

**UNRELIABLE SELVES IN AN UNRELIABLE WORLD:
THE MULTIPLE PROJECTIONS OF THE HERO IN
KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *THE UNCONSOLED***

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ABSTRACT. The Unconsoled (1995), Ishiguro's fourth novel, was received with some perplexity by critics who formerly praised the author's controlled "Jamesian" realism. However dissimilar this "Kafkaesque" novel may seem in comparison with the previous three, it can be regarded as a further step in the development of one of Ishiguro's major fictional interests: the way an unreliable first-person narrator introduces characters who might be understood as extensions or projections of himself. While Ishiguro's first three novels could be said to deploy unreliable narrators who try to revisit their past and overlook their mistakes by using self-deceiving rhetoric, a sort of oneiric unreliability constitutes the general framework of The Unconsoled. This article comments on the implications of such a fictional technique and analyses those characters that may work as projections of the narrator's persona, embodying his anxieties and traumas with special emphasis on those stemming from lack of communication and parental neglect.

1. INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro (Nagasaki, 1954) has published five novels up to date, most of which have received prestigious literary awards: *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), a story of repressed sense of guilt told by a mature Japanese woman, was awarded the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Prize; *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986),

which explores the self-deception of an old painter who supported the imperialistic cause during the Second World War, received the Whitbread Book of the Year Prize; the well-known *The Remains of the Day* (1989) was given the Booker Prize (and Hollywood's blessing by way of James Ivory); and the fourth one, *The Unconsoled* (1995), which overtly represents a significant change from the previous ones in tone, method and context, won the Cheltenham Prize.

It seems at first sight that in his fourth novel Ishiguro felt the need to break away with his former psychological realism and take a further step in the representation of consciousness. Expressed in terms of admitted literary influences, Ishiguro has turned away from the precise and controlled narrative modelled on Chekhov into the chaotic and undisciplined spirit of Dostoevsky (cf. Swift 1989: 23); or rather from the neat Jamesian design to the uncanniness and absurdity of Kafka or Beckett. Indeed, *The Unconsoled* has inspired disparate reactions among the critics that hitherto had praised Ishiguro for his disciplined control over the narrative. Thus, Amit Chaudhuri considers the novel "a failure", Roz Kaveney a "talented mess", Richard Rorty is not sure "what exactly has been attempted (...) nor what has been achieved" and for Ned Rorem it is a boring and undramatic work "heading nowhere except back into itself" (in Shaffer 1998: 119). Other reviewers, however, maintain that the book is praiseworthy for its originality and neat accomplishment of its intentions, and credit Ishiguro with producing an innovative tone and structure while remaining faithful to his earlier vision. Such is the case of Rachel Cusk, Vince Passaro (quoted in Shaffer 1998: 120), or the Spanish novelist and critic Miguel Sánchez-Ostiz, for whom the novel is "*una auténtica proeza literaria*", "*a medio camino entre el cultivo cuidadoso del misterio y la extravagancia radical*", "*un alarde de ingenio y de pericia narrativa*", "*resultado del afinado talento para la invención narrativa de su autor y de su ambición literaria*" (Sánchez-Ostiz 1997: 12).

Ryder, the protagonist of *The Unconsoled*, is a prestigious pianist who arrives in an anonymous European town¹ where he is due to perform in an extraordinary concert as well as to give an influential speech. He cannot remember what his schedule is or what events he is meant to take part in, but he partly feels he must have agreed to the programme even if he cannot remember any details of it. From the very moment of his arrival he is assaulted by several characters who take him into their confidence, expose their existential problems and humbly but insistently demand of him an urgent solution. Thus, Ryder is not only meant to provide a sort of spiritual and material renaissance to the whole town through his concert, but he is also required to heal the bleeding wounds of some locals by performing some apparently minor favours such as taking a message

1. Wood (1998) interprets that the town is set in Germany, perhaps taking into account the origin of most characters' proper names. Shaffer (1998), more cautious, locates it in Central Europe.

to the hotel porter's daughter, having a look at a woman's album of press cuttings, listening to a young pianist play, etc. As the narrative goes along, Ryder seems to understand that he is regarded as the messianic remedy that will save the citizens from their emotional lethargy. Regarding himself as an honest, well-meaning person, he tries to be kind to everyone and to do his best to help, but as the different demands overlap he painfully finds he cannot cope with them all. In fact, as it turns out, with none of them.

The Unconsoled pervades a constant fear of the small daily duties or various commitments that might divert the person from his true vocation or from the great task he might have done². The many absorbing little favours Ryder is demanded from all quarters prevent him from finding his true self, from giving and receiving enduring love and affection. As he is progressively carried away by the circumstances, we witness how he is not immune to the same evils affecting the strange characters he is trying to help, most of whom suffer from lovelessness and non-communication in its various kinds: between parents and children, between husbands and wives, among friends or colleagues.

2. UNRELIABILITY AS FRAMEWORK

Narrative unreliability constitutes the general framework of the book. Broadly speaking, Ishiguro's first three novels could be said to deploy *unreliable narrators*³ who try to reconstruct their past and overlook their mistakes by using self-deceiving rhetoric. But *The Unconsoled* shows a significant change in this respect: from the very start of the novel the occurrence of highly unlikely elements gives a sense of global unreliability. Thus, when the novel opens the narrator is arriving at the hotel where he is going to stay, and as he enters the elevator the porter starts telling him about his life and his concept of dignity within his profession. But the conversation seems too long for an ordinary ascent (it takes five pages, silences included), and suddenly Ryder realises they are not alone in the elevator, there is a woman "standing pressed into the corner behind" him (5-9). The elevator keeps ascending, and two pages later it stops and the doors slide open. But immediately afterwards, Ryder begins to perceive nonchalantly that he knows what goes on inside the porter's mind and what has been troubling him over the last weeks

2. For a further explanation of this idea by the author himself, see Villar Flor (1997).

3. In his traditional categorisation Wayne Booth calls "a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not." Booth also admits that "difficult irony is not sufficient to make a narrator unreliable. (...) It is most often a matter of what James calls *inconscience*; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him." (Booth 1961, reproduced in Onega & García Landa 1996: 152).

(13-15). This initial chapter ends with Ryder's realisation that "the room I was now in (...) was the very room that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents and I had lived at my aunt's house on the borders of England and Wales. (...) It was unmistakably the same ceiling I had so often stared up at from my narrow creaking bed of those days" (16).

Preceded by such examples, the subsequent episodes of *The Unconsoled* continue offering the texture of a "strange territory" defined by three major features (cf. Wood 1998: 172-3): first, characters appear at the moment Ryder thinks of them or are mentioned by somebody else. Secondly, almost everyone who comes upon Ryder launches into the narrative of his or her life, and whenever the pianist meets new people or enters strange rooms he is often invaded by the thought that he ought to know them well. Thirdly, there is a basic incoherence marking every scene in the book. Thus, certain pieces of Ryder's past seem to have been transposed to this unknown town: old schoolfriends, a girl from his village in Worcestershire, and old car that used to belong to his parents in England... Strangers are never complete strangers, but they don't have a real history for him. And such inconsequentiality extends until the very conclusion of the novel: Ryder sobs with distress when Sophie finally rejects him on the tram, but immediately afterwards he cheers up when he discovers that a splendid breakfast is being served on the tram itself (cf. 532-5).

Soon the presence of such improbable facts acquire the consistency of a dream, and the whole context of the novel becomes oneiric or surrealistic: newly met characters behave like old acquaintances or even lovers, old acquaintances turn up unaccountably in such a foreign country, the protagonist hears conversations out of earshot, the setting changes without a logic, the spaces grow or dwindle for no apparent reason. In short, nothing seems reliable. The narrative technique employed still rests on the narrator's unreliability, as it happened in the first three novels by Ishiguro.⁴ But in *The Unconsoled* it is not a question of revisiting the past through a biased filter; what is unreliable now is not only the accuracy of memory: it is the whole world that cannot be trusted. For Wood (1998:

4. Without contradicting our initial view about the distinctiveness of Ishiguro's fourth novel, there is certainly some continuity between *The Unconsoled* and the previous novels regarding narrative technique. As Shaffer puts it, "Ishiguro's four novels share enough similarities -unreliable first-person narrators, protagonists who remake themselves by 'mixing memory and desire' and emotional and psychological emphases- to suggest a coherence and integrity to the author's aesthetic vision" (Shaffer 1998, 120). More specifically, we find echoes of *Pale View* in the way the narrator creates characters -or endows them with attributes- who are mainly understood as extensions, versions or variations of Ryder himself. The novel is also close to *An Artist of the Floating World* in the role played by art (now music instead of painting) to justify a workaholicism that accounts for much of Ryder's frustration. Similarly, the ending of *The Unconsoled* resembles that of *The Remains* in one significant sense: the protagonist turns his public and private failures into successes and persuades himself to continue down the same path he has been on (cf. Shaffer 1998, 118).

174-5), the story is “a long metaphor for deferred and displaced anxiety” rather than the straightforward representation of a dream, since “the point about anxiety is that it doesn’t occur only in dreams”. According to this critic, the apparent absurdity of events and setting ultimately shows that “the novel takes the opportunity that fiction so often resists and pursues the darker logic of a world governed by our needs and worries rather than the laws of physics” (175). And, as pointed out above, a link uniting the different characters Ryder meets in his frantic roaming around the unknown city is that all of them are victims of non-communication. This is the ultimate reality that lies under an unreal texture of strange scenes, under an unusual story of lovelessness, moral decay and lack of understanding.

3. “UNHAPPY FAMILIES”

All the previous elements are significant in order to understand a basic strategy giving *The Unconsoled* its peculiar shape, and illustrating one of the major thematic issues: the neglect of family relationships, with special emphasis on the plight of children deprived of the love of one or both parents, and the aftermath in adult life of such emotional injuries. As regards narrative unreliability it seems that Ryder is telling a story in which he might be transplanting characters and episodes from his own past into the oniric present of his narration. An alert reader might realise that many characters appearing in the novel, though basically “real” (fictionally real, perhaps), are likely to be projections or variations of the narrator himself. Since Ryder doesn’t question the obvious absurdity of some events he relates, we are not fully entitled to doubt about the fictional existence of these characters: they are not necessarily his fabrication, but clearly many of them embody what must have been or indeed are Ryder’s own traumas and injuries. If the whole story should be interpreted as an extended dream, this rarefied process could be considered a peculiarly dreamlike metamorphosis in which the dreamer is the centre.

On the other hand, the broader theme of lack of communication pervading the novel gets further specified when analysed in relation to children. Indeed, images of the plight of neglected children abound within each of the five basic “families” into which the main characters can be divided, namely:

Mr Hoffman	Brodsky	Gustav
Stephan	Bruno	Sophie
Mrs Hoffman	Miss Collins	Boris
Ryder	Mr Ryder	
Boris	Ryder	
Sophie	Mrs Ryder	

The least unconventional of these is perhaps the Hoffman family. Hoffman is the mysterious manager of the hotel where Ryder is staying, one of the most earnest promoters of the event that will restore the town to its former glory, for which purpose he insists that Ryder must help Brodsky to climb back to a pre-eminent position in the town's cultural life. But on a more personal level he wants the pianist to inspect the album of press cuttings that his wife, Christine, who seems an enthusiastic fan of Ryder, has been collecting for years. Ryder agrees to grant such a small favour, but in fact he never actually manages to carry it out.

Behind Hoffman's insistence lies a desperate effort on his part to revive a relationship with his wife that seems to have gone wrong over the last twenty years. When they got engaged Christine mistakenly believed he was a composer, and the misunderstanding went on for a time until the inevitable moment of truth arrived, which triggered off a process of deterioration of their mutual love. Finally Hoffman is certain that "sooner or later she'll leave me for someone like the man she thought I was before she realised" (353). But Hoffman's effort to regain her is counterbalanced by his own self-destructive desires: at some points in the novel he is carried away by a fatalistic wish to end his pursuit tragically, a "wish to fail". And he does fail, since after the fiasco of Brodsky's performance he takes on all the blame and urges Christine to leave him once and for all (506).

Caught in the middle of this storm stands their son Stephan, a young pianist who demands an opportunity to show his talent. But the main reason behind his search for appreciation is that by means of a successful piano performance he will be able to regain his parents' affection. The distressing notion that a child has to *earn* his parents' love by means of achieving success and thus overcoming their own frustrated expectations in life will reappear in connection with other characters, working as a sort of overwhelming *leitmotiv*. Stephan indeed feels neglected and excluded from his parents' love, and somehow senses that the conflict afflicting them will remedy if they come to feel proud of him. So in this case the child's frustration not only derives from the fact that his parents have no time or no energy to care for him, but also from the belief that their happiness depends on his blameless piano performance, a belief that has been eating him since he was "thirteen of fourteen" (76). His one request to Ryder is that he agrees to hear him play, which he finally does. On doing so Ryder realises that Stephan is a talented and promising artist, and he says so to Mr Hoffman. But the hotel manager, perhaps following his self-destructive instinct, refuses to believe him. He prefers the sour taste of failure:

"There was this one, single hope. I refer, of course, to our son, Stephan. If he'd been different, if he'd been blessed with at least some of the gifts her side of the family possess in such abundance! We sent him to piano lessons, we watched

him carefully, we hoped against hope. (...) Then in the last few years it became useless to pretend any more. Stephan is now twenty-three years of age. I can no longer tell myself he will suddenly blossom tomorrow or the next day. I've had to face it. He takes after me. (...) Each time she looks at him, she sees the great mistake she made in marrying me..." (353-4).

The second family is still less conventional: Leo Brodsky was once a prestigious conductor but now is a degenerated neurotic given to drunkenness. He is the one who is meant to be rehabilitated before the most distinguished citizens of the town at the concert, but such attempt ends up in a fiasco. Miss Collins remains his wife, but she uses her maiden name because she has been estranged from him for two decades. There are two important similarities between Brodsky and Hoffman: one is that both intend to recover their wives' affection by means of building up an external prestige for themselves, which would make them worthy of admiration and love. Another is their utilisation of the child figure for their own purposes of self-restoration. Bruno is Brodsky's beloved dog, functioning as a child substitute for his "father": "We could keep an animal," Brodsky would say to Miss Collins, in a hopeless attempt to win her back. "We could love and care for it together. Perhaps that was what we didn't have before. (...) We never had children. So let's do this instead" (274). Brodsky is thinking of the surrogate child as a way of keeping himself and Miss Collins together, which shows a sardonic parallelism with Hoffman's instrumentalisation of his son: Stephan doesn't seem to have a value in himself, but only as long as he can be instrumental in joining his parents together again.

The next family is made up of three single members, each from a different generation: Gustav the hotel porter, his daughter Sophie and his grandson Boris. Though initially we know nothing of Boris's father, later in the novel Ryder will enigmatically acquire that status. The family conflict between Gustav and her daughter is the first of the many troubles that the unconsolated characters in the novel want Ryder to solve: it is basically a lack of understanding between father and daughter, the reasons for which are never too clear but whose ultimate consequence is that Gustav is no longer on speaking terms with his daughter. Once more, as it happened with Mr and Mrs Hoffman, the reader senses that both characters still love and care about each other, but something in their way of expressing themselves hinders them from achieving a fruitful communication. And, once more, the child is the victim of adult misunderstanding: "There were, furthermore, clear signs that the trouble, whatever it was, had started to make its mark on Boris. (...) The porter had noticed how every now and then, particularly at any mention of his home life, a cloud would pass over the little boy's expression" (14).

The implications of the preceding stories become clearer when seen in the light of Ryder's personal conflict with his parents. As we have already mentioned, the characters

in *The Unconsoled* “should be understood as conduits for Ryder to remember and forget, judge and censor his own past” (Shaffer 1998: 94-5) which doesn’t necessarily mean a denial of their fictional existence. From certain references that Ryder slips into his narrative we learn that he, like Stephan or Boris, must have been severely hurt in his childhood by being a witness of constant parental fighting and by suffering a subsequent neglect. Some hints of how young Ryder has learned to cope with this situation are given in the text. In the very first chapter, for instance, he recalls an episode of his childhood,

[...] one afternoon when I had been lost within my world of plastic soldiers and a furious row had broken out downstairs. The ferocity of the voices had been such that, even as a child of six or seven, I had realised this to be no ordinary row.

And then Ryder suggests a feature that may provide the key for the interpretation of the whole novel: in order not to think about the row downstairs he concentrates on how to take advantage of a torn patch on the green mat that had always irritated him:

[...] that afternoon, as the voices raged on downstairs, it 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 to me, and that ‘bush’ was to become a key factor in many of the battles I subsequently orchestrated (16-17).

Indeed, this image can be symbolically applied to the whole narrative process carried out through *The Unconsoled*, and accounts for the peculiar unreliability referred to above: Ryder as a narrator is trying to incorporate his own scars into his imaginary world. As well as he develops from his early childhood several defence mechanisms to cope with his family conflict (“denial, fantasy, sublimation, and, later, music-making” according to Shaffer 1998: 105), the narrating Ryder projects his own traumas into other characters that are more explicitly analysed than himself. While the respective plights of Stephan or Boris, Hoffman or Brodsky are extensively reported, his own is just glimpsed at in a few references dispersed along the story. One significant instance of such is his recollection of a conversation at the age of nine with his friend Fiona, in which he is telling her how he has trained himself to enjoy being alone, and to fight against the need for the company of his parents. The girl replies that he feels that way because of his sad experience: “when *you* get married, it needn’t be like it is with your mum and dad. It won’t be like that at all. Husbands and wives don’t always argue all the time. They only argue like that when... when special things happen.” The boy presses on, “What special things?” But unfortunately the conversation ends abruptly, and he is left without an answer (171-73).

Furthermore, young Ryder has not only developed coping skills to deal with the family quarrels and the insufficient love received, but from an early age he also seems to have turned to music as a refuge against loneliness. And, closely resembling Stephan, his prestige as an acclaimed pianist is a way of attracting his parents' attention towards his own worthiness and of winning over their affection. Significantly, one of the running obsessions haunting Ryder is the imminent arrival of his parents in the town in order to attend his piano performance, so much so that he decides that his priority is "to ensure that my performance was the richest, the most overwhelming of which I was capable" (420). Thus, in a suspiciously similar attitude to Stephan's, Ryder fears not to be up to the expectations his parents are supposed to have on him. The peculiarly unreliable atmosphere of the novel prepares us for contradictory versions regarding whether they have attended their son's concerts before or, as Ryder says at some point, they are "coming all this way to hear me perform for the very first time" (272). But, not surprisingly for a reader who is already much on his guard, despite Ryder's morbid concern for their welfare they never turn up. When he realises once more that they are just too busy to care about him he collapses and sobs in distress.

A final example of the mysterious projections of the unconscious can be found in the presentation of the fifth family outlined here, the triangle comprising Ryder, Sophie and Boris. Perhaps one of the most disquieting effects of the oneiric context pervading the novel is seen through the strange relationships between these three characters: at first Ryder has never seen Sophie before (cf. 32), but progressively it turns out that he might have met her in the past, been on intimate terms with her, or even been Boris's father. In fact, Ryder is referred to as such by passing characters (cf. 45, 50, 155, 286) and his subsequent role with respect to Boris suggests that of the returned father starting to take care of his child again.

But, in case readers were wondering whether Fiona was right when she said to nine-year-old Ryder "when *you* get married, it needn't be like it is with your mum and dad", in his paternal role Ryder fails as much as his own parents did. In the words of Brooke Allen, he "repeats the cycle of familial sickness that has blighted his own life" by taking "out his rage toward his parents on Sophie and little Boris" (Allen 1995: A12). Such neglect of his "family" (no matter how strangely he has acquired it) derives mainly from his vanity and "workaholism": Ryder subordinates his family duties to any kind of minor errand he is required to perform, since in those cases he feels his prestige is at stake. So his vanity and his devotion to professional duty are mutually related, and might be some of the reasons ("the special things") behind Ryder's inability to act like a good husband and father. He gives false assurances to Boris and Sophie that the future will be better (157, 446), but abandons Boris at several points when otherwise required, and even blames both mother and child for bringing chaos to his life (179, 289).

In some moments of tenderness, however, Ryder is on the verge of showing concern and warmth to his family, as when he apologises to Boris for his frequent absences:

“I know you must be wondering. I mean, why is it we can’t just settle down and live quietly, the three of us. You must, I know you do, you must wonder why I have to go away all the time, even though your mother gets upset about it. Well, you have to understand, the reason why I keep going on these trips, it’s not because I don’t love you and dearly want to be with you” (217-8).

The vague reason Ryder gives to account for his constant absences has to do with professional duty and personal self-realisation. But the feeling remains that such a reason is not convincing, and though he seems not to admit it, he is being carried away by impulses that will eventually make all kind of family life impossible. Thus, when he says “as my breath came harder, I could feel returning to me an intense sense of irritation with Sophie for the confusion she had brought into my affairs” (179), he is adopting the discourse of the egoist who has been diverted from his own concerns. And similarly, on an occasion when he cannot suppress his rage, he deliberately destroys Boris’s enjoyment of a book he’s been presented with by shouting at him unfairly: “Look, why do you keep reading this thing? What did your mother tell about it? She told you it was a marvellous present, I suppose. Well, it wasn’t. Is that what she told you? (...) That I chose it for you with great care? Look at it (...) It is just a useless old manual someone wanted to throw away” (471). So Ryder is indeed repeating the same mistakes he detected in his parents and lacks the inner integrity to stop inflicting a similar suffering on Boris.

His failure as father and husband is so evident that the novel ends with Sophie telling Ryder to go away: “Leave us. You were always on the outside of our love”. She is tired of being let down by him, and, although Boris tries to ask for his forgiveness in a last desperate attempt to keep his family together, Sophie insists: “Leave him be, Boris. Let him go around the world, giving out his expertise and wisdom. He needs to do it” (532). After this scene Ryder loses sight of both, and remains momentarily sad and lonely. But with the characteristic incoherence of the novel, he cheers up when he learns that a substantial breakfast is being served on the tram.

4. CONCLUSION

In his fourth novel Ishiguro has chosen a disturbing oneiric technique, reminiscent of Kafka and Beckett, to suggest images of non-communication and familial anxiety. Special emphasis is made on the plight of neglected children, represented by several characters who, though maintaining their own separate identities within the novel, can

be easily identified as projections of the narrator's persona. They all, like Ryder, are early in their lives conscious of the existence of serious tensions between their parents, as a consequence of which they grow up with a distressing sense of guilt and have to develop coping techniques. They know their parents don't have the time or the interest to look after them properly, so they learn to get used to loneliness. They need to regain their parents' affections by means of achieving a certain prestige or success. They try to build up fantasies of family harmony or of parental concern, fantasies that get shattered as reality intrudes.

Whether Ishiguro was devising this peculiar projection of the character-narrator into several others as an individual portrait of failure and repressed guilt, or his novel is a sad comment on the situation of many western families in the turn of the century, each reader must judge. What cannot be denied is Ishiguro's dismal but thought-provoking presentation of a world of brotherless children, condemned to isolation from their early lives and whose closest game partners are grandparents and plastic soldiers. A world in desperate need of understanding, of human warmth, of communication. Perhaps of generosity too.

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