narrator.

Part of the relevance of these utterances is that they place the pianist in the position of a child – a fact which will, in turn, be argued to have key implications for the novel's concern with exile. Ryder is spoken to as an upset child would be by a kind adult in terms of emotional approach, rhetoric and imagery (note the reference to fairy-tales and the allusion to Santa Claus), and the direct subject matter of such speeches is either about the musician's own parents or the parental care he himself has provided for Boris. So even when neither is the case and Miss Collins offers to just listen to the troubled celebrity like a sort of therapist, she is in fact 'doubling for [Ryder's] beloved mother.'¹¹ In addition, there is a slightly different episode confirming the conceptual link between childhood and the phenomenon of irresistible, flowing, must-be-listened-to speech. Relying on the consistent way in which Ishiguro uses his male characters interchangeably (thus, as has been suggested, the neglect Boris suffers is a narrative-visionary version of the neglect that was once inflicted upon Ryder), one may say that on one occasion the father speaks, as it were, instead of the young boy. If only mentally, Ryder forms the following sentences about Sophie's unsatisfactory culinary performance on a rare, potentially intimate get-together of mother, father and son:

She had not thought to provide, for instance, any sardines on little triangles of toast, or any cheese and sausage kebabs. She had not made an omelette of any sort, or any cheese-stuffed potatoes, or fish cakes. Neither were there any stuffed peppers. Not those little cubes of bread with anchovy paste on them, nor those pieces of cucumber sliced lengthways, not even wedges of hard-boiled egg with the zig-zag edges. And afterwards, she made no plum slices, no buttercream fingers, not even a strawberry Swiss role. (288)

¹¹ Adelman, Gary. 'Doubles on the Rocks: Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*,' *Critique* 42.1 (2001): 166–177. 176.

The real subject of Ryder's ridiculous complaint about his wife's cooking is, of course, not the itemised delicacies themselves, but the lack of Sophie's unlimited, absolute attention. Hunger for food is hunger for love. It is demand in that it 'bears on something other than the satisfactions it calls for', in that it is about the 'presence' or 'absence' of 'the Other', a remodelling of a 'primordial relation to the mother.'¹² Unable to recover from the loss of his own mother, and self-barred from the good verbal rapport between Sophie and Boris, Ryder rehearses the kind of speech that a cranky, possibly neurotic child would produce to command the undivided attention of a parent figure.

But, as has been noted, the significance of the above, contrasting and yet supplementary, models of listening and not listening goes well beyond the novel's otherwise extensive interest in gender and psychology. A geographically constituted rift too seems to shape the way in which language is used and music is performed. To elaborate on this dimension of the novel, I would like to cite two comments offered by Ishiguro in interviews. The first provides a broader, indirect context for the issue of communication, while the second reflects on linguistic choices specifically. Thus, in a conversation with Maya Jaggi, the novelist talks about his awareness of an alternative life – one that he never actually lived, and does not even regret not living, but which nevertheless allows him an insight into what it would have been like to grow up in his country of birth:

'This [in England] is the only life I've known. I had a happy childhood, and I've been very happy here. But ... the strong emotional relationships I had in Japan ... were suddenly severed ... I've always been aware that *there was this other life I might have had*.'¹³

On another occasion, in a conversation with Gregory Mason about the use of his Oriental origin in his fiction, the novelist rejects the restricting 'Japanese writer' label and suggests critics should stop hunting down predictably ethnic motifs in his works, because they are just not there: his Japanese is 'like a *five-year old*'s.'¹⁴

In the present reading, these words are charged with meanings that may not have been actually intended by Ishiguro, but which his novel nevertheless appears to warrant. To speak like a five-year-old, or to listen to the other like a five-year-old would – acts with a magical capacity to reproduce affection and relatedness, where nothing is yet 'severed' – is to revert to the discourse of a lost home, this 'other life'. Like Japanese, emotional-auditory rapport in *The Unconsoled* is a vanishing, half-remembered language, and Ryder displays fascinated susceptibility to it. Whether he listens to 'full' – kind, dreamlike and incantatory – speeches or he makes his own attempt at a sort of irresistible because so childish, discourse, the condition of being understood on the linguistic-musical level coincides with the condition of having returned home, being unconditionally loved.

¹² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–1955* translated by Sylvana Tomaselli; edited by Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 286.

¹³ Interview with Maya Jaggi (1995). *Writing Across Worlds. Contemporary writers talk*, ed. Susheila Nasta (New York: Routledge, 2004) 166, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Interview with Gregory Mason (1986). *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, ed. Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008) 4, emphasis added.

Indeed, in spite of its general lack of accurate geographical-national reference, *The Unconsoled* contains a number of scenes where the motif of remaining unheard – together with other modes of being ignored – appears in contexts of origin and identity.¹⁵ For example, globally distinguished Ryder is curiously muted when Hoffman drives him to a banquet. Here, though the pianist is assured of his special standing as a guest of honour, he soon has the sense he is not identified at all but, instead, outright ignored (‘although heads would turn and greet my hostess she made no effort to introduce me to anyone. Moreover, although some people smiled politely at me from time to time, no one seemed especially interested in me ... no one seemed to recognise me’ [125, 133]). Under these circumstances, it is almost predictable that the speech Ryder is prompted to deliver will remain, in spite of a farcical formal start, unrealised (‘Thrown into confusion, I hesitated for a second then sat back again. Almost immediately, a woman stood up across the room and said [something] stridently’ [143]). It happens on a similar social occasion that the musician, after being actually asked his thoughts on a particular issue, must experience his efforts to articulate a view in public being consistently stifled. When he first speaks, ‘a woman interrupt[s]’ him (270) immediately, and when he ‘began again heatedly’, a man cuts in, saying something more ‘firmly’ than himself was capable of (270). Elsewhere, in the idiosyncratic surrealism of Ishiguro’s vision, Ryder alternates between not being heard and being assumed not to hear. So, when two journalists convince him to leave his son in a café and join them for a photo session, the flow of words and sounds is suddenly out of control: ‘Letting out an exclamation, I went up to them, but curiously the two men continued their discussion without looking up at me.’ A few seconds later, he hears what he is not intended to when the men call him, within his earshot, a ‘difficult shit’ (166) and a ‘touchy bastard’ (167). (Note also the role of bias and hearsay in the journalists’ attitude. They despise Ryder not because he does anything particularly nasty towards them, but because they rely on another journalist’s account – a detail which allows Ishiguro to explore identity politics through a perspective broader than the merely psychological. The narrator is a visitor, and just as certain ethnic or racial stereotypes travel ahead of exiles who are individually not known, a notorious preconception precedes the pianist.)

So where does Ryder come from? Ishiguro never tells us directly. Furthermore, he systematically undermines possibilities of easy classification. Initially, the main character’s Anglo-Saxon name, his recollection of a Manchester home and his encounter with a former schoolmate position him relatively firmly in England as a place of origin and identity. Yet the reader soon senses the unreliability of these coordinates: Ryder’s name is an allegory rather than a proper family name, his memories of a childhood habitat are absurdly shifting and fragile, and there is the sheer improbability of spotting a former schoolmate not among the tourists, but among the locals far from the UK. Moreover, the main character’s claims on Britishness are questioned, as well as thoroughly recontextualised, by the various, and again auditory, details of his renewed contact with Sophie and Gustav.

¹⁵ An insistence on the simultaneous presence and absence of engagement with ethnicity punctuates a large segment of Ishiguro criticism. Cynthia Wong, for example, contends that ‘ethnicity is not intended as the main subject of [Ishiguro’s] books’ and suggests, elsewhere, that the novelist’s ‘own status as an immigrant writer in the early years of his life ... probably shaped the emotional life of his characters’ (6). Cynthia F. Wong, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Tavistock: Northcote House in association with the British Council, 2000) 9, 6.

Unsettled and itinerant, Ryder is related to a wife and a father-in-law who appear to possess a migrant background themselves. Note how a version of the motif of the pianist being ignored in public is repeated, after being supplemented with the ethnic clue ‘gypsy’, when Sophie suffers comparable humiliation. Thus, ‘Sophie, in a dark crimson evening dress, [was] standing awkwardly by herself in the centre of a crowded room, while all around her people stood laughing and talking in little groups’ (259). This is the recollection of an earlier event, but when the woman attends, in the main plot, a party with her husband and son, nothing changes:

Sophie was standing a few steps from where I had originally left her, quite isolated, not talking to anyone. A feeble smile hovered on her face, though there was no one to display it to. Her shoulders were hunched and her gaze seemed to be fixed on the footwear of the group of guests nearest her. (277)

This is not how the wife of a celebrity is normally treated, but this may well be what happens, in the novel’s multiple surrealist visions, to a visibly different nomad in a racially uniform company. Therefore, it is relevant that dark-haired Sophie strikes even her own husband as a ‘gypsy’ (32), an association reinforced by her worries about their not having an appropriate home, and in general, permanence. Sophie’s father too appears to have migrated to his present residence. Gustav’s Hungarian origin is never actually stated, yet it is a strong narrative probability. He is one of the senior regulars at the Hungarian Café, and when the porters’ dance episode takes place, a crowd gathers, and an unspecified ‘section of it’ (406) begins a high-intensity Hungarian song which in turn spreads quickly among the spectators.

This particular language choice is only one of the reasons why, in the present interpretation, the location of *The Unconsoled* is treated as a postmodernist revisioning of the ethnically highly diverse Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Apart from the various markers of an Austrian landscape, the local community’s nostalgic-declivist attitude (the monarchy’s cultural and political significance around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries cannot be overestimated) and the apparent, often-mentioned Kafkaesque qualities of the narration are further, possible support for this idea. But it is reliving the cultural memories of a once glorious state from a contemporary ethnic margin that connects with the central character’s experience with particular poignancy. In this context, Ishiguro’s choice for ethnic otherness – Hungarian – in the territory of the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy is significant precisely through its relative insignificance. Historically, Hungarians constituted the second largest population in this dual state, so as a consequence, to be Hungarian entails no conspicuous deviation from the majority. But at the same time, the status of Hungarians as second class citizens was apparent even during the final decades of the monarchy when the relations between the two dominant nationalities were, after numerous confrontations, the most balanced. On Ishiguro’s fictive territory of an increasingly global, yet post-colonially burdened contemporary Europe, the alternation between showing the narrator as an insider and an outsider meaningfully supplements the presentation of characters who are just like the locals, yet whose slight ethnic difference remains a powerful, if residual and indirect, element in their identity.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ishiguro will use the Hungarian motif next in his *Nocturnes. Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009) where, similarly to *The Unconsoled*, the Hungarianness of one of the title characters in ‘Cellists’ is subject to uncertainty (Tibor is mistaken for a Russian) and a subaltern position (the young player’s economic vulnerability is not only

This, of course, is not to claim that Ryder himself is a travelling Hungarian, even if, during the dance scene, he narrates that ‘I began to sing, making up words I thought sounded vaguely Hungarian. For some reason, this worked surprisingly well – I found more and more such words pouring out of me with gratifying ease – and before long, I was singing with considerable emotion’ (408). The combination of such ethnic possibilities with narrative suggestions that clearly contradict them – to the effect that Ryder is a genuine Englishman – signals, instead, that on this terrain of the surreal and the pronouncedly psychological, individual uncertainties about nationhood and ethnicity are allegories of a broader, and general, immigrant predicament. In other words, the main character’s mobility and indeterminate origins are not only reflective of several other characters’ migrant backgrounds but also of what it takes, typically, to be caught between locations, conflicting identities, even languages. Therefore, details in the novel about foreignness ‘no longer designate [...] just a concrete] narrator or a character but an assemblage that becomes ... all the more collective because an individual is locked into it in his or her solitude.’¹⁷

So, for example, when the narrator conjures up his parents’ arrival at his concert, the old couple’s description (‘looking at the strange city around them ... while cars and lorries roared past them and commuters rushed by’ [176]) is, as Shao-Pin Luo registers, ‘perhaps a universal [image] of immigrants arriving in a new city where they do not know a soul.’¹⁸ Or when we become aware of Gustav’s, Sophie’s, Boris’s and Ryder’s possibly non-English origin, the incident of the street thugs’ repeated, and then successfully ward-off attacks no longer reads simply as the wish-fulfilling fantasy of a teenage boy but as a particular rendition of racial attacks against ethnic minorities. Similarly, the motif of the Sattler monument – through its embarrassing, communally so divisive effects, its Germanic character and especially the never-specified radicalism associated with it – easily evokes memories of Nazi race ideology. Besides these examples of actual racial abuse, yet further details indicate how the represented community stereotypes, or outright ignores, its non-native members. Thus, proceeding on the assumption that Gustav and possibly his fellow porters too are from a different country, one can suspect that the pride they display and the urgency in their protest against public misperception are not only professionally motivated, as they appear, but they are also rooted in their ethnic standing. They are a ‘close-knit group’ (7), to whom, as Gustav puts it, no one is actually rude, but the ‘politeness and consideration’ he mentions reads in his speech rather as polite condescension, a sign of the fading ‘respect’ (6; emphasis in original) about which he does complain explicitly. An immigrant in the service industry, he resents the suggestion of inferiority that at one point another character’s words carry when calling an enemy, maliciously, a mere ‘bell-boy’ (458; emphasis in original).

As implied in this slur, the condition of being a specifically male foreigner is an integral part of the novel’s vision of the diasporic predicament. From a gendered perspective, it is Brodsky, Christoff and Hoffman whose troubled masculinity – mirroring, once again, Ryder’s own

linked to his East-European background but it is also orchestrated by the sumptuous Western setting and the condescending attitude of a wealthy American couple).

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, ‘What is a Minor Literature?’, *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends* edited by David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007) 1779.

¹⁸ Shao-Pin Luo. “‘Living the Wrong Life’: Kazuo Ishiguro’s Unconsoled Orphans’, *Dalhousie Review* 83 (2003) 51–80.

anxieties – appears to be burdened by their non-local origins. Thus, Brodsky, whose general ‘recovery’ (57) perhaps most substantially recapitulates Ryder’s ‘recovering lost ground’ (376), is a figure originally from Poland or the Ukraine, and his sexually deprived condition seems to be in some remote, yet quite real relationship with this background. We learn that his loss of a limb, symbolically so resonant, occurred in a distant region and in the distant past, but the person whose heart he tries to win is an emphatically local woman: Miss Collins, the reader is told, has ‘[never] even left the city’ (364). This might seem to be an isolated example were this motif not repeated in description of fellow fallen music idol Christoff. A kind of successor to Brodsky, Christoff too is originally a newcomer (106), and he too focuses his sexual attention on a pronouncedly ‘local girl’ who is ‘one of [them], grew up with [them]’ (104). After both Brodsky and Christoff are deposed, the town-dwellers envision a new idol who ‘*shared our values*’ (113; emphasis in original). In Hoffman’s case, there is no suggestion of geographical relocation, yet the maritally miserable man conceptualises his perceived inferiority as a matter of the difference in talent that lies between two genealogies: while his wife ‘comes from a long line of talented people’ (346), he himself shows only ‘mediocrity’ (354). One way or another, outsiders as well as newcomers appear to be disadvantaged in sexually competitive situations.

Furthermore, anxieties about displaced masculinity are focused in the leitmotif of music and speech. In Ishiguro’s vision, the ability to strike the right notes (or the right tone) signals the promise of admission into the community from which one has been cast out before. It is because of this conceptual pattern that, comically and originally, music features in the city dwellers’ life so significantly. To make the appropriate auditory gestures is both an act of compensation (as Kristeva notes, ‘The foreigner is the one who works’¹⁹) and homecoming. Thus, although Ishiguro never explicitly relates music to foreignness, various indirect statements imply that any well-done performance is instrumental in securing a much coveted act of return. The longest, and most straightforward articulation of this idea occurs in Chapter 15, where Ryder tells Boris the following:

I’d like nothing better than to stay at home with you and Mother ... But ... it’s not so simple. I have to keep going on these trips because ... you can never tell when it’s going to come along. I mean the very special one, the very important trip ... It’ll come soon ... then ... I’ll be able to relax and rest ... I could stay at home ... we could enjoy ourselves, just the three of us. (217–18)

The very special concert is, of course, the one that Ryder is currently invited to give, so he explains the same idea to Sophie in these words: ‘I promise, I won’t be travelling much longer now. Tonight, if it goes well ...’ (446). Several of the various narrative-psychological projections of the pianist are correspondingly beset by the idea of having to earn a home, even love, via excelling on the auditory level. So from Stephen (who hopes his satisfactory recital on the concert night will restore affection and intimacy in his family) through Christoff (who fell out of grace with his wife as a direct consequence of his declining professional prestige) to Brodsky (who aspires to win back his former lover’s affection through revitalising himself as a composer), a variety of characters reinforce the concept of music as compensation and interpersonal dynamic, especially serviceable for the displaced or marginalised. Efforts of this

¹⁹ Kristeva 17.

kind are necessary; otherwise the barriers that time, insensitivity and heartlessness have erected remain in place – one can notice how the titles Ishiguro has chosen for several of the fictitious pieces of music appearing in the novel are expressive of distance, division or impenetrability. Thus, when Ryder hesitates between the compositions called *Globestructures: Option II* and *Asbestos and Fire* (339), a sense of his exilic restlessness as well as various concepts of boundaries are conveyed. When Stephen switches from an earlier idea to play *Glass Passions* (477) to regain the affections of his less than loving parents, the name choice hardly seems accidental. Immersed in the highly specialised, elitist production of contemporary music, the at once mad and brilliantly focused Brodsky can only play something that is titled *Verticality*.

Finally, in this particular musical context, Ryder's just quoted definition of their family ('just the three of us') may bear additional relevance for the novel's intertwined notions of gender, migrancy and auditory relations. Here and elsewhere in this indeed Kafkaesque, claustrophobic story, the family is invariably nuclear: there is no suggestion of any larger number of relatives living together; the housing estate that Ryder revisits with Boris accommodates small, isolated families, where only one child is the norm. This configuration, which lends itself to the conventional designation Oedipal, may explain the fear that imbues Ryder through the anti-Oedipal perspective of Deleuze and Guattari. For the French theorists, the too tight association between the nuclear family and Oedipus offers a restrictive, in a sense false, view of how desire actually operates: 'It is not a question of denying the vital importance of parents or the love attachment of children to their mothers and fathers. It is a question of knowing what the place and the function of parents are within desiring-production, rather than ... forcing the entire interplay of desiring machines to fit within ... the restricted code of Oedipus.'²⁰ Desire, which is multiple and nomadic, cannot be pinned down to two binary subject-positions only: 'We pass from one field to another by crossing thresholds: we never stop migrating, we become other individuals as well as other sexes.'²¹ Ryder's actual migrancy, and especially his music, may be construed as a way to reclaim (or, in Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, reterritorialise) that which has been lost. The 'cold' titles of music listed above file not only a sort of complaint about repressed love and sexuality, but the description of their performance also relates music to a sort of protest against the normative or the majoritarian (including the Oedipal). Note the link between the sexual and the spatial in the following comments on the playing of Brodsky (that is, Ryder himself): it was 'push[ing] into ever stranger territories' (492), 'tak[ing] things too far' (494), yet producing an 'unnerving but compelling' effect (492), and before coming 'unstuck' (496), it 'veered ... towards the realm of perversity' (494). This gesture too produces a variant on the inaudibility theme in that in the audience's failing to follow him, 'disaffinity' (494) and non-comprehension grow between them and the musician.

To conclude, the novel's concentration on the divisive effects of language and music remodels less explicitly portrayed, yet for the narrative definitive, anxieties about the notion of home and community. Specifically, the experience of displacement becomes focused in the motif of inaudibility. This holds true even for otherwise officially celebrated music. While music represents a form of cultural power, Ishiguro stresses how its truly profound moments can go ignored by familial as well as non-familial audiences. This condition of remaining unheard being

²⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2003) 47.

²¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 85.

Ryder's plight and legacy, he now hands it down to his son: notwithstanding his particular gift for auditory excellence, the pianist remains invariably deaf to the emotional needs and signals of others. Ryder is not the only such person in this fictive town of musical connoisseurs: many shared attributes imply a symbolic identity to the pianist with other men and other migrants, reinforcing thereby an artistic link between male restlessness and mobility on the one hand and, on the other, socially conditioned fears, even phobias, concerning the feminine. For this reason, *The Unconsoled* can be read as the composite story of actual foreigners, unloved children and inarticulate, emotionally troubled men, where music and conversation feature as promises of reconnection.

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