

ISHIGURO'S FLOATING WORLDS

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Great literature is written in a sort of foreign tongue. To each sentence we attach a meaning, or at any rate a mental image, which is often a mistranslation. But in great literature all our mistranslations result in beauty.

—Marcel Proust, *Contre Saint-Beuve*

It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.

—Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

That mistranslated or missing information might add to rather than diminish a novel's effect is an insight common to modern stylists as different as, say, Marcel Proust and Salman Rushdie. Indeed, Henry James built his late work on the foundation of absent narrative and envisioned his task as the evocation of insufficient representation: he hoped to convey to his readers the sense of "ever so many more of the shining silver fish afloat in the deep sea of one's endeavour than the net of widest casting could pretend to gather in."¹ For James, the floating world was the condition to which fiction aspired.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels dare us to read indirect style as cultural content: his strategies of description and narration seem to imitate the characteristics of the place and people represented. Ishiguro's narrative styles evoke national attributes, whose recognition among readers tends to situate his texts within particular cultural traditions: this is true for the apparent Englishness of *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), and for the apparent Japaneseness of *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *A Pale View of Hills* (1982). In Ishiguro's fourth novel, *The Unconsoled* (1995), the pattern continues, except that the strange, digressive plot of the novel corresponds not to a narrator's specific location, but to his lack of location altogether. The narrator of *The Unconsoled* is one Mr. Ryder, whose name impersonates the text's metaphorical detours, its Symbolist logic, its continuous interruptions and departures.

Ryder is a man always on his way somewhere else. In Ishiguro's story, he is an acclaimed pianist who arrives in an unnamed European city for a single performance. The inhabitants of the city, full of individual and collective anxieties, are hoping that Ryder will bring both public and private consolation. The event is the occasion of Ryder's visit, it is the climax of the story, and it is a scene the reader ultimately does not see. Ishiguro withholds this scene, he neither narrates nor describes it, and in its place he records the prodigious expectation that the performance has generated throughout.

What we miss most in *The Unconsoled*—that is, what we notice—arrives in the absence of certainty and in the security the novel fails to bring. As for Ryder, *his* consolation is also elsewhere: on a bus at the end of the novel, already planning his next performance in another city, he imagines a leavetaking full of the sympathy he neither found nor gave in the community he departs.² Sympathy is possible only as potential encounter, as nostalgia for a connection that did not take place. In each of Ishiguro's novels, there is a turn away from pivotal and traumatic episodes, whether historical events, such as atomic devastation in Nagasaki, or private betrayals, or the lack of courageous action, passivity in the face of fascism. In each case, a lapse is registered in a substitution: *The Unconsoled* often provides interior monologue or daydream in the midst and instead of exterior interaction and description. It is not so much that an event, such as a concert or a sympathetic encounter, fails to happen—though it may fail to happen—but rather that, for the reader, something else happens: a fantasy, a desire, an adjacent and seemingly marginal incident. The novel's substitution repeats the narrator's distraction, though the narrator's distraction comes in the exchange of one incident for another. In this doubling of plot and story Ishiguro draws the reader's attention to the phrases, metaphors, and words that constitute Ryder's life.³ Ryder's problem is not his inability to face the past in these figurations so much as his inability to acknowledge that the past, always figured, cannot be faced. Ryder cannot see, as all of Ishiguro's protagonists cannot, that one takes responsibility for the past only by acknowledging its loss: the attempt to deny this loss, and thereby to deny that there is any betrayal of self or community, turns out in Ishiguro's novels to be the worst evasion of all.

The Unconsoled is Ishiguro's most abstract novel, but in it one sees most clearly that the floating world, produced for the reader as a strategy of evocation, is composed in the text as a quality of the narrator's existence. It is the predicament that Ryder lives. Ishiguro

associates the gestures of his meandering style with the location—or dislocations—of his protagonist and thus offers a story of travel as a narrative of translation, in the sense of both cultural discrepancy and rhetorical estrangement. The itinerant Ryder might be one of Salman Rushdie's "translated men," those literally "borne across the world," removed from one site to the next and also situated in that process of location.⁴ He is "translated," like James Clifford's postmodern "travelers," who are always going but also coming and dwelling, "cross-cutting," as he says, "'us' and 'them.'"⁵ Such persistent displacement is a condition of culture that Ishiguro represents, in wandering metaphors and discordant perspectives, as a condition of narrative.

For Proust, novelistic success depends on this kind of displacement, on the transient "beauty" derived from what is new, unexpected, and forever unknown. Indeed, Proust's claim that "in great literature all our mistranslations result in beauty" is somewhat disingenuous, since for him mistranslation is the necessary, and not the incidental situation in which beauty emerges. For Proust, infidelity is the test of "great literature," in that art should inspire many more meanings than the single one an author may have had in mind. However, infidelity is also the condition of art: in Proust's novel, the narrator's imperfect, partial sight seems to generate the beauty it perceives. "The arrows of Beauty," Proust writes, are stimulated by the glimpse of "a fragmentary and fugitive stranger" seen from the window of a galloping carriage. The stranger is "fugitive"—departing, "passing," even moving—only insofar as Proust's narrator is traveling in another direction, longing for what he purposefully leaves behind. The "stranger" and the desire are produced in one and the same gesture, and the "charms" of this partial encounter increase, Proust avers, with the speed of one's passage, the mistake of one's vision, and "the desire for what we cannot possess."⁶

Proust's narrator longs for what escapes him: the object and the structure are conflated, much as they are in his title, *The Fugitive* (1925), or in Ishiguro's title, *The Unconsoled*, where person and condition, identity and narrative, are closely intertwined. Proust provides an important comparison for Ishiguro's project because he theorizes a relation between narrative and the self and also allows that his text might produce a self, defining in its style a particular persona or experience. By his own account, Proust imagines the "function and task of a writer as those of a translator," one who mediates (and knows the difference) between an "impression" in life and its "expression" in literature. He will name this distinction and

yet propose, at times, that expression may suggest what impression was: one may recognize in retrospect the telling evidence for a self invented in the act of retrospection; narrative may articulate for the first time the identity whose characteristics it claims merely to recall.⁷ For Ishiguro, also, novels give rise to histories and impressions that characters, remembering in the present, nevertheless attribute to the past. Characters attribute these impressions to the past, not because they misremember, though they do, but because they do not realize or will not acknowledge that the past changes. Against this inconsistency, Ishiguro's narrators, all of whom are desperate to explain away the present sense of a prior mistake, try to fix a positive history in the continuity of values that are, literally, timeless.

Ishiguro's early works register this dialectic, between the narratives that generate identities and the narratives that describe them, as the origin of foreign fictions, those cultural stereotypes whose authenticity depends on a consistent history, culture, and self. The forms of loyalty that Ishiguro critiques in his novels promise consistency and also promise not to represent—not to remember—anything that would demonstrate its cost. In Ishiguro's novels, characters maintain loyalties by invoking what Maud Ellmann, writing on Henry James, calls "vulgar truth." Refusing to endorse any single, consistent explanation of the past, Ishiguro evades "vulgar truth" in order to evade "vulgar falsehood" as well. This is to say, as Ellmann explains of James, Ishiguro is unwilling to reduce his narratives to a defining, transparent event, because, in a world of changing interpretations, such truth is itself a kind of fiction. "As soon as there is representation," Ellmann proposes, speaking both of narrative and of politics, "there is treason."⁸

In order to represent the treason of representation, Ishiguro's novels plainly reiterate, as his narrators reiterate, the many generalizing utterances that obscure particular differences among people and perspectives. These generalizations are audible in Ishiguro's novels as the echoes of nationalism and cultural stereotype. Ishiguro shows how cultural stereotypes work by constructing his novels as national allegories, allowing the characteristics of his texts to stand for the characteristics of the cultures they seem to describe.⁹ Ishiguro's novels disrupt national allegories, at least in part, by embedding their cultural truths in narratives about the fictionalization of cultural truths. These narratives demonstrate an "aberrant grammar," Roland Barthes's term for the discrepancies of language that disorient social

categories and systems of meaning.¹⁰ However, for some readers this grammar only increases the effect of particularized strangeness; the persistent approximation of cultures remains mimetic of places rather than of displacement.¹¹ This essay will consider how Ishiguro both anticipates and entices these formulations, and how he conceives treason—in persons, nations, and art—as a value more consistent and more responsible than any single allegiance that either characters or readers can imagine.

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If *The Unconsoled* offers a most figurative version of estranged or translated writing, *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro's second novel, seems much more literal in its foreignness. Its "floating world" names a subject for art—"those pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light"—and also intimates a country, a cultural style, a social milieu, a past.¹² The "artist" of the title is Masuji Ono, once a respected painter and imperial propagandist, now, after World War II, a collaborator in disgrace. His story is elusive, gestural, and "written in a kind of foreign tongue" in every sense, for Ono is a Japanese man speaking his native language, ostensibly Japanese, in formal English. The difference between English discourse and Japanese setting, rather than calling attention to the English writing of the novel, helps to articulate a cultural estrangement that becomes, for some readers, simply a culture: Japan itself. The fact that readers reproduce a metonymic logic that Ishiguro attributes ironically to many of his characters should remind us that narratives may project national fictions even though the assembly of these fictions is part of the stories they tell. By addressing Japanese stereotypes within his work, Ishiguro prefigures and theorizes the interpretations that have come to pursue him.

In several reviews, the artist Ono and the artist Ishiguro are metaphorically interchangeable. Critics associate the novelist's technique with an authentic Japaneseness, and they propose this affiliation as a natural rather than a cultivated element of Ishiguro's craft. The author's "instincts," we are told, "are for the nuanced, the understated, elegant but significant gesture, similar to the deft brushwork of Japanese paintings."¹³ It is more common for readers to attribute Ishiguro's non-English qualities to his style of writing rather than to his subject matter or biography, but some have attached a specific cultural particularity to the latter elements as well. For one reader, Ishiguro "remains inalienably Japanese" *despite* "Western

literary techniques,” in good part, it would seem, because the contrast between “the West” and Japan is itself “a favourite subject for Japanese writers.”¹⁴ Ishiguro has lived in England since the age of six, was educated in England, writes in English, but he is regularly compared with “modern Japanese novelists” all the same.¹⁵

Homi Bhabha has suggested that this kind of critical transformation, from difference into identity, attempts to convert what escapes the reading, authoritative gaze—those floating fish, the floating world, those “things that disappear”—into a containable metonymy. For Bhabha, the reader’s failure becomes the object’s abstract noun: “the *inscrutability* of the Chinese, the *unspeakable* rites of the Indians, the *indescribable* habits of the Hottentots.”¹⁶ The floating world of the Japanese. These metonymies generate the racism of fixed characteristics, but for Bhabha the opacity of these characteristics also reflects an impotent gaze and the potential failure of definitive sight. Whereas in Bhabha’s account inaccessibility becomes an accessible, if somewhat menacing content, for Rey Chow obstinate strangeness justifies for many a distance that need not be measured. “When that other is Asia or the ‘Far East,’” Chow has argued, it is typically represented in “absolute terms, making this other an utterly incomprehensible, terrifying, and fascinating spectacle.”¹⁷ The problem, Chow explains, is not the incomprehension of difference but the embodiment it provokes: readers, she might say, transform a subjective, idealized fantasy of a “floating world” into an objective place or person; they “(mis)apply” this “otherness,” as Chow puts it, to “*specific other cultures*.”¹⁸

What is interesting about Ishiguro’s approach to these transformations is his suggestion that national identities are invented not only to maintain a boundary from the outside but also to erect boundaries in the face of new, perhaps internal estrangement. Ishiguro describes a world of metonymic reading, but he is careful not to suggest either that one might replace it with a more authentic, less figurative form of description or that its consolidating tactics are solely the strategy of an Orientalist perspective. Both Bhabha and Chow have criticized those models of anti-ethnocentrism which, in seeking to replace bad images with good ones, reproduce racist stereotypes by making foreign persons into objects of insistent, persistent nobility.¹⁹ Chow is suspicious of any discourse that would transform other cultures into sites of “authenticity and true knowledge,” not only because this “authenticity” forecloses the agency of self-definition and self-fashioning, but also because it suggests that observers of these cultures

might gain from them a “true knowledge” uninflected by translation and self-interest. Chow takes up Slavoj Žižek’s observation that those who think themselves “non-duped,” or “undeceived,” are in fact the most deceived of all. Chow extends Žižek’s argument to assert that “[o]ur fascination with the native, the oppressed, the savage, and all such figures is therefore a desire to hold on to an unchanging certainty somewhere outside our own ‘fake’ experience. It is a desire for being ‘non-duped,’ which is a not-so-innocent desire to seize control.”²⁰ The desire to be undeceived, like the desire for a “vulgar truth,” leads to falsehood and coercion.

In Ishiguro’s novels, the fictions of national certainty are as often a product of local imagination as they are an imposition of foreign scrutiny. Moreover, for Ishiguro, the fixing of national identities depends on a style of representation whose claims to mimetic transparency assume norms of unwavering allegiance and historical continuity. Refusing this transparency at the level of narration, Ishiguro’s novels generate what Bhabha calls “hesitant” knowledge, which is neither homogenous nor absolute: Ishiguro’s *aberrant grammar* resists political and cultural norms by reproducing a normalizing rhetoric (for example: “I always think it’s so truly like England out here”) excessively and inappropriately.²¹ It is important for Ishiguro’s project that his novels are *not* incomprehensible, for any absolute ignorance would preserve, in its opposite, the fiction of unanimity. Against the ideal of understanding, Ishiguro commits his writing to meanings that change and to people who change their minds. Ishiguro’s characters, for whom lapses in unanimity constitute a disquieting lapse in self-confidence, frequently claim incomprehensibility—as misunderstanding—in order to disclaim conflict and bad feeling. The word “misunderstanding” repeats throughout Ishiguro’s texts in the voice of characters and narrators whose response to conflicting interpretations is not acknowledgment but correction.²² Like Ishiguro’s characters, readers can only make sense of the narratives once they exchange the rhetoric of correction for the necessity of accumulation and partial knowledge.

Many of Ishiguro’s reviewers want to separate the practical difficulty of reading his novels from the cultural complexities that his narratives represent. The reviewers attribute a Japanese style or repertoire to Ishiguro, while they remain otherwise self-conscious about the use of ethnographic language. This ambivalence tends to produce a reflexive denial of cultural or national metonymy, which often constitutes the reviewer’s only articulation—and explicit circulation—of the

application he or she is trying to avoid. Consider, for example, this statement, which introduces a discussion of *The Unconsoled*: “First, Ishiguro himself is a puzzle (I am not referring to his name or country of origin).”²³ The effect of the sentence depends on what is withheld: the reviewer’s meaning, though not Ishiguro’s, is so self-evident that it need not be specified; there is nothing in the review, at least prior to this statement, which either identifies Ishiguro’s name as Japanese or justifies a connection between “name” and “country of origin.” Moreover, there is nothing to tell us why or how a man or a place, if he or it were Japanese, would be “a puzzle.” The reviewer imagines that this information is obvious, or at least understood; he presumes that his readers might read the name Ishiguro in the same way he says he does not. The reviewer denies a cultural specificity in the grammar of negation, but he reproduces its effect in the rhetoric of presumption: leaving his comment to speak for itself, he affiliates his readers with the clarity of his referent (what he and “we” understand) and thus contrasts them against the “puzzle” of Ishiguro’s prose. The denial of reference (“I am not referring . . .”) initiates the reviewer’s incomprehension (puzzlement) as that which results from and distinguishes Japanese incomprehensibility.

It does seem that it is difficult to discuss what signifies Japan without repeating the signifiers as natural or necessary. A critic in *The New York Review of Books* writes of Ishiguro’s style, in a metaphor I have cited before, “the elegant bareness inevitably reminds one of Japanese painting.”²⁴ That said, however, the critic argues against this comparison and opposes its sensibility to Ishiguro’s “indictment” of “cliché” and, consequently, of “Japanese-ness.” The reviewer explains:

He writes about guilt and shame incurred in the service of duty, loyalty, and tradition. Characters who place too high—too Japanese—a price on these values are punished for it. . . . Compared to his astounding narrative sophistication, Ishiguro’s message seems quite banal: Be less Japanese, less bent on dignity, less false to yourself and others, less restrained and controlled.²⁵

There are three main assumptions posed as “inevitable” here: first, that “elegant bareness” points a straight line to Japanese painting; second, that a “Japanese style” would suggest a celebration of Japanese culture; and third, that Ishiguro’s critique of “cliché” is a critique of “being Japanese” rather than a critique of cultural stereotypes. It is important to see that Japanese painting *has become*

the inevitable comparison for Ishiguro's work, if only because so many reviewers make the association. It might be inevitable, then, because Ishiguro identifies and evokes the signifiers that produce the collateral effect. In any case, *The New York Review of Books* writer makes no distinction between the claim that emotional restraint is Japanese and the possibility that such restraint reflects disagreement and uncertainty over what being Japanese involves.

As a style of art and a style of speaking, the restraint represented in Ishiguro's novels is not necessarily a sign of ethical evasion or political quietude. To be sure, the narrator of *The Remains of the Day* cultivates restraint to excuse his complicity in decisions that he allowed others to make for him. However, one sees that another character in the novel, while full of "good strong opinion" (184), is not wholly admirable: he may speak for democracy among Englishmen, but he laments the decline of Empire and "all kinds of little countries going independent" (192). Ishiguro is careful to show that no one literary or artistic style directly corresponds to any particular political content. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono seems to exchange cartoon stereotype and impressionist shadow for realist transparency: the narrator recalls moving in his apprenticeship from the commercial studio of Master Takeda, where the presence of "geishas, cherry trees, swimming carps, temples" (69) defined Japan in paintings sold abroad, to the workshop of Mr. Moriyama or Mori-san, artist of pleasure houses and their women, and finally to the tutelage of Chishu Matsuda, an advocate of Japanese militarism, for whom Ono turns out imperialist propaganda. While Ono tells us that the political message of his later art was starkly opposed to the aesthetic project of his earlier, Ishiguro makes it clear that Mori-san's aestheticism has its own commitments, and the realism of the political work is not without deceit.

Mori-san's impressionism is saturated with politics: those who paint in a style or with a subject that differs from his example are considered "traitors" to his cause (165). Likewise, Ono produces the most cunning political messages when he adopts a style of painting that seems most direct and explicit. In a painting called "Complacency," which Ono composed in support of Japanese militarism in the 1930s, the artist fuses the image of three impoverished boys with the image of three samurai warriors to suggest that the fact of poverty can only be addressed by the necessity of imperialist expansion (167-68). Ono's art as a propagandist is not more true than the illusoriness of the style he adopted under a former teacher: rather, in "Complacency,"

the fact of illusion is no longer represented. The propagandist style acts as if it is true, whereas the impressionist style never makes this claim: in this sense, Ishiguro suggests, the style that claims openness and truth is most deceptive. Restraint, which corresponds both to the impressionist style of painting that the narrator had studied before joining the imperialist campaign and to the style of the novel, seems more honest by comparison, though it seems only more Japanese to the extent that it is part of a long tradition of Japanese art.

In Ishiguro's novels about Japan, what counts as Japanese is what James Clifford would call, ethnographically speaking, "an achieved fiction."²⁶ The point of Clifford's metaphor is that cultural narratives are by definition "novelistic," which, for Clifford, makes them no more and no less "fictional" or "achieved" for all that. One of Ishiguro's short stories provides a good example of the relation between what we might call insider and outsider ethnographies, Japan's stories about itself as opposed to the stories told about Japan. For Ishiguro, it is not only that Japan can be fictionalized, but that the true Japan is already a fiction, and not just someone else's. In "A Family Supper" (1990), suicide is offered up both as a fact of Japanese nostalgia and as a myth of Orientalism.²⁷ One need look no further than Ishiguro's reviews to see how this myth operates: in the *Times Literary Supplement*, for example, the novelist's birthplace and the Japanese setting of his early works makes Japan and its metonyms somehow relevant to any discussion of the author's work. Hence Ryder's "eagerness to do and say the right thing" in *The Unconsoled* is likened—as if by chance—to "some old joke about a Japanese man saying, 'Honourable sir, very sorry to be bothering you with my suicide.'"²⁸ The *TLS* reviewer reads Ryder's formal speech, which takes place somewhere in Europe but certainly not in Japan, as Ishiguro's mistranslation from Japanese and his failure to represent a mimetic European idiom. European realism fails, the reviewer suggests, because Ryder sounds like a caricature of self-effacement, though this is a self-effacement associated with a particular cultural face: the popular, if facetious "joke" of Japanese formality.

"A Family Supper" offers this joke in a different context, not as the lingering truth of Japanese affect, but as its fiction. Ishiguro's story begins with a parodic account of *seppuku* in which the narrator's mother dies, not through her own purposeful and ritualized disembowelment, but by the accidental ingestion (at a dinner party) of a fish whose poisonous glands had been imperfectly removed. In case the reader has missed the replacement of one gutting for another, the

narrator reports that in Japan “after the war” it was “all the rage” to serve this particular fish—*fugu*—to neighbors and friends, as if the risk of the feast, and the “hideous pain” of its poison, would serve as a more sociable form of collective suicide in the wake of national dishonor (207).

Ishiguro’s parody is recounted in the first person by a young man, born in Tokyo, who has been living in California up until the start of his story. The narrator is returning to Japan some two years after the death of his mother, which is described in the opening paragraphs. Since Ishiguro’s name sounds Japanese, since he is writing in English and publishing his story in *Esquire* magazine, since he seems to know about Japanese rituals and describe them much as one who has been living far from home, perhaps in California, readers might imagine that “A Family Supper,” and its story of poisonous fish and hazardous dinner parties, is true. Or maybe that some of it is true. But which part? Even before one gets past the framing narrative of return to the supper that is the story’s putative topic, there are details—both personal and historical—that the narrative encourages its readers to accept. The parody inheres in its assumed referent, in the expectation that readers will find the fish story grotesque, bizarre, unlikely at best, though they will recognize in it, perhaps, that common and persistent trope of Japanese melodrama: suicide.²⁹

Left with this “reminder” of Japan’s predisposition, one enters the body of the tale and the narrator’s supper with his father and sister. Readers learn through dialogue, though not through narration, that the father is melancholy because his business has recently collapsed. Moreover, there are some family conflicts that are presented only indirectly: the father is “prepared to forget” his son’s unspecified “behavior” (208) in the past and longs for that time when his business did not involve “foreigners”; the son (the narrator) recalls his father striking him when he was a boy; the sister contemplates immigration to America with her boyfriend. These conflicts are what the characters do not talk about: the father does not want to consider the future; the narrator is reluctant to reopen prior disagreements; the sister has not told her father about her thoughts of leaving Japan. What the family does talk about, in implicit and explicit terms, is suicide: for while the mother may have died by accident, the father’s business partner, we learn from the narrator’s sister, has “cut his stomach with a meat knife” after killing his wife and children (210). The narrator and his father, as well as the narrator and his sister, separately discuss versions of this story twice before the meal is served. The father

seems to approve his partner's action for its particular ethic and its general bravery: he calls his partner "a man of principle and honor" (208); later, the father says he wishes that he had been a pilot during the war, because "in an airplane . . . there was always the final weapon" (210). With the mother's death as background and the partner's suicide as foreground, one learns that the family is having fish for dinner, which the father has prepared by himself in the kitchen.

Ishiguro's story is about Japanese suicide, though not because the story is solely about Japan and not because Ishiguro thinks that suicide is a natural inclination of Japanese persons. Rather, Ishiguro's tale is about the expectation that suicide is likely to figure in any narrative of Japanese life and about how this expectation, in its generalization about Japanese people, obscures differences within Japan and within a Japanese family. The story seeks to show that characters and readers are eager to transform a narrative about individual conflicts into a narrative about collective ritual. Suicide functions for readers and for characters as a form of nostalgic citation: it points to a past whose continuity and authenticity can be affirmed, through iteration, in the present. Ritual suicide, for the business partner and even for the air force pilots extolled by the father, is a Japanese anachronism, a performative longing for a pure and purely Japanese Japan.³⁰ In Ishiguro's story, suicide serves to correct the unevenness of national uniformity by lending itself as a uniform narrative. Ishiguro thus promotes a double consciousness: in the first case, to see suicide as an essential, defining Japanese characteristic is to miss its fictionalization; alternatively, to understand suicide *only* as a Western fiction is to underrate its position within Japanese culture and to imagine, in its place, an authentic, less fictional narrative.³¹ "A Family Supper" leads its readers to believe that the father might intentionally repeat the scene of his wife's accident, but it is clear by the end, after the fish has been consumed completely, that the entire family disapproves of the partner's actions. Ultimately, the characters remain with their lives and their conflicts intact. For them, and for readers, suicide has obscured the difficult cultural and generational disputes that might have otherwise emerged, but it has also registered those disputes as that which needs suicide—in all its supposed Japaneseness—to contain them.

The ending of "A Family Supper" seems to surprise the narrator as much as it may surprise the reader. The son, who had been living in America, does not approve of his father's values, but it is clear that he has assumed he knew what his father's values are:

“Father,” I said, finally.

“Yes?”

“Kikuko tells me Watanabe-san took his whole family with him.”

My father lowered his eyes and nodded. For some moments he seemed deep in thought. “Watanabe was very devoted to his work,” he said at last. “The collapse of the firm was a very great blow to him. I fear it must have weakened his judgment.”

“You think what he did . . . it was a mistake?”

“Why, of course. Do you see it otherwise?” (211)

Ishiguro’s story closes a few paragraphs later without resolution or consolation; it ends, moreover, without the sense that suicide *is* consolation for what cannot be found or retrieved, either as national past or even as national difference. Even though they do not affirm suicide as a positive act, the son and father are reluctant—the word “mistake” suggests this—to acknowledge that the business partner’s values differ from their own, or that their own values in the present are different and opposed to the values of the past. “Mistake,” like “misunderstanding,” transforms political choice and individual action into accident and misapprehension and moreover implies a continuous self, who has merely strayed involuntarily from a course now correctly identified.

It is significant in Ishiguro’s story that there are two suicide effects in play. First, the reader’s metonymic presumption—in which the narrator participates—that Japanese “restraint” or “despair” will resolve itself as suicide. Second, the fact that the business partner’s death is his own compensatory act, history cited against the assault of foreigners and economic decline. There are multiple agents in the making of the suicide fiction, and their differences can be seen most clearly in two scenes from Ishiguro’s early novels. As in “A Family Supper,” these scenes involve suicides described but not performed in the text. In *A Pale View of Hills*, suicide haunts the narrative; a young woman has hanged herself in the immediate past of the novel’s present, but there may have been an earlier suicide—the memories are not clear—in the distant past that the narrator recalls in the middle and in the margins of her framing story. The novel opens with a stereotype of Japanese suicide, rendered clearly in the contrast between the narrator’s report of her daughter’s death and her description of an account written in an English newspaper.

The reader learns that the narrator’s daughter, Keiko, has hanged herself just before the story begins. Keiko was born in Japan, but she and her mother later moved to England, where the mother, Etsuko,

remarried in the years after World War II. Etsuko's second daughter, Niki, has come home after hearing about her half-sister's death. The narrator tells us:

Keiko, unlike Niki, was pure Japanese, and more than one newspaper was quick to pick up on this fact. The English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide, as if further explanations are unnecessary; for that was all they reported, that she was Japanese and that she had hung herself in her room. (182)

Etsuko presents Japanese suicide as “an instinct” of English invention, and this “instinct” is made newsworthy by the juxtaposition of a “pure Japanese” woman and the English room in which she died. The newspaper offers this contrast as the *effect* of death, but the novel suggests instead that it may be a *cause*: in her suicide, Keiko seems to be asserting a particular identity and a ritualized history against the assimilationism, perhaps the racism, of her English home. One might say that she is acting Japanese in order to adopt and stabilize a cultural difference that is otherwise unnoticed or superficially described. Ishiguro presents suicide as the preeminent signifier of Japanese culture, a story so common that “further explanations are unnecessary,” and, at the same time and for this reason, it is a story to which he returns over and over again. Ishiguro uses suicide as a model for national fictions in other contexts: the Japanese “instinct” for suicide, which Etsuko critiques, resonates ironically with the “truly” English landscape that Etsuko celebrates at the end of the novel (182).

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, the assertive Japaneseness of suicide complicates its status as a form of antinationalist apology. For the narrator, Ono, the suicide of a former patriot, in disgrace after the war, is “honorable” because it acknowledges “mistakes” even as it maintains the codes and rituals of the past it claims to regret. Ono explains at length to his young grandson, Ichiro:

No. He wasn't a bad man. He was just someone who worked very hard doing what he thought was for the best. But you see, Ichiro, when the war ended, things were very different. The songs Mr. Naguchi composed had become very famous, not just in this city, but all over Japan. They were sung on the radio and in bars. And the likes of your Uncle Kenji sang them when they were marching or before a battle. And after the war, Mr. Naguchi thought his songs had been—well—a sort of mistake. He thought of all the people who had been killed, all the little boys your age, Ichiro, who no longer had parents,

he thought of all these things and he thought perhaps his songs were a mistake. And he felt he should apologize. To everyone who was left. To little boys who no longer had parents. And to parents who had lost little boys like you. To all these people, he wanted to say sorry. I think that's why he killed himself. Mr. Naguchi wasn't a bad man at all, Ichiro. He was brave to admit the mistakes he'd made. He was very brave and honourable. (155)

Suicide functions here as a disavowed apology: it offers to negate a nationalist fervor that its performance reiterates. The suicide of Mr. Naguchi shows its support for political change through a public act of cultural conservatism; by choosing death, the composer recasts his "mistake" as a "brave and honourable" life. In this context, suicide is not what the West sees when confronted with Japan, but instead it is what Japan invokes and reinvents in its confrontation with the West.

Ishiguro thus represents the national allegory of Japanese suicide as an achieved fiction of English convention, as in *Pale View's* newspaper report, but he also suggests that Japanese nationalists, Japanese migrants, and even novelists like himself have used this trope to revive and reappropriate the dead metaphors of national identity. Ishiguro's suicide serves to distinguish East and West: in *A Pale View*, it confirms for English newspapers the Japaneseness of a Japanese-born girl living in England, and it also performs the foreignness that, for the girl, cannot be assimilated or described. In *Artist*, suicide summons Japanese tradition in the face of military defeat and foreign intervention. For Ishiguro, Japanese fictions do not originate, or do not only originate, from a distinctly measured outside to be found in a Western, colonialist, or Orientalist gaze. To the extent that Ishiguro's Japanese characters attribute innate values to common rituals—the "honor" of suicide, for example—these Japanese fictions are what Roland Barthes calls "myths": "less reality than a certain knowledge of reality." Nature is defined by use, as Barthes writes, famously,

A tree is a tree. Yes, of course. But a tree as expressed by Minou Drouet is no longer quite a tree, it is a tree which is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social *usage* which is added to pure matter.³²

In Ishiguro's novels, suicide is *used* to confirm a past and to define it. Making history, the myth of Japanese suicide secures continuity in a floating world.

Ishiguro undoes national allegory by allegorizing the invention of national identities. Seen this way, Ishiguro's novels become both more and less mimetic than most of his readers would have it. For even those reviewers who notice that the stories produce "the sound of authenticity," "what looks to a Western reader like a Japanese text," or "the illusion of depth and feeling where there is only cartoon drawing and cliché," still oppose these "reality effects" to a true Japanese realism somewhere else.³³ It is Ishiguro's analogy between "reality effects" and his narrators' reality inventions that brings his texts closest to the fictions of Japanese life.

Even as Ishiguro's texts suggest that restraint is not simply, or not necessarily metonymic of Japanese culture, they regularly propose that styles of self-presentation are characteristic of particular identities. The works least identified with a Japanese setting or experience, which offer no explicit references to Japan whatsoever, provide a helpful template for Ishiguro's project, since they allow us to disaggregate narrative estrangement from the representation of worlds that are, for most English readers, already strange. I have noted, for example, how the absence of consolation in *The Unconsoled* comes to describe Ryder's experience as well as the reader's. This experience is intensified by Ryder's many efforts to deny it, in which he either claims the satisfaction he does not find or embraces its loss as part of a larger gain. As a child, he recalls, a small tear in the "green mat" on his bedroom floor had almost destroyed the image of a soldier's battlefield he fantasized there. Ryder reports his early realization, however, that "the blemish that had always threatened to undermine my imaginary world could in fact be incorporated into it"; he learns to naturalize the accidental or strategic gaps in any narrative, including his own.³⁴

Similarly, Stevens, the narrator of *The Remains of the Day*, proudly attributes his own purposeful discretion to the essential reticence—"dignity"—of a genuine Englishness. For Stevens, discretion is like Ryder's incorporated "blemish": neither an intention nor a failing, it is an indispensable characteristic. The countryside in England, where Stevens manages Darlington Hall, may be distinguished from the "sights offered in such places as Africa and America" by its lack of "unseemly demonstrativeness." Lest one fail to connect such scenic moderation with the narrator's own taciturn performance, Stevens offers a closer metaphor: it is, he explains, "the very *lack* of drama or

spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart" (28). If a distinctive artlessness is the hallmark of English manner, it is the accomplishment of this effect, everywhere boasted by Stevens, which nevertheless gives its claims away. "Dignity" turns out to be a cover story, not a disinterested attribute of English identity, but a purposeful stylization of it; it is, in this case, merely the conventional defense of a guilty butler. The emotional restraint necessitated by dignity leads Stevens to facilitate the Nazi sympathies of his employer, Lord Darlington, by refusing to consider them. Playing valet to the German officers who frequented Darlington Hall before the war, Stevens fancies his circumspection as a kind of English patriotism. In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens reproduces the dignity that he recommends as English behavior in the style of storytelling he adopts; the novel thus allows us to imagine, by the argument Stevens offers, that the text composes not just the narrator's story of England but an element of Englishness itself.³⁵

For Ono in *Artist*, as for Stevens in *Remains*, the perceived authenticity of cultural description depends on an exoticism displaced elsewhere. Ishiguro's narrative offers, if only for a moment, the nearness of Japan in the distance of other cultures. Salman Rushdie has proposed "authenticity" as "the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism," and Ishiguro exploits this family relation: what seems most Japanese in *Artist* is the fascination with and mistranslation of American culture.³⁶ Chantal Zabus has placed Ishiguro among other contemporary writers who write in English but were born outside of Great Britain. These writers, Zabus posits, are "exiled in English" and often "write with an accent" to express their alienation within the Anglophone literary and cultural tradition.³⁷ On his own, Ishiguro has indeed called himself "a kind of a homeless writer," neither "a very English Englishman" nor "a very Japanese Japanese either."³⁸ His sense that national identities require emphatic participation—if one is not "very," one is not quite "at home"—leads him not to reject or hybridize standard English (as Rushdie does) but to reproduce it out of place.

With *Artist*, there is rarely a break in the frame of English narration; typically, Ono's voice comes with all the fixings of polite and educated British expression, and little sounds "Japanese" about it. A meal one enjoys is "very nice" (136); a routine matter is "some such thing" (20). However, what seems "standard" or beneath notice does become conspicuous at moments. The naturalized vernacular of the novel's English is strikingly ruptured in those moments when Ichiro, Ono's grandson, imitates characters from American popular culture:

“Very impressive, Ichiro. But tell me, who were you pretending to be?”
 “You guess, Oji.”
 “Hmm. Lord Yoshitsune perhaps? No? A samurai warrior, then?
 Hmm. Or a ninja perhaps? The Ninja of the Wind.”
 “Oji’s completely on the wrong scent.”
 “Then tell me. Who were you?”
 “Lone Ranger!”
 “What?”
 “Lone Ranger! Hi yo Silver!”
 “Lone Ranger? Is that a cowboy?”
 “Hi yo Silver!” Ichiro began to gallop again, and this time made a
 neighing noise. (30)

Ichiro’s “Hi yo Silver!” and, later, “Popeye Sailorman” (152) are not quite right. They are a long way from his other Anglophone pronouncements, which are usually rather precise, if somewhat imperative. Ono cannot identify his grandson’s appropriations of either the Lone Ranger or Popeye; he does not know who these characters are, or even that they are American. Ultimately, it is the reader’s ability to recognize America, and Ono’s failure to do so, which registers Japan as a place, if not itself foreign, surely foreign to us.

Of course, even if Ichiro had gotten his imitations right, an America defined by Popeye and the Lone Ranger is not so very different from a Japan identified by geishas and cherry trees. America as foreign trope—“Hi yo Silver!”—partakes of the metonymic exoticism that is everywhere ironized in Ishiguro’s work.³⁹ In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko’s fantasy of English pastoral prompts, as in *Artist*, a lexical awkwardness: “I always think it’s so truly like England out here,” the Japanese born narrator tells her daughter, Niki. *A Pale View* is narrated from an unspecified English village where Etsuko now lives. Reflecting on her arrival from Nagasaki after World War II, Etsuko continues and reiterates:

When your father first brought me down here, Niki, I remember thinking how so truly like England everything looked. All these fields, and the house too. It was just the way I always imagined England would be and I was so pleased. (182)

Etsuko refuses to recognize the difference between the imperfect England she experiences (recall that her eldest daughter, born in Japan, hanged herself) and the idealized England she conjured as an escape from postwar Nagasaki. In a single gesture, this moment of repeated affirmation and infelicitous phrasing signals the unreliability

of Etsuko's narrative, the exoticism of its rhetoric, and the foreignness of her perspective. The emphatic nostalgia of Etsuko's language records her failing effort to make England correspond to the place she allowed herself to imagine. For her, "England" remains an optimistic fiction from a Japanese past.

That familiar category, "unreliable narrator," would seem to characterize the first person protagonist in every one of Ishiguro's five novels to date. Throughout Ishiguro's work, the signs of this unreliability are often indistinguishable, as they are in *Pale View*, from the details that make a speaker seem foreign to the novel's discourse. To consider this connection, one might observe that unreliable narrators typically articulate values or interpretations jarring to the reader's expectations.⁴⁰ That is, the unreliable narrator is one whose values are visible, for the category functions only if readers can recognize the speaker's perspective as radically different from their own. The *unreliable* narrator emerges in a contested or troubled identification between narrator and reader. In this sense, unreliable narrators are an effect of cultural and conventional disjunction: we know that the narrator's world is not ours, not because we perceive the content of this difference, but because we perceive the fact of difference at all. This difference is marked: unlike the "reliable" narrator, the unreliable narrator is perceived as *being* the story rather than merely *having* one.

Unreliable narrators from fiction past regularly project their stories into the lives of the people they describe. One thinks of Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights* or Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, both of whom liked to imagine the considerable effect of their influence in the choices made by others. This desire, which the narrators hardly realize, is part of the story these novels tell. Ishiguro's narrators, though they also offer information about themselves that they do not know or do not say they are providing, importantly reverse the usual projective process: rather than claim all stories as their own, they try to propose that their own stories are always someone else's. The anxiety and disappointment they detail, they assure us, do not belong to them. For the reader, Ishiguro registers this disavowal through the displacement or abstraction of pronouns. Floating worlds, unreliable and gestural, are thus articulated in and as floating words. Ishiguro's aberrant grammar has the effect not of substitution but of comparison and parataxis: individual persons and distinctive loyalties, no longer subordinated by time and moral certainty, become less individuated and less distinctive, competing truths rather than continuous ones.

For example, in *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens translates personal choices into universal rhetoric by addressing his own morality as a matter of English dignity. When the housekeeper Miss Kenton accuses him of complacency in the case of two Jewish girls fired in the heat of anti-Semitism, Stevens denies indifference, replying: “Naturally, one disapproved of the dismissals. One would have thought that quite self-evident” (154). Ishiguro has the wit to notice that the choice of “one” over “I” unites an “impersonal” grammar with the rhetoric of English impersonality. Stevens’s language seems at once natural—what a butler sounds like—and yet tactical. “One” negates the claim to personal feeling Stevens’s statement would otherwise offer, and it is stilted, an attempt to sound like the gentleman that Stevens, in his indifference, fails to be. “One” cannot be said to replace “I” exactly, since “one” leaves open the possibility that “I” is implied; moreover, we might notice that “I” is everywhere dependent on Stevens’s fantasy about what “one” would do.

Reading this last scene, it is important to see the “I” that “one” at once effaces and putatively includes. A narrator is unreliable if he or she blithely conflates a unique and subjective experience with a generic and objective fact: Stevens allows “one’s” disapproval to compensate for *his* silence. The reader’s assumption that a statement has a universal application rather than an individual specificity is an everyday force of habit, certainly a valid expectation for readers trained, as we are, in the traditional model of sympathetic reading. However, an unreliable narrator, for whom our expectations fail to function, makes this habit visible. For Ishiguro, the realization that a speaker has fused a story about him- or herself with a story about someone else revises the status of linear past and discernable narrator, as well as the status of blame, guilt, and loyalty. Readers are no longer confident of knowing a fact or a character when they see one.

One learns, for instance, from a slippery pronoun in *A Pale View of Hills* that Etsuko may be revealing information about herself when she says she is telling a story about Sachiko, a woman she knew in Nagasaki. At the time Etsuko met Sachiko, about three decades before the novel opens, the latter woman was planning to marry an American soldier stationed in Japan for the postwar occupation. Sachiko was hoping to leave Nagasaki with her future husband and her daughter, and this is not unlike the (not shown, little discussed) trajectory we know Etsuko follows, as she marries an Englishman and takes her daughter abroad. In a scene she describes from memory, Etsuko tries to convince Sachiko’s daughter, Mariko, that a departure

for America will “turn out well,” though at the last moment she shifts from “you” to “we”: “if you don’t like it over there, we can always come back” (173). This is the text’s first explicit signal that the girl Etsuko calls Mariko in her memories might be Keiko, Etsuko’s daughter who hangs herself in England many years later, in the event that generates the narrator’s story. The narrator shifts to “we,” but—it should be noted—the girl is still called “Mariko” as the chapter closes. It is hard to tell where Etsuko’s past begins and Sachiko’s narrative ends, or whether Sachiko is really there at all.

An Artist of the Floating World complicates this structure of displaced narrative by recounting and juxtaposing, in a palimpsest of memories, several stories at once. Towards the end of the novel, Ono describes a long-past confrontation with Mori-san that took place in “that same pavilion” (175, 177) where, he tells us, a later conversation with his own student, Kuroda, also unfolded. The later scene is never explicitly narrated in the novel. In the earlier scene, Ono tells Mori-san that he needs to leave the “floating world” and its art for “something more tangible than those pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light” (180). Mori-san, who has already confiscated Ono’s new “experimental” paintings, demands the last of Ono’s unfinished work, the “one or two” (178) canvases Ono did not store with the others. Eventually, when Ono demurs, Mori-san offers a cutting response to his student’s refusal. As Ono reports this exchange, he interrupts his account to acknowledge that Mori-san’s language might in fact be his own, the phrases he later used in a similar exchange with Kuroda; Ono is not sure what he has remembered and what he has projected backwards.

The retrospective tense that tells us that the earlier scene with Mori-san is at an end—“I still turn over in my mind that cold winter’s morning” (180)—also indicates that the much later scene with Kuroda has already taken place as well. “That” recalls “that same pavilion” (175) and links the two events; the “arrogance and possessiveness” (180) Ono seems to attribute to Mori-san seamlessly becomes the very attitude he adopted towards Kuroda. In this transition, Ono’s narrative jumps ahead; he is now visiting Kuroda’s home where imperial police have taken the younger artist into custody and burned his paintings because Ono, angry at his student’s turn away from nationalist themes, has fingered him as a political traitor. There is “the smell of burning,” a smell we associate with a childhood memory Ono relates at the beginning of the novel, in which his father, trying to urge a more “useful” profession, destroys

all his son's early paintings but the "one or two" Ono has hidden (43–47). Ono later associates this same smell with the damage to his adult home and the death of his wife in the war, as well as with the death of his son, Kenji, who was a soldier in the Japanese army ("The smell of burning still makes me uneasy," I remarked. "It's not so long ago it meant bombings and fire." [200]). The repetition of phrases, "the smell of burning" and those "one or two" paintings withheld from father and teacher by son and student (43, 178), implies that Ono's discussion with Mori-san and the episode with his father stand in for a scene we will never see: Ono's rejection and betrayal of Kuroda, who is subsequently tortured as a government traitor. Rather than shift from personal to impersonal as in *Remains*, or from "you" to "we" as in *Pale View*, Ono's tell-tale, demonstrative pronoun—"that same pavilion"—merely floats, leaving the reader to imagine a scene that is not or cannot be given, and to measure the nearness of artistic and political treason.

The betrayal of Kuroda seems to be the political kernel or "primal scene" of Ishiguro's novel, even though it is difficult to separate this scene, which we never see, from all of its echoes throughout the text: we come to know the betrayal of Kuroda only insofar as Ono compares it to other, represented betrayals in his life.⁴¹ As the novel continues, the later scenes offer new interpretations of early ones: the scenes that seem like echoes, that seem like pale views of the narrator's past, introduce some information for the first time. In retrospect, for example, the given scene with Mori-san and the implied scene with Kuroda lend a political tone to the scene with Ono's father, which constitutes the first betrayal in the novel: as Kuroda is imprisoned for refusing to be "useful" to the militarist regime, so Ono's father, who punishes his son for choosing art over business, seems to enforce a similar orthodoxy (46).⁴² In this retrospective, patriarchy is legible as an element of fascism. The novel not only refuses to separate politics and art, but suggests that art is both political and politicized when its values (decadence, imagination, nonconformity) are among those that politicians seek to suppress. For the novel, the refusal to inhabit, to affirm, or to represent "the real world"—as Ono's imperialist mentor demands, as Ono's father demanded before him—is its own political act (172).

That the violence Ono attributes to his father and his teacher may be his violence, that the absolute allegiance that they demanded may

be what he himself required, alters the lessons of the novel and establishes betrayal—literally, a kind of delivery or disclosure—as an essential aspect of the novel’s instruction. Ono tells any number of stories, but his subsequent unreliability, the sense that he has evaded both scrutiny and responsibility, obscures the content and the characters he has led his readers to discern. The telling of stories turns out to be the subject as well as the strategy of Ishiguro’s novel. As “reliable” and “unreliable” narration is usually distinguished, one is either the master of a narrative, one who possesses knowledge, or one *is* the narrative, the object of knowledge itself. In *Artist*, however, the narrator’s inability or unwillingness to maintain these distinctions, to make it clear for the reader whose experiences he is describing, produces a life of several histories and several perspectives. We know Ono through his relation to others, through the words he recalls as other people’s words, through the actions we must guess by implication. With Ishiguro’s narrators, identification—comparison, substitution, association, allusion—is the closest we come to identity. Diana Fuss has described identification as “the detour through the other that defines a self,” and Ishiguro is committed to these detours and the characters they inscribe in the turnings of narration.⁴³ His narrators are perpetually distant, foreign to themselves. Their stories—abstract, indirect, partial—constitute the substance of the storyteller but may well fail to produce an authoritative plot or definitive self. Kathleen Wall has suggested, writing on *The Remains of the Day*, that “changes in how subjectivity is viewed will inevitably be reflected in the way reliable or unreliable narration is presented.”⁴⁴ As Ishiguro’s work accommodates and theorizes such changes, his narratives estrange and challenge not just the content of identity but the way it is imagined. What readers confidently label “foreign” or “Japanese” in Ishiguro may be an attempt to reify a structure of self that is under assault.

Confidence and labeling are themselves primary topics in Ishiguro’s work, and that primacy is nowhere more apparent than in the first paragraph of his very first book. *A Pale View of Hills* begins:

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

Ishiguro's oeuvre opens with an echo: Niki, a name that is not "a Japanese name" but merely sounds like one. Niki imitates what is already an imitation. It is an echo of an echo, a "vague" repetition of an abstracted place, "the East." The narrator wishes to forget the past, but the "compromise" name intones, in its more-than-Englishness, the nagging effect of reminder—not Japan but its reverberating, persistent memento. The novel thus opens with an empty gesture of several sorts: the father does not speak Japanese, but he wants to give his daughter a Japanese name; the compromise name is English in origin but sounds Japanese, though only to an English father. The echo represents, in Ishiguro, another (though the first) structure of failed consolation, where what is missing is always out of reach, in the previous city, in the past, in a fantasy of transparent proper nouns.

Ishiguro's novels, inevitably, lead us to a longing for home, the attempt to reassemble plot and character, a longing not unlike Ono's nostalgia for a time when "prestige," artistic and otherwise, reflected "moral conduct and achievement" (10) rather than political standing. In Ono's narrative, however, there is no such purity, especially in the past. For Ishiguro, purity is suspect, as it obeys the impulse of fascism and absolute loyalty. In *Artist*, oaths of loyalty recapitulate an undernoticed coercion: even after the war, when Ono finally announces that his past influence is "best erased and forgotten," he observes his son-in-law's father watching him "like a teacher waiting for a pupil to go on with a lesson" (123). The new loyalty enforces old positions: no longer a Sensei, Ono must be a student. In the postwar slogans of the American occupation ("our country has finally set its sights on the future" [186]) which resonate at the end of the novel, one hears the polished assurance of prewar imperialism ("Japan must go forward" [169]). In this repetition with a difference, Ishiguro makes allies of American democracy and Japanese militarism, both certain of progress and continuity. At the end of his novel, Ishiguro commits to treason: never one place, nothing to lose, the floating world betrays its narrator, and it everywhere betrays "us."

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NOTES

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¹ Henry James, "preface to *The Golden Bowl*" (1909) (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), lviii.

² Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 534–35.

³ For a discussion of the traditional distinction between the telling of the story (*discours* or "plot") and what the story tells (*récit* or "story"), see Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 13.

⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 17.

⁵ James Clifford, *Routes* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), 36.

⁶ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927), 6 vols., trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D. J. Enright (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), 2:398–99.

⁷ Proust, 6:290–91. For this idea of retrospective "recognition," see Lee Edelman, *Homographesis* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 19–21. Both Edelman and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have described in Proust a relation between writing and identity that both elaborates and disavows the text's and the narrator's "homosexuality." Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: The Univ. of California Press, 1990), 223. Similarly, with Ishiguro, the reader is brought to imagine that "restraint" or "dignity" of presentation might correspond in a novel and in a person to a certain cultural location, such as Japan or England. Ishiguro evokes this correspondence and also disrupts it by correlating particular cultures to narrative effects.

⁸ Maud Ellmann, "'The Intimate Difference': Power and Representation in *The Ambassadors*," in Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 508–9.

⁹ I mean here by "national allegory" both Frederic Jameson's sense of "private individual destiny" standing as metaphor for "public third-world culture and society" and individual or narrative self-presentation standing as national characteristic. I take Aijaz Ahmad's critique of Jameson's formulation, that "national allegory" comes to *define* the "third-world" or non-Western text, as consonant with Ishiguro's own intervention. See Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 69 and throughout; Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 (1987): 12.

¹⁰ Ishiguro seeks to represent, through dislocation and deviation, the habits of language and thought that keep his narrators from perceiving those elements of the past that do not correspond to their categories of self and national tradition. Ishiguro's effort resonates, in strategy and in practice, with Roland Barthes's attempt to conceive "what our language does not conceive": that is, to consider how language and other cultural systems create both limits and opportunities for knowledge. Barthes imagines "an aberrant grammar [that] would at least have the advantage of casting suspicion on the very ideology of our speech." Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 7–8.

¹¹ In part, this is because Ishiguro evokes specific cultures in the comparison between places, languages, and traditions: America and Japan, Japan and England, England and America, etc. However, the visibility of comparison and approximation, which reminds readers that Ishiguro's texts do not belong to a single, recognizable culture also intensifies the generic foreignness of the novels. Homi Bhabha addresses the "foreign element" produced by cultural translation in a discussion of Walter Benjamin that has been crucial to my own formulations. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 224–28.

¹² Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 180. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

¹³ Bruce King, "The New Internationalism: Shiva Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta, Timothy Mo, and Kazuo Ishiguro," in *The British and Irish Novel Since 1960*, ed. James Acheson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 207. Stanley Kauffmann, writing in *The New Republic*, also associates the "'Japanese' qualities" of Ishiguro's first two novels (set in Japan) with a style of writing: "the taciturnity, the subtle brush strokes, the aim to evoke form rather than to create it." Kauffmann, "The Floating World," *The New Republic*, 6 November 1995, 43.

¹⁴ Valerie Purton, "The Reader in a Floating World: The Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro," in *The Literature of Place*, ed. Norman Page and Peter Preston (London: Macmillan, 1993), 170–71. This is not unlike Pico Iyer's remark that Ishiguro is "as Japanese as his name, and as English as the flawless prose he writes." Notice the parallel here between the distinct and self-evident nationality implied by a name and that offered by the perfection of a literary style. Iyer, "Waiting Upon History," *Partisan Review* (1991), 586.

¹⁵ Anne Chisholm, "Lost Worlds of Pleasure," *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 February 1986, 162.

¹⁶ Bhabha, 112, emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1993), 33.

¹⁸ Chow, 49, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Chow, 30. Bhabha similarly argues that replacing bad images with good ones transforms an "'other' culture" into a "docile body of difference" forced to be "a good object of knowledge" (31).

²⁰ Chow, 52–53. See also Slavoj Žižek, "How the Non-Duped Err," *Qui Parle* 4 (1990): 1–20.

²¹ Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 182. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number. The Japanese-British narrator's view of England, from England, is repeated in Ishiguro's novel to remind us, in its tautology (England is "like England") and in its echo of other cultural truisms about the East, that the "truly" is always only approximate and idealized.

²² For example, the narrator of *The Remains of the Day* ([New York: Vintage, 1988]; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number) calls his fascist employer's dismissal of two Jewish maids a "misunderstanding" (153), and Ogata-San, a former teacher and supporter of Japanese imperialism before World War II, imagines in *A Pale View of Hills* that his son's criticism of imperialist education shows that he "clearly [doesn't] understand" (66). The words "misunderstanding" and "mistake" are most prevalent and most significant, however, in *An Artist of the Floating World*, where they register in those characters who claim them all the disagreements and disloyalties too difficult to accept (44, 49, 56, 123, 155, and throughout).

²³ Tom Wilhelmus, "Between Cultures," *The Hudson Review* 49 (1996): 321.

²⁴ Gabriele Annan, "On the High Wire," *The New York Review of Books*, 7 December 1989, 3.

²⁵ Annan, 3–4.

²⁶ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), 95.

²⁷ Ishiguro, "A Family Supper," *Esquire*, March 1990, 207–11. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number. I am taking my use of myth from Barthes, who

means both that which claims “naturalness” but is “determined by history,” and “*what-goes-without-saying*” but is most strategically maintained through a rhetoric that may be “read.” Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 11–12 and throughout.

²⁸ Iyer, “The Butler Didn’t Do it, Again,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 April 1995, 22.

²⁹ Alan Wolfe argues persuasively that “[t]o mention suicide and Japan in the same sentence is to bring to bear a set of stereotypes that continue to shape Western perceptions of non-Western cultures.” Wolfe, *Suicidal Narrative in Modern Japan* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), xiii.

³⁰ The relation between “the tradition of war-related or anachronistic suicides” and “appeals to a waning sense of national self-affirmation” is discussed at length in Wolfe, xv and throughout. Wolfe explains that “narratives of seppuku, of willingness to die, were from ancient and medieval times associated with loyalty to a lord, master, or house. With the advent of modernity, seppuku took on the aura of a nationalistic narrative.” Moreover, Wolfe writes, “not a few of the famous instances of seppuku of the last 300 years were . . . either against the law or at least against the prevailing ethic of the times, but in each instance they evoked some sense of a need for a spirituality thought to be lacking in the contemporaneous era” (33–34).

³¹ Two of the twentieth century’s best-known Japanese novelists, Yukio Mishima and the Nobel laureate Yasunari Kawabata, committed suicide. Mishima and Kawabata often wrote about the effect of foreign culture on Japanese traditions.

³² Barthes, *Mythologies*, 119, 109, emphasis in original.

³³ Kathryn Morton, “After the War Was Lost,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 8 June 1986, 19; Hermione Lee, “Quiet Desolation,” *The New Republic*, 22 January 1990, 37 (“what looks”); Louis Menand, “Anxious in Dreamland,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 15 October 1995, 7 (“the illusion”). Barthes attributes the “reality effect” to those narrative details whose sole function is the promise of referentiality. See Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 148.

³⁴ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 16.

³⁵ In *The Artist of the Floating World*, there is a similar alliance between the art of painting that Ono has been taught and the art of the novel his voice conveys. For artists “true” to “the floating world,” Ono explains, the evocation of Japanese culture depends not on what is withheld so much as what is suggested. “The floating world” that Ono’s teacher champions is “transitory, illusory” (150). As a representational style, Ono opposes its method to the repertoire of stereotypes marched out to signify Japan for the foreigner; it is said to promote, rather, the sense of shadow, life seen in relief by the lantern light (141). In the most literal sense, “the floating world” names the pleasures and scenes of the night, subjects chosen against the realism, politics, and functionalism associated with daytime activities.

³⁶ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 67.

³⁷ Chantal Zabus, “Language, Orality, and Literature,” in *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed. Bruce King (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 34.

³⁸ Ishiguro and Oe Kenzaburo, “The Novelist in Today’s World: A Conversation,” *Boundary 2* 18 (1991): 115.

³⁹ If one needed any more evidence that Ichiro’s “mistranslations” signify America by overgeneralized metonymy, one might note that an English reviewer misidentifies “Hi

yo Silver” as the voice of Roy Rogers, a difference that in no way reduces the “Japaneseness” of the “great Samurai heroes” to which he is compared (Chisholm, 162).

⁴⁰ In traditional narratological terms, the unreliable narrator emerges in the disjunction between narrator and implied author, who is imagined to account for what Wayne Booth has called “the norms of the work.” The implied author is only the sum of interpretive pressure, whatever norms the reader derives from or attributes to the work. Though Seymour Chatman maintains Booth’s distinctions, he acknowledges that the implied author is “reconstructed by the reader from the narrative.” The discrepancy between “narrator” and “implied author,” or “the norms of the work,” is, for Chatman, registered in—indeed depends upon—the reader’s suspicions. It is in this sense that I have replaced the figure of the author with the expectations of the reader, though it is also the case that these expectations too are in some measure produced in and by our interpretations of the work. In Ishiguro’s novels especially, I am arguing throughout, “expectations” change with the shifting ground—or floating world—of cultural location. See Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1963; reprint, Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), 158–59; Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978), 148–49. See also Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1987), 101; and, for a more recent account of unreliable narration in the light of poststructuralist models of subjectivity, see Kathleen Wall, “*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration,” *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 24 (1994): 18–42.

⁴¹ For Freud, the primal scene is a traumatic event in the past that the patient, then a child, may not have witnessed but which he or she will nevertheless imagine through impressions of other, similar events. The prototype of this trauma is the child’s accidental observation of his or her parents having sexual intercourse. Freud proposes, however, not only that the child may not have actually seen this act, but that, even if the child did see one such occasion, what he or she really finds traumatic is the imagined event of his or her own conception before he or she is born: that is, a scene the child could never possibly witness. Metaphorically, then, the primal scene is a traumatic event that is always out of reach: either because it is understood, if it is every really understood, only at a later time, or because it is fantasized in retrospect, patched together from later echoes. See Sigmund Freud, “Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Part 3, (1916–1917),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1968), 369–70. My account of the primal scene in Freud has been very much enriched by Marjorie Garber’s analysis in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 388.

⁴² The fact that the subject of usefulness is embedded in a childhood scene between Ono and his father should make readers notice that private life is everywhere politicized in the novel: the upbringing of Ono’s son Kenji, full of samurais and heroic stories, is compared with Ichiro’s Americanized, less militarist upbringing in the present; the assertiveness of Ono’s adult daughters is contrasted to the expected submission of Ono’s mother, and perhaps Ono’s wife, in the past.

⁴³ Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.

⁴⁴ Wall, 22.