

“The Madman is a Waking Dreamer”

**A psychoanalytical and existentialist reading of
Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled***

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SAMMENDRAG. Denne oppgaven tar for seg den engelske forfatteren Kazuo Ishiguro's eksperimentelle roman *De utrøstelige (The Unconsoled)*, og leser den som drøm og mentalt univers. I min analyse anvender jeg Freuds drømmetydning og R.D.Laings eksistensielle psykologi for å utforske romanen, som jeg foreslår bør leses som et ubevisst uttrykk for hovedpersonens splittede sinn og ontologiske usikkerhet.

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Introducing a Monsterpiece

“*The Unconsoled* is now one of my favorite books, one which I will almost certainly never recommend to anyone” (Matthew, “Goodreads”)

I first read Kazuo Ishiguro’s experimental novel *The Unconsoled* in 2004, and though I felt like giving up in baffled frustration for the first 300 pages or so, my grudging perseverance eventually paid off. My final reaction to the novel as I turned the last page was one of confused admiration. It is this sentiment that has led me to choose the novel as the subject for my thesis. As confusedly admiring readers have observed before me, the appreciation comes to seem an oddly unwarranted reaction to the novel. “I can’t pinpoint my enduring affinity to *The Unconsoled*, and find it puzzling that I do given my repeated tendency to close the book abruptly after having read a particularly exasperating passage,” one reader, denoting the book his “favourite novel,” comments (Sexsmith “Ishiguro-esque”).

When *The Unconsoled* came out in 1995, it was met largely with respectful perplexity and tentative theorizing on the one hand, and overt disapproval on the other. Hailed as a work of genius by some, many deemed it pretentious and pointless: Ishiguro’s first definite failure. “*The Unconsoled* has the virtue of being unlike anything else,” critic James Wood starts off promisingly, before offering the merciless elucidation, “since it invented its own category of badness” (44). Meanwhile Ishiguro, who firmly categorised it as his “most important book” in a 1995 interview with *The New York Times*, admitted that he found the reception bemusing. He remarked that it seemed to either be praised as a “masterpiece” - or else it was “an offensive monstrosity” (Gussow “Forsaking the Specific”).¹

¹ One reader is not sparing in his judgment of just how offensively horrible the novel is: “Have you ever read Orwell’s 1984? If so, you will know of Room 101: the place where you are confronted with your worst fears by

Ishiguro, who was born in Nagasaki in 1954 and moved to England with his parents at six, had previously published three novels between 1982 and 1989. The novel that precedes *The Unconsoled* is *The Remains of the Day*, which besides winning the Booker prize, being an international bestseller, and a critics' favourite, was turned into a major motion picture starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson. The movie, which was partly based on a script by Harold Pinter, received eight Academy Awards nominations.

Ishiguro had made a stunning entrée into the world of literature, but in a 2005 interview with Tim Adams of *The Observer* he admits: "I was a little concerned that a lot of people thought I wrote Merchant Ivory movies. I also thought if I was ever going to write something strange and difficult that was the time. At least, after the Booker, everyone was prepared to give *The Unconsoled* a go ..." ² ("Mythical Place"). And his next publication did indeed prove to be a strange and difficult work.

Making the Novel Work

I was keen to write a book that was so strange that no one would mistake it for anything other than some expression of something I was thinking or feeling. Still, I think this tendency to want to tie things down is quite strong, even with *The Unconsoled*. I've read some reviews that say it's some thinly veiled allegory about the collapse of communism [*laughs*] (Ishiguro in Krider 151)

In terms of what actually takes place in the novel, *The Unconsoled* is fairly simple. It chronicles the celebrated English pianist Mr. Ryder's short stay in a central-European country, which he is visiting for the purpose of holding a concert at an important cultural

your enemy, Big Brother, place of the fears that break you, that make you renounce everything you are, make you worship those you hate, make you kill those you love. Room 101 is the ultimate in torture. [...] I have sometimes wondered what would be in my own Room 101 [...] Now I have the answer: it is this Kazuo Ishiguro novel called 'The Unconsoled'. Oh God, I hate it. I mean, how hard is literature? If a thicko like Martin Amis can almost do it, then surely anyone can" (Chivers "Comment").

² This is not to say that Ishiguro did not admit to some apprehension. As he dryly notes in an interview with the *New York Times*: "If you've been praised in your books for doing A, B and C well, you are naturally a little scared to write a book without A, B and C in it" (Bryson "Between Two Worlds").

function. He arrives on a Wednesday afternoon, checks in at a hotel, acquaints himself with the city and its inhabitants, and prepares to leave again on Friday morning, his next assignment awaiting him in Helsinki.

This, however, is as much as one can say about the novel without veering into the absurd – for little else that happens in the novel can be described in mundane terms. The nameless city in the mysterious country is populated with people that are little more than ghosts from Ryder's past; his virtual doubles. Similarly, the landscape itself often transforms into that of his childhood. The laws of physics, further, are freely breached as Ryder travels across the city, opens a door, and is right back where he started. Additionally, he can read others' minds – though, like everything else that is bizarre in the novel, this is not considered peculiar. As Ryder is overwhelmed by the personal favours people ask him wherever he goes, he also cannot seem to recall where his schedule is – though he is sure he was supposed to be given one. Moreover, he has no idea what the cultural crisis he is meant to assuage is all about, though this leaves him no less confident that he is fully qualified to solve it. Finally, though Ryder is staying at a hotel throughout his visit, it seems that he really is a local citizen after all – for how else could it be that the woman he encounters is his wife, her child, his son, and she wants to go house hunting with him?

One of the many things that make this a fascinating novel is the amount of highly disparate, inventive interpretations it has engendered. Confronted with what is indeed an enigmatic work of art, readers and reviewers alike have sometimes simply opted to refrain from trying to explain or unravel it, or have it be "about" anything in particular – letting it simply speak for itself. Richard Rorty, for example, concluded that "sometimes all a reviewer can do is express appreciative puzzlement" (qtd in Wai-Chew). If anything, readers might suggest that it is a book dealing with certain broad human themes. Other, more pragmatic readers – aiming for a more concrete interpretation of the book – have suggested various keys

to unlocking the mystery or “tying it down.” An online reviewer, Suze, endeavouring to explain the novel, writes that as she understood the book, it was "attempting to make the reader understand what it was like to be on the verge of sanity and barely coping with life." Proving the point that it is a novel that every individual reader will have her own idiosyncratic take on, she goes on, "[but] it seems like it is all in the eye of the beholder (so to speak) because I have since read a review that not only didn't mention mental illness but gave explanations of the book's hidden meaning that I could never have dreamt up. In fact I didn't even understand what the reviewer was getting at" (Suze “Review”). There are, however, others who agree that mental illness lies at the heart of the novel. The reviewer Jeanne Daniel takes the radical step of concluding that the narrator is "really" a patient at a psychiatric institution, suffering from serious dementia, and that all the other main characters simply are fellow residents or medical staff at this institution (Daniel “Book Review”). Interestingly, she adds: “I didn't like *The Unconsoled* until I came upon a metaphor that made the novel work for me.” That being said, while keeping in mind the fact that authors’ views on their own work are no longer considered sacrosanct or uniquely privileged, it seems pertinent to consider a comment Ishiguro made on his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*: “People seem to spend too much energy working on [the baffling ending] as if it was a crossword puzzle and that wasn't my intention” (qtd in Wroe “Living Memories”).

As for academic treatment, different scholars have also chosen quite divergent approaches. The analyses can be roughly separated into the following: those that deal with the multicultural/ethnic aspects of the book; those that focus their attention mainly on place and community; those whose angle is mostly psychoanalytical; and finally, those that explore the political and sociological aspects of the novel. Far from being clear-cut, borders between these are (and must necessarily be) blurred – and few if any deal exclusively with only one of these aspects. Further, a discussion of technique is usually included, with most (if not all) of

the articles mentioning the use of characters that mirror Ryder (“doubles”) as one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the book. I will in the following passage give concrete examples of articles that exemplify some of these approaches.

John Rothfork has argued that “Japanese Confucianism provides the vocabulary and scheme to explain the novel.” Describing the novel as a “psychoanalytic autobiography that gropes and fumbles through a series of portraits of the main character, Ryder, at different ages in a search for consolation or truth rendered as the discovery of an underlying, authentic, and controlling identity,” Rothfork comes to the conclusion that “third wave Confucianism” better serves to elucidate the novel’s underlying philosophical framework than Western postmodernism. This view he justifies with the observation that Ryder’s failure in his Western and Romantic quest for self-discovery exemplifies the Confucian views that “there is no transcendental truth” and that identities firstly must be developed “within the human relationships that bind one to society,” and secondly, can only exist once they are defined by language. “Thus,” Rothfork concludes, “the exploration of the question ‘who am I?’ can only be done in terms of considering different identities framed by different social contexts at various times of life.” This, in his opinion, is what Ishiguro has orchestrated in *The Unconsoled*, by letting various versions of Ryder in different life stages interact with each other. Additionally, the role that Ryder occupies as cultural lode star in the novel, Rothfork equates with the position of mandarins in Confucianism; someone “specially endowed” who will lead through example, and perform to inspire others.

Favouring a different approach, Richard Robinson deals with locus and identity, looking at the middle-European setting of the novel. Offering a prehistory of the novel’s “mysteriously unnamed and unnameable” setting, Robinson suggests that it is a result of the nature of the reception to Ishiguro’s previous novels.³ He relates a statement by Ishiguro that

³ It is no secret that Ishiguro has frequently expressed annoyance with reviewers’ tendency to let all explanatory roads lead to Japan in discussing his works, having mistaken his last name for a road sign.

makes it clear that, regardless of whether he was writing about Japan or England, he never meant for his fiction to be mistaken for documentaries. “I just invented a Japan that serves my needs,” (107) the author maintains. Rothfork speculates that the fact that *The Remains of the Day* also spurred reviewers to gush about Ishiguro’s abilities to accurately recreate history is what made him resolve to create something altogether new; a literary world that would “leave the reader in no doubt of its unreality” (107). Regardless, Rothfork argues that it is constructive to “think of *The Unconsoled* as ‘rooted’ in a Central European city overrun by big neighbours who are responsible for a nightmarish World History” (127) – or, alternatively, to see the citizens as “more complicit, guiltily repressing a *mitteleuropäisch* History for which they themselves feel accountable” (127). In the end, Robinson asserts that the novel benefits from analyses that reject claims of ahistoricism, because such a rejection will protect it from what he sees as wrongful charges that it is “utterly detached from social and political determinants, or that it has nothing to say about history” (127).⁴ “Ishiguro,” he concludes, “‘took off’ from the mimetic into the pure realm of the metaphorical, and in doing so fell back to earth – somewhere between Berlin and Budapest” (127).

Gary Adelman, on his side, bypasses setting and makes the novel’s use of character doubles his main theme. Ryder, he says, has his “inner thoughts farcically embodied by characters playing the parts of important people in his life’s story,” and thus resembles “the master of ceremonies in a cabaret – Mr Ryder’s Comedy Company of the Psyche” (167). Adelman draws explicit links between *The Unconsoled* and works by Modernist masters such as Kafka (“In the Penal Colony”; “The Country Doctor”; *The Trial*) and Dostoevsky (*The Brothers Karamazov*; *The Possessed*), and concludes that the novel’s main artistic aim is to

⁴ Amit Chaudhuri, for example, charges the novel with “lack[ing] any discernible cultural, social or historical determinants (surely fatal to any novel).” Further, he rebukes it for its “refusal to allow its allegory to be engaged, in any lively way, with the social shape of our age” (qtd in Reitano). Seeing as the novel, through a double process of elimination and pointers clearly puts Ryder somewhere – and somewhere quite distinct, for all the lack of rooting in a *single* country – this description seems equally unfair and misleading. Finally, we undoubtedly find ourselves in the late 20th century, so albeit its setting is vague, the novel clearly does not take place in an historical nowhere.

“externalize the central character’s interior life by means of doubles.... [Ryder] is profoundly split, doubled, with the private self living in the perpetual anxiety of the public man’s being found out and disgraced” (178). Veering off into more controversial territory, he finally speculates, on the basis of a “persistent feeling,” that Ryder might be a “potential pedophile.” This he admits is more “supposition, presentiment” than wholly rooted in the text, but the diagnosis, he argues, “seems to fit Ryder’s personality,” with his “coldly repellent objectivity to his own cruelty,” and his “inability to form emotional ties with anyone other than his childhood pal Fiona.” He further belabours this theory with reference to the literary allusions he sees in the text, to other fictional predators such as Dostoyevsky’s Stavrogin, and Dante’s sodomite Ser Brunetto Latini (178).

Nathalie Reitano has written a PhD thesis titled *Against Redemption: Interrupting the Future in the Fiction of Vladimir Nabokov, Kazuo Ishiguro and W.G. Sebald*. The title of her chapter on Ishiguro is titled “The Good Wound,” alluding to the novel’s aging conductor Brodsky’s many references to what he calls his painful “wound.” Brodsky’s wound occupies a dual position of injury and indulgent pet obsession, fuelling both his artistic drive and his eventual ruination. In her thesis, Reitano proposes that the “wound” of the novel figures as “both traumatic rupture and as the site where finite beings are exposed to one another at what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “the limits of community.” *The Unconsoled*, she holds, “fitfully interrogates the idea of a founding traumatic rupture by rethinking the relation between the memory and promise that structure any present.” Reitano finally suggests that Ishiguro’s “privileging of memory and denial of historical authority are... a rejoinder to the cultural spokespersonship he has been critically and popularly appointed as well as a response to a rather specific national and historical circumstances that in fact do inform his “landscape of the imagination.””

Carlos Villar Flor draws our attention to what he calls Ishiguro's "disturbing oneiric [i.e., dreamlike] technique... reminiscent of Kafka and Beckett," which he proposes has been used in the novel to "suggest images of non-communication and familiar anxiety" (168). Special emphasis, he maintains, has been made on the "plight of neglected children, represented by several characters who, though maintaining their own separate identities within the novel, can easily be understood as projections of the narrator's persona" (169). Striking a similar note to Rothfork, Flor sees the doubling characters as conduits for Ryder in understanding, shaping and judging his own past. Like others he notes that the narrative is governed by the protagonist's own mental inclinations, his fears and his wishes – and he argues that Ryder-the-narrator "is trying to incorporate his own scars into his imaginary world" (166). His traumas are externalized, Flor says, into characters that are "more explicitly analysed than himself" (167). Flor finally suggests that it is open to interpretation whether the novel offers an "individual portrait of failure and repressed guilt," or aims to "comment on the situation of many western families in turns of the century" (169).

Bruce Robbins, who sees Ishiguro's previous novel *The Remains of the Day* as stating a "case against professionalism...[and] simultaneously a case against cosmopolitanism," maintains that in *The Unconsoled*, "'this "very busy just now"⁵ theme is both intensified and tied still more tightly to the domain of the international." The novel, he goes on, "seems to elevate harriedness into a sort of ontological principle, a description of being itself."⁶ Ryder's constant time problems, lack of schedule and inability to meet the demands of both strangers and family as globe-trotter and father, Robbins sees as a "metaphor for the conflicting scales and rhythms of the foreign and domestic." He argues that though frameworks that critics have

⁵ "Very busy just now" is the phrase that Stevens the butler utters in *The Remains of the Day* as a reaction to the news that his father has just passed away, having earlier refused to interrupt his duties upon learning that his father was gravely ill.

⁶ James Procter, similarly, notes that "[t]he epistemological questions raised by the first three novels become ontological questions in *The Unconsoled*, "which he deems "a deft, disorientating text that reveals the novelist's commitment to narrative innovation and experiment" (Procter "Kazuo Ishiguro").

employed to interpret the emotional repressiveness that characterises Ishiguro’s novelistic characters have usually been “psychoanalytical and metaphysical,” the novels would be better served to be understood in light of the context of globalisation.⁷ Robinson cites the American author Julie Schor, who has suggested that not merely health and repose have been sacrificed to overwork, but also the time and ability to care. If this is correct, he extrapolates, then “stories about not having enough time” such as *The Unconsoled*, “acquire another interpretive dimension.” “The temporal limits on caring... become a way of confronting experientially the geographical limits on caring, the global border of solicitude, which are harder to experience or to make into stories.”

We have seen that “average” readers and academics alike have opted for quite divergent interpretive framework to understand the novel. While lay readers might reach for some explanatory framework that would provide them with “keys” to unlock the mystery and make sense of the extra-realist features of the book, scholars have applied various theoretical frameworks to focus on the aspects of the novel that pique their attention most, aiming not so much to solve a puzzle as to elaborate on certain facets of the work. I have attempted this brief sketch of the various shapes scholarly attention of the novel have taken in order to offer a backdrop against which to position my own approach. Having described what my own interpretation will mostly occlude – yet sometimes overlap with – I will thus proceed to describe what it will actually include.

Beyond Appreciative Puzzlement

Aiming to go beyond “appreciative puzzlement,” I will in the following chapters argue for an interpretation that proposes that the novel be read as a dream on the one hand, owing to its

⁷ Jai Arjun Singh, author of the blog *Jabberwock*, strikes a similar note when he observes that he felt the novel captured a “nightmare world” at first, until he “went on a couple of high-activity, high-tension junkets and realized that Ishiguro’s book was an only slightly exaggerated version of our real lives” (Singh “Book Tag”).

obvious dreamlike quality, and as the mental universe of an alienated, split man on the other. In doing this, I will try to elucidate on several of the well-executed aspects of what makes Ishiguro's novel such an odd and oddly compelling work.

Using Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), I aim to elaborate on several features that characterise the dream. In my first chapter, I work with Freud's basic understanding of dreams as the expression of wishful thinking to elaborate on the origin of many of the crucial scenes in the novel. Freud sees dreams as governed by two forces: "one of these forces constructs the wish which is expressed in the dream, while the other exercises censorship upon this dream-wish and, by the use of that censorship, forcibly brings about a distortion in the expression of the wish" (177). With that presumption in mind, I will attempt to untangle wish from censorship in the novel. Freud sees the dream as a manifestation of the impressions and preoccupation of childhood, and in my discussion I read Ryder's world as taking its basis in the family triad. Above all, I show that his preoccupation with his parents, which explicitly surfaces in the novel only as occasional mentions of their imminent visit, in fact implicitly permeates and shapes his entire mental universe. In addition, I hedge my investigation in a close analysis of Ryder's odd game (his "training sessions") which he plays as a child, and I examine the implications inherent in Ryder's son obsessive preoccupation with the toy footballer "Number Nine." Finally, I try to unearth some kind of truth about Ryder's parents through an analysis of the allusions to alcoholism and infidelity strewn throughout the novel.

In chapter two, I turn to Scottish psychologist R.D. Laing's exploration of what he saw as the existentialist foundations of schizophrenia, the subject of his 1960 book *The Divided Self*. I argue for an analysis that reads the main characters in the novel – those that function as so many mirror images of Ryder and that Ishiguro has called "echoes of his past and harbingers of his future" (qtd in Adelman 166) - not only as *reflections* of the protagonist, but

as unconscious mental constructions representing his self. I use Laing's "existential-phenomenological foundations for the understanding of psychosis," (27) to read Ryder as the portrait of an individual who is *ontologically insecure*, i.e., "cannot take the realness, aliveness, autonomy and identity of himself and others for granted," (42) and thus creates a false self as a protective device to sustain himself. I argue that the novel describes Ryder's "microcosmos within himself," (Laing 74). Using Laing, I also read the character of Ryder's extreme self-consciousness as an existential sort of exhibitionism since he, too, needs other people to supply him with his identity, as schizophrenic "James" puts it in *The Divided Self* (52). As Laing expresses, "[the] individual in this position [of a false self] is invariably terribly 'self-conscious' in the sense in which this word is used to mean the exact opposite, namely, the feeling of being under observation by the *other*" (74). Further, I turn to Gregory Bateson's 1956 paper "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia,"⁸ which launched the concept of a *double-bind* situation. The article argues that a continuous, dysfunctional breach of communication patterns between mother and child can make "a pathology" occur in humans. "[At] its extreme," he maintains, this pathology "will have symptoms whose formal characteristics would lead [it] to be classified as a [sic] schizophrenia" (202-203). By "breach in communication patterns," Bateson means that the primary message conveyed will be contradicted by a second, more abstract meaning. "Posture, gesture, tone of voice, meaningful action, and the implications concealed in verbal comments may all be used to convey this more abstract message" (207). The child is thus put in an untenable position of trying to respond to messages that are inherently contradictory. This mode of communication is explicitly employed several times in *The Unconsoled*. I will offer an analysis of two of them, and relate their significance to the rest of the novel. Finally, my second chapter will also look at Ryder's dual position as insignificant person and celebrity, as well as map out the function

⁸ Co-written with Donald Jackson, Jay Haley and John Weakland.

of high culture in his mental universe. Its contrast, the idea of working-class men being pictured as animals, is also discussed. I round off with a short conclusion.

It is important to add that in invoking the dream or anything as mundane and sordid as a mental illness, I do not aim to reduce the novel into an exposition of either. A theoretical framework that reduces, forcefully contorts, skews, or shirks the work of art can – needless to say – not be said to be a commendable endeavour. I do not aim to explain the novel as much as to offer an interpretation befitting it. Hence, in the following paragraphs, I will attempt to explain what I see as the benefits of my approach.

The Unconsoled is a novel that has, as mentioned before, confused readers and critics alike. Some of the elements that strike readers as the most enigmatic can, I believe, be fruitfully elucidated upon, and in my thesis I aim to offer a theoretical underpinning that can aid to make sense of these elements. There can evidently never be a “final” explanation or interpretation of the work, as this would reduce it to a riddle with a single answer. But in my opinion, taking the approach that I do in the following thesis can offer a reading that makes the novel “work,” as it were – and this, hopefully, without conveniently condensing it into a mere venue for theory.

My starting point for working with Freud’s dream theory and Laing’s exploration of madness are a series of flashbacks to the protagonist’s childhood that appear in the novel. In these brief sketches, we learn a few grimy facts about an impoverished childhood marked by abusive and distant parents. As a child, Ryder is relying on escapism and fantasy to get by. This is the background, and on this canvas a crucial episode of Ryder’s childhood can be painted: the odd, solitary game he calls his “training sessions.” These take place when he is nine years old, and out playing, “absorbed in some fantasy” (172). Some distance away from his home, Ryder starts panicking about the fact that he is on his own, and finds that the urge to run home is overwhelming. “[P]erhaps I had quickly associated the sensation with

immaturity,” he suggests, for at some point he starts forcing himself to delay the moment of return as long as possible, achieving a sense of control over his emotion this way. Ryder goes on to explain that these sessions soon came to take a compulsive hold over him and thrill him despite the “growing fear and panic” they provoke in him.

I analyse this telling passage twice in this thesis. It is contrasted with Freud’s famous exploration of children’s “fort-da” games in chapter one, and I argue that in Ryder’s case the game serves not as a child’s usual exercise in coping with the need of its parents, but as a repression of this very need. In chapter two I read it as an exercise in protecting the self. Laing quotes Nietzsche’s dictum “be thou hard!” (51) as a self-protective mantra governing the psyche of some schizophrenics – and I argue that this ideal also sets off Ryder’s “training sessions.” As Laing puts it, “[t]o turn oneself into stone becomes a way of not being turned into stone by someone else.” (51) It is on the basis of my analysis of this exercise in self-control and escapism that I propose the idea that Ryder has developed a false self and a fantasy world.

Freud’s subject in *The Interpretation of Dreams* is the “common” dreamer; Laing’s, in *The Divided Self*, the schizophrenic. However, taking as my starting point the basic premise that the story and characters of *The Unconsoled* emanate from the mind of protagonist Ryder, I argue that an analysis using both approaches to the novel can successfully be combined. In the chapter “The Relation Between Dreams and Mental Diseases,” Freud explicitly links dreams and psychoses, arguing that they both exhibit similar traits: a suspension or retardation of self-consciousness, an “inability to feel surprise,” a modification of sense organs,” the fact that ideas are inter-connected “exclusively according to the laws of association and reproduction,” and the “alteration / reversal of personality” (123). All of these do, as we shall

see, describe Ryder and the laws that govern his universe. “The madman,” Freud argued, “is a waking dreamer” (122).⁹

There exists, finally, an unambiguous link between Freud’s account of dreams and the split personality. A common characteristic of dreams, Freud maintains, is this kind of splitting, where “the dreamer’s own knowledge is divided between two persons and when, in the dream, the extraneous ego corrects the actual ego.” (123) This, of course, instantly evokes the ‘divided self,’ and Freud himself points out that this feature is “precisely on par with the splitting of the personality that is familiar to us in hallucinatory paranoia; the dreamer too hears his own thoughts pronounced by extraneous voices” (123).

Words With Wood

The underlying enterprise of Freud’s dream theory was to show us how “the seemingly meaningless fragments of dreams suggests the whole range of personal issues in the dreamer’s present and past life,” (Davis “The Interpretation of Dreams”). Laing’s purpose was to make the worlds of schizophrenics intelligible, suggesting that “the behaviour and thought patters of the schizophrenic patient are reasonable and understandable when interpreted in context.” (Scott and Thorpe 331)

The Unconsoled, too, has been deemed illegible, for example by James Wood, who once concluded that any attempt to decipher the novel would be futile, seeing as it was a “composed dream-narrative (that is, one written by Ishiguro) rather than an accidental dream-text (the kind we dream while we sleep).” Hence, he maintained, any attempt to understand it would prove meaningless since “a dream’s significance is that it is not intended, not artistic,

⁹ In reading the novel as a dream, I use an approach that Freud developed for the analysis of “regular” dreams, while Lang’s approach is geared toward mental illness. In a curious reversal of matters, however, a Freudian reading of dreams forefronts the neuroses, psychological battles and shadow sides inherent in the “normal” child-to-parent relation, while the Langian approach will center the inherent comprehensibility, and explainable origins, of mental illness. While Freud sees madness in sanity, Laing sees sanity in madness. Both aim to make sense of the enigmatic by rooting it in childhood origins.

not written” (44). I argue that all that happens in the novel stems from Ryder’s fictive unconscious as created by Ishiguro, and hence is neither accidental nor meaningless. In the end, then, I will attempt to prove Wood wrong.

Chapter I: Unravelling the Dream

The Scent of a True Meaning

The Unconsoled is at first glance a book about a musician's stay in a foreign city, but quickly turns out to be a family story more than anything. The story is fundamentally shaped by – and has its origin in – the narrator's psyche, and in his all-encompassing preoccupation with his parents. At the most basic level, then, I propose that it is this inherent tension between manifest and latent content, as well as the story's psychological nature, that makes it such fertile ground for a psychoanalytical reading in general, and dream analysis in particular.

One of the pitfalls of classic psychoanalytical criticism is to favour the analysis of a person rather than of the text. As Maud Ellman puts it in *Psychoanalytical Literary Criticism*, what ends up being analysed is “the author, the reader, or the characters, all of whom are viewed as independent personalities rather than as functions of the text” (3). Seeing as novels rely on the basic premise of the reader's cooperation in the illusion of literary characters as real people, it is easy to understand how easy it is to slip into this mode. With this in mind, it is important to remember, as Ellman reminds one, that “[as] amusing it is to speculate about his early history, Hamlet never had a childhood” (3). It is difficult to wholly avoid referring to literary characters as individuals, but my objective here is to read the novel not as a person's dream, but as a literary work constructed as a dream.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud uses the example of literary production to explain his theory on how dreams are produced and shaped, and he compares the manifest content of a dream to a work of literature that has been subjected to censorship. Faced with restrictive mechanisms, both the unconscious and the author must be ingenious in their creative endeavours: “A writer must be aware of... censorship, and on its account he must soften and distort the expression of his opinion.... The stricter the censorship, the more far-reaching will

be the disguise and the more ingenious too may be the means employed for putting the reader on the scent of the true meaning” (176). In the same way, he maintains, dreams are shaped by one creative agency which constructs the dream, and are curtailed by a second agency which exercises censorship upon it and “forcibly brings about a distortion in [its] expression” (177).

Clearly, my argument here is not that Ishiguro has chosen to write such an enigmatic novel to advance his inflammatory ideas under the Draconian literary censorship of contemporary Great Britain. My point is simply that it is the author who supplies both the creative and the defensive agencies, to use Freud’s terms, that shape this story. As such, my argument is not that the novel is Ryder’s dream, sprung out of his unconscious, but that it is *written* as if it were Ryder’s dream sprung out of his unconscious. It might seem a banal distinction, but the difference is important. Further, despite employing psychoanalytical theory in this chapter, I will also abstain from launching the theory that *The Unconsoled* is a “window to the author’s sex-tormented soul” (2), to use Ellman’s pithy phrase, and I will not devote my pages to a hunt for phallic symbols or repressed libidinal passions.

My starting premise is simply that the novel is constructed as a dream, and that its manifest content covers up for something else. Hence, one must search for the ingenious little pointers that, in Freud’s modified phrase, let off a scent of another true meaning (176). Finally, if I sometimes treat the novel a little too much like a whodunit, I can only say in my defence that it is done in the best Freudian spirit of universal semantic mistrust. In other words, I am operating with the conviction that whatever the text readily tells me must surely hide something of greater importance.

This chapter is organised around several interlinked sketches that focus on a few crucial aspects that contain clues on how to understand the novel – and the character of Ryder – at large. The first part of this chapter deals with the introductory chapter, which serves as a prelude to the rest of the novel and contains the protagonists’ earliest flashback. My second

part analyses Ryder's previously mentioned "training sessions" in light of Freud's anecdote of a little boy's "fort-da" game, and then I move on to investigate an equally important motif: the toy footballer Number Nine. Further, I briefly discuss the peculiar use of weekdays in the narrative, before looking at the similarities that exist between the novel and fairy tales. The following section analyses Ryder's relationship to his wife Sophie. Then follows three parts that concern themselves with what might be called Ryder's main secrets, namely infidelity, the illicit child, and alcoholism. Finally, I briefly discuss the recurring episode of the car crash, before rounding off with a concluding note.

The Talented Mr. Ryder

"... before me is continually an empty space, and I am propelled by a consequence that lies behind me. This life is turned around and dreadful, not to be endured."

(Kierkegaard)

The first chapter of *The Unconsoled* serves not only as a brief sketch to the setting, characteristics, and characters of the novel but also, more specifically, as an enlightening prologue. Freud posits that "a short introductory dream will often stand in the relation of a prelude to a following, more detailed, main dream or may give motive for you" (Grinstein 216). What is particular about the first chapter is that firstly, it contains most of the features later encountered in the novel and secondly, it contains references to the most central characters, as well as situations later elaborated upon.¹⁰ Further, it is a self-contained little

¹⁰ Because of this, some readers have suggested that Ryder is only awake in the first chapter, only to dream the rest of the story. What follows, thus, is to be understood as Ryder's dream concocted out the ingredients provided in chapter one. One argument against this interpretation is that the first chapter contains extra-realistic, dreamlike distortions of time and space too, and that its style is in no way different from the rest of the novel.

story in that Ryder arrives at the hotel in the beginning, and falls asleep in his room at the end of it, completing the first, modest journey of the narrative. Finally, before falling asleep, he has a characteristic flashback in which he recalls a traumatic experience from his childhood. Freud employs the word “motive” in his description of a short, initial dream’s relation to the following main dream, and in analysing the first chapter a prelude, its motive becomes apparent.

“The taxi driver seemed embarrassed to find there was no one - not even a clerk behind the reception desk - waiting to welcome me” (3). Thus opens *The Unconsoled*, and this brief sentence harbours a theme and a sentiment that will prevail throughout the narrative. We learn two important things. On the one hand, no one is there to greet Ryder: the hotel is deserted. To compensate for this matter on the other hand, Ryder’s taxi driver is described as being embarrassed. Hence, the situation quite simply expresses that Ryder is no one of importance, yet an instant corrective reverses this matter. The fact that no one is there to greet him is turned into a cause of great shame; an unfortunate mistake. What speaks in favour of the second interpretation is Ryder’s own judgement that the driver *seems* embarrassed.¹¹ All the driver actually does is to set down Ryder’s suitcases next to the elevator, and then leave after “mumbling some excuse” (3).

The pattern can be summed up thus: in situations where the facts speak for a devaluation of Ryder, a corrective will be added that, to a certain degree, reverses the situations and provides comforting explanations for any kind of absence of appreciation.¹²

Using Freud, the mechanism can be explained in the following way: the underlying sensation

¹¹ Ryder’s credibility is not strengthened by his straight-faced hypothesis that as the taxi driver crosses the “deserted lobby” he is “perhaps hoping to discover a staff member concealed behind one of the plants or armchairs” (3). What that phrase does, however, is to grant Ryder a childish disposition for silliness concealed behind adult gravity. On the topic of the farcical in dreams, Freud notes that “...dreams containing nonsensical or absurd elements are a means of representing “embittered criticism and contemptuous contradictions” (Grinstein 210). The embittered criticism would in this case be brought on by Ryder’s disappointment in finding the lobby empty, a sentiment he would suppress by letting the situation suddenly veer into the slightly absurd.

¹² Mr. Hoffman is not present; evidently he is at an “important meeting” and will be disappointed to have missed Ryder’s arrival.

of being unloved, which has its root in childhood, is countered by another childhood wish for the negligence to have its soothing explanations. One agency constructs the dream, the other one exercises censorship on it. The last passage of the first chapter, which describes a 6-year old alone in his room while his parents have a vicious fight downstairs, confirms this interpretation.

At the end of chapter one, Ryder experiences an odd *déjà vu* as he is lying in his hotel room in this foreign country. His hotel room not only suddenly reminds him of his childhood bedroom; he concludes that the hotel room *is* indeed his childhood bedroom. “The room I was now in, I realised, 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” (16). This typical dream element of a place temporarily morphing into somewhere else is described by Freud: “Sometimes, in a dream in which the same situation and setting have persisted for some time,” he notes, “an interruption will occur which is described in these words: ‘But then it was as though at the same time it was another place, and there such and such a thing happened’” (Grinstein, 220). The main narrative is then resumed, and Freud argues that this fledging change of scenery is to be understood as a “subordinate clause in the dream element,” of an interpolated thought. This interpretation seems a prudent explanation of a magical element: the adult Ryder is lying in bed as a memory from his childhood comes back to him. Since dreams, according to Freud, employ a predominantly pictorial language, the memory comes back to Ryder in the form of an actual change in the room.

In *Freud's Rules of Dream Interpretation*, however, Alexander Grinstein writes that “[Victor] Tausk noted that [such] a change of scenery in a dream ‘means a reminiscence of an event that contains an essential element belonging to the most important element of the dream’” (220). Ryder’s change of scenery contains a recollection: hence, going with this interpretation, the flashback must be understood to be containing something essential to our

understanding of Ryder's overall dream. Analysing the passage in a new way provides a useful angle on this premise.

Based on the fact that Ryder is "just about to doze off" (16) when he makes his realisation about the hotel room and then falls asleep at the end of his recollection, the first chapter can be understood as a dream framing a short dream within it. The memory, thus, not only represents a magical change of scenery: it is a dream within the main dream of the narrative. Freud argues that "to include something in a 'dream within a dream' is... equivalent to wishing that it [a true recollection] had never happened" (338). This lends some light on the content of the memory, which describes a "true recollection" in the life of Ryder. Hence, we are left with a dual understanding of the passage: first, it harbours the feature of a place temporarily turning into somewhere else; second, it is a dream within a dream. Two conclusions can be drawn from this assumption.

A magical change of scenery posits the following: in explicitly relating a traumatic episode from Ryder's childhood, the scene draws attention to the protagonist's troubled childhood on the one hand, and escapism on the other. Understanding the dream of the novel to be marked by wishful thinking lays the groundwork for deciphering the peculiar world of Ryder. The sub-clause in the dream goes to the core of who Ryder is and which wishes and repressed anxieties govern his dream. As interpolated thought, it has its own separate meaning that in its manifest content has little to do with the main narrative. But in its latent content it, in Tausk's words, "contain[s] an essential part of the dream" (in Grinstein 220).

The second interpretation rests on the assumption that this memory is contained in a dream within the narrative as Ryder falls asleep. According to Freud, this type of phenomenon expresses a wish that the dreamt scene had never happened. Seeing it as a traumatic event (though the trauma is safely relegated to the periphery of the recollection), this explains both

its presence in the novel, and the fact that it is never referred to again. This is the case with all the flashbacks in the novel – they are mentioned once, and never referred to again.

In short, the ending of the first chapter displays two types of dream phenomena, which together express an interpolated thought that lays Ryder's psyche bare. The hotel room is momentarily turned into the protagonist's childhood room, and a traumatic scene is briefly narrated. The focus is not on the fighting parents, however; it is on Ryder's coping mechanism in dealing with this event. What the passage highlights is Ryder's ability to think himself as someone else, somewhere else, as a redemptive move. As such, the episode serves as a parable for the entire novel.

This brief dream within the main dream-narrative highlights both Ryder's difficult relationship with his parents (which informs the entire dream) and it describes a situation that serves as a bleak point of contrast to the picture of Ryder that has previously been described in the chapter. This peculiar contrast is an essential component in understanding the protagonist: the relationship between Ryder-the-child and Ryder-the-imaginary-military-leader mirrors the relationship between Ryder-the-child and Ryder, world famous pianist.

Finally, the passage *privileges* Ryder's dream world of plastic soldiers over the troubling reality. The "tear in the carpet"¹³ is notably incorporated into the fantasy rather than being allowed to yank Ryder out of it. In the same way that the grating sound of an alarm clock is incorporated into a dream as an element of the dream world, Ryder's tear –which threatened to "destabilize" his dream – becomes part of it. Ryder's wish for consolation thus maintains his fantasy in the same way that the wish to sleep – designated "one of the motives for the formation of dreams" by Freud (268) – maintains the dream.

¹³ The double meaning of tear is no coincidence, and might very well be a reference to Ryder's distress. If a carpet rift can morph into a soldier's way, after all, the rift may very well have been a teardrop in the first place.

Beyond Wish Fulfilment

A basic tenet in the psychoanalytical method is the principle of tracing the psyche's peculiarities to childhood origins. Specifically, most things will be explicitly rooted in child's relationship with his or her parents. As Ellman puts it, to delve into the past is seen as necessary to "decipher the mysteries of the present" (9). Further, anything that has been repressed is understood to refuse to lie dormant: it is destined to eventually resurface as symptoms, actions or dreams. In a sentence from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that elegantly befits the *The Unconsoled*, Freud maintains that the afflicted person is "obliged to repeated the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past" (12). Dreams, meanwhile, are specifically understood to be expression of concealed wishes. "A dream," Freud firmly stated in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "is the (disguised) fulfilment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish" (194).

However – while Freud contumaciously maintained that both "punishment dreams" and "anxiety dreams" could, once elaborate distortions of disguise and repression had been weeded out, always be traced to an underlying wish, certain types of traumatic dreams could not be pegged as such no matter how many attenuating admonitions one allowed. Confronted with shell-shocked war veterans who kept reliving horrible experiences in their dreams, Freud realized that he would have to grant, for the first time, "an exception to the proposition that dreams are fulfilments of wishes" (26). The controversial booklet *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, published two decades after his tome on dream interpretation, sprung out of a desire to bring these obstinate dreams back into the fold of the psychoanalytically explainable. To do so, however, Freud came to recognize that he would have to relinquish his founding view of a pleasure principle acting as the basic human drive. Instead, he introduced a second, strikingly

opposite element to the psychoanalytical system of thought: the death drive. This instinct seems to go against what not only psychoanalysis but also biology teaches us about humans. Flying in the face of the hitherto supreme belief in the human animal's relentless will to live and reproduce, it posits that "*the aim of life is death*" (32; emphasis in the original).¹⁴

Freud set out to develop a new theory that would satisfactorily explain recurrent traumatic dreams. While he maintained that repetition – "the re-experiencing of something identical" – can itself be a source of pleasure, he conceded that a phenomenon such as compulsively reliving traumatic events from one's childhood "evidently disregards the pleasure principle in every way" (30). These dreams clearly arise out of a "compulsion to repeat" (26), but it is a compulsion from which no pleasure can be gained. He makes two suggestions. The first entails that these dreams are "endeavouring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis" (26). The second reevaluates the idea that dreams are fulfilments of wishes. This will instead be understood as the secondary function of dreams; a function which can only take place once the "dominance of the pleasure principle" has been wholly accepted by the mental life. He thus posits that there exists a "before" the pleasure principle (27); and at this stage the dream will often fulfil other functions, stemming out of the wish to "conjure up what has been forgotten and repressed" (26).

The Unconsoled is a novel whose enigmatic content takes the shape of a closed world predictably governed by certain rules: namely, those of the dream. However: the basic premise

¹⁴ This conclusion Freud based on the "truth that knows no exception" that "everything living dies for internal reasons." A return to an "inorganic state," is thus literally the purpose of life, because 'inanimate things existed before living ones'" (emphasis in the original; 32). In other words, Freud argued for the understanding that the wish to return to a former inertia was a major driving force. This conclusion Freud based on the "truth that knows no exception" that "everything living dies for internal reasons." A return to an "inorganic state," is thus literally the purpose of life, because 'inanimate things existed before living ones'" (32). In other words, Freud argued for the understanding that the wish to return to a former inertia was a major driving force in human existence. Life, hence, was seen as a disturbance of this instinct toward non-being; a temporary external disturbance. This is not to be understood as a simple wish to die. Freud argues that what we see as a will to life is better comprehended as, essentially, a certain curious rebelliousness on the part of the ultimately deathbound organism. What it really wants is simply to "die in its own fashion" (33).

that Ryder's world is governed by wishful thinking, though invaluable in many cases, comes to prove inadequate in explaining certain phenomena. This is why Freud's exploration of traumatic dreams comes to prove relevant. Ryder's dream is notoriously haunted by a constant resurfacing of uncomfortable scenes that, to use Freud's phrase, "[repeat] the repressed material as a contemporary experience" (12). To put it simply, Ryder is re-enacting his memories. Moreover, so do most of the other characters in the novel. "In dreams," Freud points out, "the personality may be split – when, for instance, the dreamer's own knowledge is divided between two persons and when, in the dream, the extraneous ego corrects the actual ego. This is precisely on par with the splitting of personality that is familiar to us in hallucinatory paranoia; the dreamer, too hears his own thoughts pronounced by extraneous voices" (123).¹⁵ This is also "precisely on par" with the way in which the novel is constructed. While Ryder's thoughts are represented pictorially (as when his surroundings actually become those of his childhood), his personality is split up and represented by different characters.

One of Freud's classical and much-referenced anecdotes, related in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is that of a little boy playing for himself for the first time at the age of one and a half. The boy invents a game that involves taking a small object and throwing it away, upon which he exclaims "o-o-o-o" with some satisfaction. Freud and the boy's mother both agree that his interjection must mean "fort" (*gone* in German) (9). This assumption is confirmed by the slightly different game played at a later point in time: this time the child is amusing himself by throwing a wooden reel away so that it is out of sight, only to pull it back using an attached piece of string. Upon getting it back, he "[hails] its reappearance with a joyful 'da' ['there']" (9). "This then," Freud concludes, "was the complete game – disappearance and return" (9). Freud analysed this game as a staged disappearance and return

¹⁵ This evidently foreshadows the second chapter of this thesis. In that chapter, the world appears a construct of Ryder's mental world, but it is interpreted in as fantasy born out of a split mind rather than as the product dream.

that re-enacted the boy's achievement in "allowing his mother to go away from him without protesting" (9).

He was puzzled, however, by the fact that the game replicated something that clearly must have been traumatic for the boy: his mother's departure. It remained a mystery why the boy would willingly subject himself to staged repetition of something inherently unpleasurable. Freud initially argued that the "disappearance" part of the game was simply a necessary prerequisite of the satisfaction of return, and thus provided a plausible explanation for the distress involved in the game, but this explanation left something to be desired. The fact was that, more often than not, the boy would simply play the game as he had initially done it: throwing the object away but never retrieving it. What was needed, hence, was a new explanation.

Conceding that "no certain decision" (10) could ever be reached from such a (single) case, Freud nevertheless launched the theory that the objective of the game was twofold. Firstly, the boy revenged himself for his mother's abandonment and expressed a feeling that he had repressed. As such, the game acquired a defiant meaning: "All right, then, go away!" (10). Secondly, it provided him with a sense of mastery that had been withheld from him in the original situation: "At the outset he was in a *passive* situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, he took an *active* part" (emphasis in the original; 10). In other words, the child learned to repeat the uncomfortable situation in a safe setting until it stopped representing a danger and he could feel that he was the one in charge of it.

One of the most interesting passages in *The Unconsoled* relates Ryder's memory of his "training sessions."¹⁶ The name itself is fascinating, because it is never stated explicitly what it is that Ryder is training *for*. Seeing as I am here operating with a cautious distinction between

¹⁶ I have earlier referred to this passage in my introduction, and I will also pick it up again in the next chapter.

Ryder's "real" past and his dreamt present (his "real" past surfacing in dreams within the dream as traumatic memories he wishes to forget), this passage cannot satisfactorily be interpreted in the light of dream theory. Rather, I will consider it a description of the childhood which fuels the dream. As such, it is compulsively re-enacted in it. Freud's discussion of the child's "fort-da" game offers a fruitful starting point for launching a possible interpretation of these "training sessions."

This game, as we have seen, is understood to be born out of the child's struggle to detach her or himself from the mother, and it is played out with objects that seem to represent the mother. The "mother" is thrown away (and may or may not be retrieved), and the child, through repeated sessions, learns to master the situation and experience herself as the master of an initially upsetting dynamic. In addition, the child may be permitted to express a sense of vengeance otherwise repressed.

In Ryder's case, there is no object: just Ryder and his parents. Ryder, playing outside one afternoon, is overwhelmed by an urge to return to the safety of his family home. However, in a sentiment that echoes that of any young child struggling with a sense of attachment he would prefer to deny, he quickly comes to "[associate] the sensation with immaturity" (172). His solution is to force himself to ignore this need, and gradually he comes to take an *active* part in the situation (to use Freud's phrase), and gain a sense of mastery from it. In his game, which he continues to re-enact compulsively over months, Ryder thus plays in a way that resembles that of Freud's example – the crucial difference being that Ryder puts *himself* in the place of the object. He "throws" himself away, and thus learns to be away from his parents.

Freud's boy gains some independence by imagining himself in control of the mother – pictured as a compliant object – and harmlessly gets to express a sense of revenge in this way. Ryder, however, expresses no ill feelings whatsoever toward his parents in this passage: rather his aim is to "[fight] off [his own] emotions" (172). Notably, no resentment toward his

parents is expressed in Ryder's childhood memories, despite the fact that they chronicle a family life devoid of affection and safety. In other words, the necessary rebellion against – and detachment from – the parents that any healthy child must undergo is missing. This passage thus describes a deeply unresolved issue. Ryder's game does not teach him to cope with his parent's absence; it teaches him to repress his needs for them. The implications for the rest of the novel, the "dream," are startling: what Ryder keeps re-enacting in the main narrative is precisely this unresolved issue. Having been unable to come to terms with his parents' absence, he is condemned to have his psyche overwhelmingly dominated by his very, suppressed need for them.

Ryder is a famous and admirable musician who is in a position of respect and power. He does not need anything or anybody; Ryder *is* needed. As he reminds his wife in a telling phrase: "the fact is, people need me. I arrive in a place and more often than not find terrible problems. Deep-seated, seemingly intractable problems, and people are so grateful I've come" (37) Not only does the dream enact a completely reversal of the attachment situation; his "deep-seated problems," too, are loaded on to someone else. To modify Freud's phrase, the actual ego points the finger at the extraneous ego.

An obsession with detachment prevails in the novel. Ryder, stranger in a strange land and self-appointed outsider, vehemently denies any attachment to his city or his family. When Sophie apologizes for having left him and Boris alone in the city at a moment when he depended on her, Ryder "[gives] a small laugh" and retorts, "I've never depended on you. I think you ought to calm down a little" (91). Yet when she announces that, it being late, she wants to head home rather than to watch a movie with him at the cinema, Ryder is suddenly frightened: "But I thought you said you wanted to... [A] strange panic had begun to seize me and I could not keep a pleading note out of my voice." Ryder does his utmost to keep Sophie there by listing ostensibly objective reasons why she should not go ("this will be a good

movie”), and when she agrees to stay experiences “a considerable feeling of relief.” As they enter the cinema together, he wants to “grasp her tightly to [him]” (91).

Ryder’s bizarre double status as a local, married resident who is also a visiting stranger must thus be explained in light of this analysis. The symbolic detachment he enacts in his childhood is lived out with full force in his dream. Having once and for all denied his need for his parents and forced himself to distance himself from the home, he has in the dream become a man who has no home, no first name, and no family. Yet the initial need has not been eliminated, only repressed. Hence he is condemned to be on a constant, desperate lookout for his parents, and this need eclipses all else. In addition, traumatic scenes from his childhood are relived again and again, by himself and by his surrounding characters. In a landscape malleable by his obsessions, he finds himself in his childhood home no matter where he goes.

Number Nine

One of the repeated tropes in the novel is the number nine. Boris is obsessed with Number Nine, a plastic toy which is also a fantastic imaginary footballer. “[The] best footballer so far in history,” Number Nine does “everything” (52). This superhero, Boris boasts, once scored “seventeen goals in ten minutes” (49) – the digit sum of which is also nine. There are other references to this number: Two of the very few – there seems to be only three in all – mentions of hours of the clock in the novel refer to nine o’clock.¹⁷ Christoff has “eight or nine” protégées (205); Sophie and Gustav, who have not been speaking for years, had a good relationship until Sophie was “eight or nine” (83); and Gustav and his group of porters number

¹⁷ Ryder’s old schoolmate Geoffrey Saunders invites him over for cake a second time (as Ryder did not show up for his cake appointment with him the previous day), saying that the following day Ryder can drop by “any time after nine o’clock.” (48). Also, Fiona Roberts rebukes Ryder for not having come when he was supposed to the previous day (having seemingly agreed to join her for dinner), and mentions how her guests started getting impatient as the evening progressed and he did not show up: “around nine o’clock the restlessness started up” (173). As often in the novel, a situation is repeated with only slight variations made to it.

“eight or nine” Further, the novel centres around three triads¹⁸: Ryder, Sophie and Boris; Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman and Stephan; and Brodsky, Miss Collins, and the dog Bruno¹⁹ – all of which mirror Ryder and his parents in one way or another.

There are three interesting aspects to this repeated use of the number nine. Firstly, Ryder starts undertaking his “training sessions” at the age of nine. I have previously analysed this episode in the light of Freud’s “fort-da” game, and argued that it underpins the construction of the novel as a constant denial of – and hence obsession with – the need for parental presence. This interpretation is bolstered by the fact that the age at which this episode takes place is the number that keeps marking its presence in the novel. “[Dreams] of numbers,” Grinstein concurs, “[often] refer to the age of the patient at the time of the event, especially if it was traumatic” (193). Secondly, I nod to Freud, who writes that the number nine, “often refers to the months of gestation” (qtd in Grinstein, 193). Thirdly, not insignificantly the ninth letter of the alphabet is “I.”

All in all, this obsession with Number Nine (the name is used at least fifty times in the novel), as well as the frequent return to the number itself, points in direction of the “training sessions;” the implications of which I have earlier elaborated upon. Equally importantly, however, the number exposes preoccupation with *origin* and *identity*.

At one point Ryder and Boris go looking for – but never manage to find – Number Nine, who has been “left behind” in the old apartment after it “came off its base,” and was boxed up only to be lost (48) This description, of course, instantly finds resonance in the character of Ryder, who is definitely “boxed up,” lost, and “off [his] base.” Additionally, it reveals a repressed fear of being invisible on the one hand, and of becoming a *person without a*

¹⁸ It can be said that Ryder imagines he has nine lives.

¹⁹ Other, partly overlapping, groupings include Sophie and her parents (in the past); Sophie, Gustav and Boris; and the childless couple Rosa and Christoff. All other central characters appear either in larger groups (the Civil Council or the Porters, for example), or are pictured on their own.

foundation on the other. Finally, it is clear that in looking for Number Nine, Boris/Ryder is looking for his lost self; the “I” that was disrupted at age nine.

Thursday Night; Sunday Afternoon

In chapter one, “Thursday night” is mentioned for the first time. Apart from the many references to this event in the novel, the only other time this weekday is referenced is when a crowd of men in the cinema in chapter nine talk about local *femme fatale* Rosa Christoff, and recall that, some decades ago, she used to work at a gallery on Thursdays and Fridays (104). A “drunken man,” however, quickly corrects this to *Tuesdays* and Fridays. The word “Thursday,” which here was in danger of losing its nominal function, is thus explicitly reserved for the particular occasion of the cultural event. Remarkably, this is the only time *any* weekday is referred to in the novel, with one important exception: Sunday. Just like “nine o’clock” takes precedence over all other times in the narrative, Thursday is the weekday above all others in Ryder’s mind. Gustav’s gatherings at the Hungarian café, however, take place on Sunday afternoons, but this day is also related to one other specific context: various characters’ memories of the past. These almost invariably refer to Sunday mornings and afternoons. Sunday thus figures prominently in the novel, eclipsing all other days but the weighty “Thursday night.” It is always, it should be mentioned, Thursday *night* and, in all cases but one, Sunday *afternoon*.

Freud repeatedly stressed the importance of looking at omissions in dreams, and with that in mind the elements missing from Ryder’s universe – here, references to days – are as telling as what is included. What should be inferred from this peculiar (non-) use of weekdays, I posit, is that both Thursday night and Sunday are times of leisure rather than work; times the child Ryder would be spending at home, with or without his family. Thus, we are again

confronted with a semantic signpost signalling “home life.” The regular working week, which represents occupation, school and responsibility, has nearly been. In the novel, which chronicles a time period between Tuesday afternoon and Friday morning (with nothing signifying a holiday), the young child Boris does not go to school but is free to spend time with Ryder. The only reference made to Boris being in school is by his mother, Sophie, who at some point briefly refers to his schoolmates. In Ryder’s flashbacks, however, school figures prominently – and is painted in a predominantly negative light. Several mentions are made of bullying schoolmates. In addition, in a reminiscence of the ugly old family car he grew up with,²⁰ which is a source of great shame to him, Ryder recalls that he “had started to invent elaborate ploys to avoid taking journeys in it, so much did I dread being spotted by a school-friend or a teacher.” (261) Schoolmates are thus seen as someone who might make discoveries about Ryder’s home life that he prefers they would not.

A childhood wish for the disappearance of painful weekdays is hence fulfilled in the dream. Home represents a wished-for safety tempered by stark real-life facts; Ryder’s only positive childhood memories revolve around the idea of finding solace in solitude and in resorting to escapist fantasies. Indeed, Ryder’s troubled home life can be said to be behind his perpetual search for the safety of a home. The unconscious creation of a world in which every moment is time off (yet, ironically, filled with obsessive “business”) allows the hypothetical possibility of a fulfilment of a wish of family bliss.

To Ryder, the young musician Stephan Hoffman relates a fantasy he has had since he was a teenager; a dream that includes a detail that relates to the wish of regaining family bliss. He describes his long-held daydream of once and for all impressing his parents with a magnificent, all-encompassing piano recital at home.²¹ The recital would cover several

²⁰ The exterior of the car is described in the following colourful terms: “The paintwork had been gone over on numerous occasions, on the last of which the painter appeared to have used house paint before giving up midway. Both rear fenders had been replaced by mismatched substitutes from other vehicles”(260).

²¹ This is a fantasy he has had since he was thirteen or fourteen” (76); the digit sum of which is nine.

musical periods and styles, and would move his parents to tears with “[sublime,] sensitive adagios” and “[astounding] fiery bravura passages” (76). This private concert would take place, he muses, on “[a] Sunday afternoon probably. *In any case some time when Father would be home too*” (76; my emphasis). Not only would it take place on this particular day; Stephan explicitly compares it with the forthcoming concert: “Thursday night may not turn out quite like it, but it’s possible it could be pretty close” (76).²²

Finally, in this exploration of “Thursday night,” I want to zoom in on its most important aspect, one that Stephan’s fantasy touches upon. It serves a symbolic function as a turning point,²³ a last attempt at reconciliation that will fix a broken situation. In the case of the city, the “cultural crisis” that is threatening to destroy the community; in Brodsky’s case, his ruined career and estrangement from his ex-wife; in the case of Stephan, his parents’ dysfunctional marriage; for Mr. Hoffman, a feeling of inferiority toward his wife; and finally, for Ryder, the loss of his parents. Additionally, the idea of a single moment undoing years of trouble pervades the novel. Christine, the estranged wife of Mr. Hoffman, at some point formulates her hope in this phenomenon to Ryder, as she relates her dream of “one day [having] a warm and close family... [One] day, you see, I hope to catch it out, this whatever it is... Like a cord suddenly snapping and a thick curtain dropping to the floor to reveal a whole new world, a world full of sunlight and warmth” (417).²⁴

In a similar vein, Ryder himself tells Boris that he keeps travelling, leaving his family behind, because “you see, you can never tell when it’s going to come along. I mean the very

²² In my next chapter I describe a similar episode. As Ryder is preparing for his Thursday night performance, he pictures himself back at his neighbour’s house – holding an imaginary concert for his parents. The crucial performance for the parents that both Ryder and Stephan dream of is thus tellingly imagined as a rather intimate affair held on family grounds.

²³ This expression is repeatedly used in the novel, in a myriad of contexts; most often in people’s descriptions of their lives, and expressing either a negative change that lead to some kind of personal ruin, or as an occasion of (hypothetical) salvation.

²⁴ The mention of the curtain “dropping to the floor” seems an allusion to Ryder’s aborted address at the banquet, a speech that espouses a sentiment that more accurately describes the realities of the novel: “Collapsing curtain rails! Poisoned rodents! Misprinted score sheets!” (145).

special one, the very important trip, the one that's very very important, not just for me but for everyone, everyone in the whole world" (218).²⁵ He goes on to elaborate this point:

... You see, it would be so easy just to miss it. To say one time, no, I won't go, I'll just rest. Then only later I'll discover that was the one, the very very important one. ... [People] spend year after year travelling and they start to get tired, perhaps a little lazy. But that's often just when it comes along. And they miss it. And, you know, they regret it for the rest of their lives...By the time they die, they've become broken people." (218)

Ryder again expresses his persistent fear of chaos and disruption. His main coping strategy for dealing with his troubled home life as a child, we have seen, is to *distance* himself from it.

Ryder's perpetual travels, as related in the quoted passage, can be seen as the adult version of his "training sessions"; Ryder is teaching himself to be *away*.

Once Upon a Mind

"Dreaming," Freud maintains, "is on the whole an example of regression to the dreamer's earliest childhood, of the instinctual impulses which dominated it and of the methods of expression which were then available to him" (587). In other words, the child is the one providing both the medium and the contents of the dream. *The Unconsoled* depicts an adult world, populated almost exclusively by adults. In fact, Boris is the *only* child who explicitly figures in the novel. Ryder and his perpetual shadow relationship with his parents occupy centre stage.

Establishing a formal link between the fairy tale and the dream, Freud notes that "elements and situations derived from fairy tales are... frequently to be found in dreams" (in Grinstein 59). *The Unconsoled* is a complex novel that owes much to diverse genres, but the way in which it resembles – and draws on – the fairy tale is particularly interesting. The novel

²⁵ Freud quite unambiguously states that "'departing' on a journey is one of the commonest and best authenticated symbols of death... departure in dreams means dying." (quoted in Grinstein, 139) I will not go into this here, but this observation doubtlessly fits Ryder's troubled psyche; after all, his obsession with escapism is little else but a fantasy of the ultimate consolation of death.

takes place “once upon a time” in a faraway country – like fairy tales it eschews the “specific someplace” for the *timeless somewhere*. Further, it is a child’s fairy tale played out by adults.

Literature scholar Donald Haase provides a starting point for the following discussion when he stipulates that, while there are “many different theories concerning the fairy tale’s psychological meaning and value,” most still start with the premise that “the stories are symbolic expressions of the human mind and emotional experience.” According to this view, then, “fairy tale plots and motifs are not representations of socio-historical reality, but symbols of inner experience that provide insight into human behaviour” (“Psychology and Fairy Tales”).

One of the basic arguments of this thesis is that rather than reading *The Unconsoled* as a largely veritable work of fiction that tweaks the rules of realism a little, one is better served to read it as a parable – much like one would a fairy tale or, as in this chapter at large, a dream. Not only does the dream contain elements from the fairy tale but, to reverse matters, Haase points out that Freud “found fairy tales especially useful for illustrating his theories of the mind because they seemed so much like dreams.” As such, fairy tales have long been favoured objects of psychoanalytical readings. Fairy tales are often understood to play an important part in the children’s development and maturation, providing them with imaginary examples to real-life challenges, just as games might. According to Welter Scherf, “these magic stories engage the dramatic imagination of children and allow them to overcome their conflicts, separate from the parents, and integrate themselves into society” (qtd in Haase).

Ryder’s dream functions largely as an expression of wishful thinking, constantly tempered by repressed anxieties forcing their own re-emergence. A previous section in this thesis deals with the function of Ryder’s “training” game as an exercise in parental detachment. Having examined the game and the dream, we now turn to the novel’s fairy tale elements. They have a dual function: on the one hand they contribute to the childlike

atmosphere of Ryder's dream, and on the other, they provide a suitable mythical landscape malleable to Ryder's wishes. A landscape, moreover, in which Ryder is (ostensibly) king, worshipped by his underlings, conquering the dark enemy of Christoff. My focus in the following section, however, is on the pictorial language of the novel, which mirrors that of a fairy tale.

His parents having been absolved of all blame, Ryder's repressed aggression finds its outlet in his rage against his wife Sophie, his son Boris, and the community at large. His absolute idealisation of his mother and father is expressed in a way that pertains to fairy tales. Ryder *père et mère* are imagined to arrive to their son's upcoming concert in manner that befits someone of great eminence: in a horse-drawn carriage. Ryder paints a tantalizing image of their arrival:

A picture entered my mind of my parents, of the two of them in their horse-drawn carriage approaching the clearing outside the concert hall. I could see the local people - the black-jacketed men, the ladies with their coats and shawls and jewellery - breaking off their conversations and turning towards the sound of horse hooves coming from the darkness of the trees. And then the gleaming carriage would burst into the wash of lights, the handsome horses trotting to a halt, their breaths rising in the night air. (398)

Ryder imagines their passage from the dark forest to a "wash of light," then, in a language that announces its own pretence, for Ryder's own memories have been washed of all sins, and his parents have been brought from the moral shadows to a place of light. In other words, the quoted passage is a perfect parable of Ryder's own mental processes as he wishfully reverses the past.

The image of aristocracy is employed again later in the novel. Ryder laments the absence of his parents to his "assistant" Miss Strattman after having failed to perform at the concert. As he breaks down in tears at her office, the necessary tale of consolation is summoned from her, just like in any other situations in which Ryder's dream threatens to become a nightmare. Strattman's lullaby ostensibly tells the story of how Ryder's parents once

came to visit the city – she comforts him with the assurance that, though she is too young to remember their visit personally, she is certain they enjoyed their stay. From that point on, the story is narrated entirely in the form of a description of what it *would* have been like, had they visited. This discrepancy is freely ignored by Ryder, who self-indulgently treats the flight of fancy like a *bona fide* memory. The fantastic sketch smoothly echoes, and serves as a sequel to Ryder’s horse-and-carriage fantasy. Strattman assures Ryder that his parents would have been assisted with their luggage; that they would have stayed in “an idyllic hotel” (which unfortunately does not exist anymore); and that they would have “loved every minute of their stay” (514). Then she gets out a “gigantic colour photograph” (515). The poster depicts a hotel that looks like “a smaller version of the sort of fairy-tale castle built by mad kings in the last century,” standing “right on the edge of a plunging valley covered with ferns and spring flowers” (515). Firstly, then, we get an explicit reference to fairy-tales; an allusion that has the effect of simultaneously labelling the description a child’s fantasy, and denoting its fictionality. Secondly, the employment of the word “mad” is telling, and works as a denouncement of the fanciful dream in its entirety. It is peculiarly at odds with the passage at large; in the otherwise idyllic description, it sticks out like a Freudian slip. A glimpse of a darker undercurrent is also permitted by the fact that the hotel is perched precariously “on the edge of a plunging valley” (515). The passage reveals Ryder’s repressed aggression toward his parents – the edge of a cliff is quite the dangerous location in which to place one’s beloved parents. The description immediately veers off in a more attenuating direction as Ryder goes on to mention the spring flowers in the valley, and thus the threat is effectively quelled and denied.

My final example highlights the artificiality of Ryder’s dream world. At the concert hall, he enters a darkened area and stumbles over something odd: “I pushed through a pair of heavy swing doors and found myself wandering through some cavernous backstage area. In the gloomy light, I could make out rectangular slabs of painted backdrop – a castle tenement, a

moonlit sky, a forest – propped against the wall” (493). This description fits the setting of the novel perfectly. The moonlit sky and the forest, as well as the medieval part of the city and the castle turret known as the “Sattler Monument” – they are all there. This short passage reads like a moment of lucidity in a dream – when Ryder on some level realizes that he is dreaming, but then walks away from the realization.

Sophie

The Unconsoled is a one-man’s fantasy universe, and it is spinning around (and away from) a few constant themes that, invariably, have their roots in the protagonist’s childhood. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud wrote about *displacement*, which involves the unconscious protectively swerving away from real preoccupation when the truth proves too raw to handle. Instead, the thought will land elsewhere, and a process of reversal or retracing is needed in order to locate the underlying source.

In his discussion of anxiety dreams, Freud gives as example a dream of robbers, and makes the following claim: “if I am afraid of robbers in a dream, the robbers, it is true, are imaginary – but the fear is real” (447). The lesson from this pithy example has some interesting implications for the novel, in which Ryder frequently experiences strong outbursts of feelings in circumstances that do not seem to warrant them. For example, he frequently “[becomes] consumed by an intense rage” (80) in the presence of his wife Sophie,²⁶ but will rarely express this anger. Instead he conceals his anger behind a cold and distant demeanour. In many of these cases, the perceived cause of his anger is vague. He will feel confusedly frustrated with his lack of progress in the city, with how muddled and unproductive his every endeavour seems to be, and will often “suddenly” turn around and blame Sophie for it:

²⁶ As for the vexing question of whether Sophie is *really* Ryder’s wife or his mother or Ryder himself; if Boris is his son or a ghost of his childhood, etc, I think it is wise to remember what Freud has to say about the either/or option in dreams: “The alternative ‘either-or’ cannot be expressed in dreams in any way whatever. Both of the alternatives are usually inserted in the text of the dream as though they were equally valid” (316). Hence, I leave these categories open.

Suddenly I felt again an intense irritation with Sophie for the chaos she had caused and for the way she had obliged me to compromise so thoroughly my usual standards. (115)

I could feel returning to me an intense sense of irritation with Sophie for the confusion she had brought into my affairs. Surely it was not too much to ask that, at such crucially important points in my life as this, she somehow contained her chaos to herself. (179)

[The] fact was, along with so much else, Sophie had succeeded in reducing my carefully planned timetable to chaos.” (310)

The anger is real, but what is the cause? A predictable return to the mother is necessary in this case. As a symbol of Ryder's mother who is *also* simultaneously his wife, Sophie, like many of the other characters, occupies a decidedly oedipal position in the novel. There are several interesting implications of this basic premise. Firstly, as a mother-figure she is an evident result of, as well as target for, Ryder's suppressed anger toward his own mother. Secondly, as a doting (if unreliable) mother to Boris, Sophie also represents the mother Ryder never had – a fact that steeps Ryder's relationship with his quasi-son with otherwise inexplicable jealousy and rage. Finally, Boris stands for Ryder-the-child in the novel, and as such he evidently *also* represents a rival of – and threat to – Ryder in the conventional, oedipal sense.

Ryder's favourite word for describing the threat that Sophie represents is “chaos.” Like a persistent and revealing tic it features in every description of his annoyance with her. Remembering Ryder's own “fort/da” game, it is clear that the safety of distance makes up the pillar of his mental universe. This mindset also explains his exhibitionist need for the gaze of the other: as a perpetual object (an “outsider”) Ryder needs the subject's affirmation to reify his existence. Further, a big ontological wedge is instilled between Ryder and his parents – the inevitable mirror side of which is his absolute obsession with their awaited and impossible presence; a phenomenon which saturates every pixel of his dream universe. Sophie, on the other hand, symbolises the feared antithesis of all this. While Ryder's parents are safely lodged on the other side of a *sine qua non* (and perpetually denied) absence, Sophie's very existence represents a threat. Not only because she invades Ryder's carefully maintained hierarchical,

triangular relationship with his parents by placing herself on the same horizontal line as himself and disrupting the holy triad: Sophie's additional crime is, as previously mentioned, her motherhood. As mother *qua* wife (to Ryder/Boris), Sophie occupies the incestuous position that, in Ellman's words, "overthrows the nomenclature of the family" (16). René Girard uses the expression "monstrous commingling" to describe this situation (in Ellman 16), whereas Ryder prefers the word "chaos."

A Few Gentle Hints

In the city, we are presented to several female characters who display similar traits and backgrounds. One of them is Hoffman's wife, Christine Hoffman. At one point Stephan Hoffman related to Ryder how his mother used to socialize with visiting musicians and "lend them her support":

She'd not only attend the performance, she'd always try and go to the dressing room afterwards to give her praise personally. Even if a performer had done badly, she'd still go to his dressing room afterwards to give a little encouragement and a few gentle hints. In fact she'd often invite musicians to visit our house, or else offer to take them on a tour around the city. (72)

Hoffman's interpretation of his wife's soft spot for musicians is even more chaste, as he takes care to make explicit that the situation is certainly *not* what it might seem: "I looked across the room and I saw her, my wife, laughing happily on the sofa beside [the musician Jan] Piotrowski. There was nothing flirtatious, you understand. Oh no, my wife has always been meticulous where propriety is concerned" (352). In a Freudian understanding of dreams, evidently, a denial is the best affirmation one can get; Hoffman's insistence on his wife's innocence announces her sin like a red flag.²⁷

²⁷ Or as Monty Python would say: "nudge nudge" "wink wink."

Another person who harbours affection for musicians is Rosa, the wife of the former local eminence, Henri Christoff. At the cinema, Ryder talks to a few members of the local council, and in “the freckled man’s” description of Rosa’s heydays, things get considerably more explicit: “[whenever] someone of note, an artist, a musician, a writer, someone like that passed through the town, she’d pursue them with no shame whatsoever” (105).

The third²⁸ character that inhabits the role of the cheating woman is Miss Collins, ex-wife of aging alcoholic and former, fêted conductor Mr. Brodsky. When Ryder first talks to Brodsky, it is at Miss Collins’ home, where they both have shown up to see her. In a long, detailed monologue, Brodsky relates to an ineffable Ryder how he used to go about seducing Miss Collins, and how he wants to “make love to her at least six more times.” The description quickly unravels into an equally farcical and unsettling tale of staged degradation:

I always wanted to say to her: “Why can't you be like a whore? Display yourself in the light?” ... Then I'll say something suddenly, something bold and dirty in the dark. “I want them to see you naked,” I'll say. “Drunken sailors in a bar. A seaport tavern, drunken filthy men, I want them to see you naked on the floor.” ... She'll say nothing and so I'll say more. “I want them all to stare at you. On all fours, on the floor.” ... “Yes, they'll be staring at you! All of them!” ... I'll touch her just as I used to, then I'll get close to her and whisper: “I'll make you work in a brothel. Night after night.” (312)

When several associated scenes are juxtaposed, Freud suggests that we read one as the consequence of the other: “A casual relation between two thoughts is either left unrepresented or is replaced by a sequence of two pieces of dream of different lengths” (in Grinstein 216). In this case, that the previous situations find their reaction or outlet in Brodsky’s wish to degrade his ex-wife, to punish her for her lack of “meticulous propriety.” It all amounts to an eerie chain of events reminiscent of a cartoon strip. In the first case we have nothing more than an allusion of to infidelity; a *potential* transgression. In the second, infidelity is a reality. In the third case, finally, the crime is absent but the punishment is real.

²⁸ Sophie falls in a slightly different category, as nothing in the novel speaks *directly* about her supposed infidelity, though it is made clear that Boris is not Ryder’s legitimate son (I shall return to the issue later in this chapter).

Freud maintains that “the person who in the dream feels an emotion which I myself experience in my sleep is the one who conceals my ego” (323); and also insists that it often happens that “the dreamer separates off his neurosis, his ‘sick personality’ from himself and depicts it as an independent person”²⁹ (445). I suggest that Brodsky is but one of the manifestations of Ryder in the novel. Hence, in the cited example, he expresses emotions that Ryder is repressing. Ryder’s absolute non-reaction to Brodsky’s intimate revelations only acts as a reinforcement to this argument: in detaching himself absolutely from what is being said, Ryder does nothing but reinforce one’s suspicion of his involvement with it. The pertinent question, though, is this: how does all this specifically relate to Ryder? The next section proposes an answer.

Why They Argue All the Time

In one of his childhood memories, Ryder relates how he is playing hideout with his friend and neighbour Fiona at age nine. They are hiding under her parents’ dining table, and Ryder is profoundly upset about something. He tells Fiona that he likes “being lonely,” and hints at the fact that he wants to spend the rest of his life alone. Fiona remarks that this is “silly” – and then proceeds to explain:

“... you know, don't you,” Fiona had said to me that afternoon, her face close to mine in the darkness, “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.” “What special things?” Fiona had remained silent for a moment. I had been about to repeat my question, this time more aggressively, when she had said with some deliberation: “Your parents. They don't argue like that just because they don't get on. Don't you know? Don't you know why they argue all the time?” (172)

²⁹ This very explains both the sadomasochistic character of Hoffman and the petulantly selfish Gustav, whom I for reasons of space cannot discuss here.

At this moment Fiona's mother interrupts angrily and Fiona has a muffled conversation with her in the kitchen. Fiona insists that "everybody knows" and that she should be allowed to tell him; her mother maintains that he is "too young." This theme of the child in need of protection from the crude realities of adult life is repeatedly related in the novel.

Ryder twice attempts to protect his son Boris from strangers revealing too much. Geoffrey Saunders, an old schoolmate who pops out of nowhere as Ryder is walking with Boris, huffily maintains that Ryder is "filling [Boris's] head with rubbish" when he insists on colluding with the boy in his fantasy of the perfect footballer, "Number Nine." When Geoffrey matter-of-factly insists that it is all nonsense, Ryder panics and shouts: "Look, you idiot, just be quiet! Be quiet!" (50). We sense that Ryder might as well be addressing his unconscious. Any questions pertaining to the subject of *origin* (as previously linked with Number Nine) is thus effectively stifled. This situation is repeated in the scene in which Ryder and Boris go looking for the toy footballer upon which the fantasy of Number Nine is built. The toy has supposedly been left behind in a box in their old apartment after Ryder, Sophie and Boris had moved. At the apartment complex, having located the old flat but unable to get in, Ryder and Boris encounter a brutish, unkempt neighbour who speaks to them about the couple who used to live next to him. At this point, the couple is obliquely referred to as strangers. Not holding back, the man tells them all about how his former neighbours used to fight violently, and how he himself tends to blame the woman for the trouble. He comments about the man who used to live there, "[okay], he went away a lot, but from what we understood he had to, that was all part of his work. It wasn't a reason, that's what I'm saying, it wasn't a reason for her to behave in the way she did..." (215). When Ryder desperately tries to shut him up, the man shrugs and says "[Your boy has] got to come to terms with the world, warts and all..." (216). Ryder cannot go along with that, and protests: "I don't care what you think! Not for a few years yet! He won't, he won't hear about such things..."(216) A dual pull of compulsion and revulsion is

at work here, as Ryder shouts at the man to shut up and threatens to “terminate this conversation here and now,” but nevertheless keeps standing there, listening to him.

Having sketched out this background image, I propose two claims: firstly, Ryder knows that his mother was unfaithful and secondly, Ryder is an illicit child.

Throughout the novel, Sophie attempts to speak to Ryder about something, some subject that he refuses to discuss with her. We find the first, unambiguous example of what this subject is in a memory that comes back to Ryder. He is remembering a past with Sophie and Boris, and recalls an afternoon when Boris, three or four years old, was sitting on the floor of their living room, carefully attempting to make a drawing of a superman. The little boy is anxious to get it just right, but ends up botching the drawing in his aims for perfection. Ryder, sitting reading the newspaper nearby, silently witnesses all this but feels unable to intervene or prevent the child from destroying his drawing. Sophie joins them, and upon seeing Ryder seemingly impertinent to her son’s distress, launches into a fuming diatribe: “Look at you, just reading the newspaper.” She lowers her voice and adds with some intensity, “[that’s] the difference! He’s not your own. Whatever you say, it makes a difference. You’ll never feel towards him like a real father” (95). The novel provides us with another consequence, like one more panel added to a previous cartoon strip. A possible affair has led to a real affair; a real affair to an imagined revenge; and finally an illicit child has materialized.

Later in the novel, Sophie, sensing Ryder’s irritation with her as they meet up at the cinema, asks him if he is angry at her. Ryder shrugs it off: “Of course I’m not angry. Why should I be?” At this point, Sophie grasps his arm and exclaims: “If you want, I’ll make a completely clean breast of it. I’ll tell you everything. Everything you want to know about...” (89). As usual Ryder is anxious to shut up any source of disruption and interrupts her. He is not interested - all he wants to do now is to “unwind.” Sophie’s final, quiet answer to this is “It’s so good of you. To be so understanding.” The use of the word breast here is not accidental; it

elegantly points in the direction of both sex and, by way of allusion to breastfeeding, motherhood.

In a later passage, Sophie again brings up the subject: “You've been very understanding about everything, more than anyone could ever expect... But it was never realistic. We couldn't just go on like this, as though nothing had happened. You're angry. Who can blame you? I always knew it would have to come out somehow” (250). The vision, then, is of a truth that cannot – and should not – be contained. However, it is clear that Ryder *does* want to contain it. Sophie's chaos needs to be kept out of his careful timetable of denial. Ryder's “understanding” in this case, is nothing but a vigorous *avoidance*. Similarly to the manner in which he learns to detach himself from his parents (by training himself to deny his needs rather than to deal with them), Ryder copes with the knowledge of his mother's (and by proxy, Sophie's) infidelity by trying to shut up his unconscious.

It is a double ignominy he is trying to cover up for: that of his own confused origins and the absence of a “real” father, and that of his mother's betrayal of his father. Further, it is a betrayal of the name. In her discussion of the origins of the Oedipus complex, Maud Ellman argues that “the father's name outlives its bearer, anticipating the extinction of the very monster that it brings to life. Thus the name, from the beginning, is an epitaph, a ghost, destined to outlive the dissolution of the flesh” (19). Ryder is a man who *only* has a last name. Denying the denial, the conclusion drawn from this fact is obvious: in designating himself Mr. Ryder he doth protest too much. In other words, Mr. Ryder, the man with only a surname is, like the world-famous pianist Mr. Ryder and the autonomous outsider Mr. Ryder, born out of wishful thinking. The reversal effectively seeks to cancel out the betrayal of the past, as Ryder turns himself into a man who bears only his father's name.

Hard-Working People Need to Unwind

Sophie looked at me, then turned to the little boy, saying: “Boris, I've got to talk with Mr Ryder a moment. Why don't you go and look at the swans?” [...]. For a few... seconds Boris gave no response. Then he sat up, let out another weary sigh and slid off his chair. For some reason best known to himself, he affected the mannerisms of someone utterly drunk and went staggering away from the table. (34)

Another murmur that permeates the narrative references alcoholism. The first hint comes in this cited description of Boris pretending to be drunk. As often in the novel, the child is here a barometer of truth – and tellingly, it is through body language that he communicates what it is *verboten* to verbally articulate. In other words, the truth is communicated in pictorial language.

The second example comes in the shape of a drunken man in the cinema: the local citizen Theo, whose name echoes that of the prominent drunkard Leo Brodsky. Theo obeys the *in vino veritas* dictum, and is the only one present that dares touch upon subjects that others keep schtum about. Addressing Ryder, he speaks out about the conspiracy that is going on.³⁰ Later that evening, Ryder leaves the cinema with the council leader, Mr. Pedersen. Pedersen is embarrassed by Theo's behaviour, and apologizes on behalf of the community: “‘Theo's an excellent fellow, but sometimes after big dinner...’ He shook his head despondently” (109). The often high-strung Ryder, however, is affable and forgiving: “Let's not worry. Hard-working people need to unwind. I very much enjoyed the evening” (109). Employing a different technique than with blabbering men revealing unsavoury truths to his son, Ryder amiably brushes off the allusion.

The word ‘unwind,’ like a vague, gnawing memory that won't go away, keeps resurfacing in the novel as a thinly veiled metaphor for drinking. Often the references take the

³⁰ Firstly, that Brodsky is being set up to fail, and secondly that Ryder is too. They are both really puppets in the hands of the all-powerful Civic Council in the city. Ryder, who is lauded as respected eminence in this scenario, is no more powerful than the 6-year lost in a fantasy of world domination. Ryder, of course, unconsciously knows that his power is nil – and this knowledge seeps out now in then in the shape of monologues from characters such as Theo. Ryder then disregards, attempts to shut up, or walks away from these sources of disruption.

shape of an apologetic justification: “It was essential every once in a while to unwind completely and enjoy oneself” (80). In one case, a hotel receptionist tells Ryder, who has just returned from another tiring nightly excursion in the city, that if he wants to *unwind* he can go to his hotel room and have a drink: “I’d recommend you take a night cap, one of the special cocktails you’ll find ready-mixed in your mini-bar. They’re quite excellent” (80). Yet Ryder always swerves away from this option, never drinking anything but coffee. In this case, the receptionist reflects Ryder’s reluctance, adding that if he “*really* wants to unwind,” he can also go see a movie at the cinema next door (80, emphasis in the original). As luck would have it alcohol, following him like some bad odour he cannot shake, makes its re-appearance at the cinema in the form of the loquacious Theo. So while escapism (a movie) trumps alcoholism in this case, there is something about the subject that makes it keep haunting Ryder’s mind.

Finding no direct outlet in the character of Ryder, the latent alcoholism is relegated to the Dionysian, passionate maestro Leo Brodsky, a person equally pathetic and bathetic. Brodsky has a long back story of alcoholism, and it is even suggested that he has attempted suicide by drinking paraffin: “[Several years earlier]... during a drunken binge, Brodsky had been rushed to hospital by a neighbouring farmer after imbibing a quantity of paraffin – though whether he had done so in a bid to kill himself or simply out of drunken confusion had never been established” (140). This passage can perhaps be read as Ryder’s unsuccessful attempt at killing off any presence of alcoholism in his mind/world.

In the end, it is through the voice of the verbose ex-neighbour at the apartment complex that the truth about Ryder’s father comes to a day:

“Whenever we saw him he was sober, very respectable. He’d give us a quick salute, be on his way. But my wife was convinced that’s what was behind it. You know, drink...”
“Look,” I whispered angrily, leaning over the concrete wall separating us, “can’t you see I have my boy with me? Is this the sort of talk to come out with in front of him?”
[...] “I was just explaining why I tended to take his side, and that’s why my wife brought up the drinking. The going away was one thing, my wife would say, but the drinking was another...” (215)

Similarly to the way that Fiona's mother shelters Ryder from the realities of his parents' marriage, Ryder is attempting to shelter himself (via Boris) from the realization that his father was a drunkard. Freud compared the dreamer to a writer constrained by external censorship: like a writer, the dreamer too must find a way to pronounce dangerous thoughts without setting off alarms. Freud maintains: "According to the strength and sensitiveness of the censorship he finds himself compelled either merely to refrain from certain forms of attack, or to speak in allusions in place of direct references, or he must concede his objectionable pronouncement beneath some apparently innocent disguise..." (176). This ingenious process of disguise, digression and delegation is carefully carried through in the novel. As Ryder's narrative is infused by "involuntary thoughts," a counterforce sets in to prevent these from emerging in undistorted shape.

An Impression of Things Crashing

One last proposition builds on our previous premise. There are various insinuations in the text about a car crash. The first one takes the shape of Boris playfully re-enacting some unspoken episode, as in the earlier mentioned allusions to drunkenness. Ryder and Boris are at the hotel, and Boris is running around in the corridor "in a curious manner":

... I stopped in my tracks at the sight of him. Then I saw he was making steering motions with his hands and guessed he was impersonating someone in a speeding car. He was muttering furiously under his breath to an invisible passenger on his right and showed no sign of noticing me as he went hurtling past. A door was ajar further down the corridor, and as Boris approached it he yelled: 'Look out!' and swerved sharply into the room. From within came the sound of Boris's vocal impression of things crashing. (162)

This episode comes to take on more depth as Sophie, Ryder and Boris are driving in the countryside in a borrowed car much later in the novel. Ryder is again annoyed at Sophie, who is sitting next to him. Boris is sitting in the back, behaving in a way that is curiously at odds

with reality - or so it seems. Ryder is lost in his own thoughts and suddenly Boris shouts at him: "We're too near the centre of the road. We're going to crash." Ryder assures him that this is "nonsense," but Boris will not be calmed:

"No, we're not!" I could feel him banging the back of my seat. "We're too near the centre. If something comes the other way, we'll crash!" I said nothing, but moved the car a little more towards the edge of the road. This seemed to reassure Boris and he became quiet again...

[But then] Boris shouted again: "We're much too near the centre!" "I'm not moving any further over," I said. "We're perfectly fine now." [...] "I'm frightened! We're going to have a major accident!" "Boris, please be quiet. I'm driving perfectly safely." (246)

It is obvious that Boris knows something that Ryder cannot let himself know, and we are given another brief hint in another episode of the novel.³¹ Ryder is driving with Christoff, and Christoff remarks on a house he and Rosa wanted to purchase, which he offers to point out to Ryder when they pass it:

"Ah, Mr Ryder, we'll soon be passing the chalet I was telling you about. It's around this next corner. It'll appear on your side." [...] "Once [my wife and I] were driving past so slowly, we were so absorbed, we nearly collided with a vehicle coming up the hill." (189)

In dreams semantic caveats and hesitations such as "almost" can freely be ignored in certain contexts: a hypothetical situation is as real as any other. Boris is *pretending* to crash; Ryder is *denying* that a crash is possible; Christoff relates a story of *almost* crashing. As in the example of the women's infidelity and illegitimacy, all these delegations and hedges only serve to strengthen the impression of these matters' importance. What is repressed here keeps rearing its head, driven on by a compulsion to make itself known – if always in disguise.

The only actual traffic accident that occurs in the novel is Brodsky's: drunk on his motorcycle, he is hit by a car right before the crucial concert, in a predictable prevention of satisfaction; it is a "volition which is opposed by a countervolition" (373), as Freud has it.

³¹ I would also like to include another reference: toward the end of the novel, the "bad" father figure Hoffman lends Ryder his car, warning him that "the steering wheel is slightly tilted to the left. I've been meaning to get it adjusted..." (434). In other words, the possibility of a frontal collision is subtly hinted at.

Ryder's will to succeed is balanced out with his will to fail, so that he always stays in a safe state of in-between where potential can always possibly lived out.. Brodsky's crash could also be understood as the second-to-last panel in the "car crash" strip; the last one being Andrzej's death as related in the following section.

As Brodsky and Miss Collins share reminiscences about their past, Brodsky brings up a former friend, Andrzej: "You know, I read somewhere, he was killed in a car accident. Yes, I read it, in a Polish journal, five, six years ago. Killed in a car accident" (325). The name is of particular significance here: "Andrzej" derives from the Greek word for man, "andrós," also signifying patriarch. This is a clear allusion, in other words, to *the death of the father*. The first interpretation of this is the following: Ryder's father died in a car accident. The second interpretation takes on a more symbolic flavour: the death of the father must be understood as a reference to the mother's infidelity. The father's name and the father's, destined to outlive the flesh, is made void; this is played out as a real death in the novel.

A particular passage in the last chapter lends this hypothesis some support. After being rejected by Sophie once and for all in a tram, Ryder, seeking consolation, sits down to talk to an electrician riding in the same wagon. A few hours earlier he was told by Miss Strattmann that, although his parents did not show up at Thursday night, they did indeed visit this very town "thirteen-fourteen"³² years ago. Seeking confirmation in the middle-aged local, Ryder proceeds to ask *him* if he remembers his parents visiting the city at that time. The electrician declares that he saw Ryder's mother: "Yes, I think I can remember a lady just like that. It was just for a few days. Looking around at the sights, that sort of thing" (530). Encouraged, Ryder proceeds to ask about his father, but the man answers in the negative: "I can't seem to remember your father." Clearly upset, Ryder cannot make sense of this: "But that's ridiculous! What would my mother have been doing here alone?" (531). Ryder seems to be fighting with

³² The digit sum of which is unsurprisingly nine.

repressed knowledge— and only a final reassuring talk from the electrician, as well as a tantalizing buffet in the tram, can sufficiently distract him from this fact. Freud argued that “... regression, wherever it may occur, is an effect of a resistance opposing the process of a thought into consciousness along a normal path, and of a simultaneous attraction exercised upon the thought by the presence of memories possessing great sensory force” (586). In other words, Ryder’s childhood memory of his father’s death is struggling to come to the surface, but cannot be allowed to take a “normal path.” Hence, it is successfully, if temporarily, quelled.

A more traditional, less literal interpretation would encourage the conclusion that these are oedipal urges coming to the surface, and then hastily denied. What is repressed, then, would be a murderous wish on Ryder’s part, and not the father’s actual death. If one goes with this interpretation, then Ryder’s worry about his mother being alone is mere pretence – an affected position taken up in order to deny the possibility of more aggressive feelings.

Finally, there exists a connection between alcoholism and the hypothesis on the car accident. In *The Unconsoled*, the word “unwind” is used *only* in two specific contexts. The first is the one previously mentioned: as a metaphor for drinking. The second is just as evocative: in the descriptions of roads. For example, it is used when Ryder is hitching a ride with Hoffman: “He fell silent again and for a while stared at the road unwinding before us” (346); and Christoff: “as I continued to watch the highway unwind before us, I found it difficult not to doze” (202). Going with the usual premise that nothing is accidental in a dream,³³ this is significant as a missing link between alcoholism and the car accident. The fact that Ryder falls asleep as the road is unwinding only strengthens this theory. Indeed, to have *Ryder* rather than the road be the one to unwind here is merely a short reversal away. Adjusting the semantic angle a little, we are dealing with a reference to drunk driving. Freud observes that “it is true in general that words are frequently treated in dreams as though they were

³³ Or a novel that is the results of nine years of meticulous labour.

things, and for that reason they are apt to be combined in just the same way as are presentations of things” (295). The word “unwind,” in being used as an obvious euphemism for drinking (and alcoholism), is combined with the road, and a casual relation is thus set up.

Circuit Ryder

The Unconsoled ends with our hero having departed from the curved corridors of the Concert Hall, to the tram circling the city. Having ignored every promise he ever made and having been unable to accomplish anything he set out to do, having been crushed by his parents’ non-appearance, rejected by his wife and son, and unable to perform at the concert, Ryder decides his worries concerning his abilities “to cope with the various demands presented to [him] in this city” were entirely unfounded (524). Nothing is forgiven and all is repressed, and hence, like Estragon and Vladimir forever awaiting Godot, he is doomed to continue his perpetual search for his parents. As the story fades out, Ryder is happily looking forward to his stay in Helsinki – and at this point it is only the first syllable of the city’s name that signals that darker fears are never far away in Ryder’s mind.

Chapter II: The Madman as Waking Dreamer

Understanding Ryder

A “truth” about his existential position is lived out. What is “existentially” true is lived out as ‘really’ true (37)

Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled* is a novel that has frustrated many readers. Expecting linearity and narrative progression, they are confronted with a story that keeps going nowhere. The narrative makes promises that it, like the narrator, can only thwart. In writing the novel in an unassuming realistic style, Ishiguro fools us into nurturing hopes for Ryder that cannot be fulfilled. Moreover, the author supplies us with a narrator who displays a notorious inability to act independently, reflect on his situation, or question his surroundings. Lured by the book’s genteel discourse, convincing tone, and affecting displays of heartfelt and recognizable emotions, readers end up reluctantly identifying with Ryder.³⁴ For this, they are constantly castigated as they are helplessly dragged through a series of disappointments. Not only that: our empathy with the wounded, betrayed Ryder is persistently challenged as the protagonist comes to display arrogance and foolishness, outright cruelty to his wife and child, and refuses to take any responsibility for the messes he lands himself in. In his absolute displays of human folly, it is almost as if he were not a real person.

The Unconsoled is a novel that relies on the use of deferral and circularity. It depicts a closed world that makes use of a limited amount of scenes, memories, biographies and motifs, and recycles them. As such, the space described in it does not begin or end, and it has neither a centre nor borders. There is no outside to Ryder’s world, and no possibility for transcending the already known. When Ryder, during an argument with Sophie, contemptuously shouts at her

³⁴ Those who don’t tend to dismiss the book as meaningless.

that she lives in “such a small world!” it is a description that, as so often when he criticises others, most of all applies to Ryder himself.

When Ryder falls asleep he is “sliding into a deep and exhausted sleep” (17) or “sinking into a deep sleep” (116). When he wakes up, it is most likely from the ringing of the telephone (18, 117, 155), and he has the feeling that he has “not been asleep for long” (117) and that he has been disturbed “after only a few minutes” (155). He is nevertheless seized by a “panicky feeling/sense” (293, 413) that he has slept far too long, since it is “well into the morning” (155) or “now morning” (413), and he is afraid he might have “let far too much of [it] slip by” (293), or that he has overslept for his performance (413). He never sleeps enough, but always too long.

His hotel room is his childhood bedroom; as is Sophie’s former apartment. The car in front of the countess’s house is his old family car, and the house itself doubles up as the hotel. Most journeys will end at the hotel; a telling fact since Ryder, who is a local inhabitant of the city, is staying there as visitor and outsider. All paths, thus, lead to the elsewhere that is his only real home, and no matter how far he travels (in a paradoxical effort to get somewhere which is *not* elsewhere), it is always right there next door. Natalie Reitano has suggested that *The Unconsoled* is characterised by a place in time that is simultaneously “not yet” and “too late;” a conflation of origin and *telos* (“The Good Wound”). Further, the country that Ryder lands in is characterised not so much by what it *is* as what it *is not*.³⁵ Although some readers have maintained that it could still be pegged as a factual (Eastern) European country, the simple fact that both England and France are described as distant countries (379) makes this quite unlikely.

³⁶ As such, it is more than anything else a perpetual *elsewhere*.

³⁵ In a process of gradual elimination the place is denounced as neither Switzerland (5), nor Italy (22), nor Holland (24), nor Germany (65), nor Sweden (92), nor the US (137), nor Austria (166), nor Japan (249), nor England or France (379), nor Russia (308) or the Ukraine (464), nor Poland (313), nor Finland (504).

³⁶ “... our local company, Seeler Brothers, was renowned for two centuries for its carriage-making, once supplying many distinguished customers as far afield as France and England” (379).

Two things may be inferred by these descriptions: I propose that Ryder's world springs out from his mind. As such everything is *inside* it. Secondly, it is populated by people who, though described as strangers, are either so many versions of Ryder, or are living replicas of his parents. In that respect, all strangers are familiar and familial. Ryder himself is as much a stranger as everyone else. The great irony of the novel is that this elsewhere, in which Ryder is an outsider, is nothing but a return to a *home* and *family*. Indeed, it slowly becomes evident in the novel that no place is unknown to Ryder – he always finds new places not only a reminder of his home and origins, but their very re-emergence. Since home and away, subject and object, origin and *telos*, past and present, are conflated, there is no distance to be travelled, no in-between; no ground to be made. As Reitano puts it – “Where it is always not yet time and already too late, it is the relation between past and future, and not the *pas per se*, that is lost.” The fact that Ryder is never really asleep – only falling asleep or waking up too late – is an elegant illustration of that. Like the relation between some faraway countryside residence and the hotel, falling asleep and waking up are always first-door neighbours.

It is on the basis of this principle of inversion and conflation that I endeavour to read the novel with R.D. Laing. In his exploration of the existential basis of schizophrenia, *The Divided Self* (1960), Laing posits that one of the characteristics of the condition is that the patient lacks a *unified sense of self*. I argue that the same explains the character of Ryder and the decentred universe of the novel. The text thus calls for a framework that makes sense of this world. Like Ryder, Laing's patients are operating in a world in which everything happens simultaneously. Laing describes one woman as follows: “In so far as reflective awareness was absent, ‘memory’, for which reflective awareness would seem to be prerequisite, was very patchy. All of her life seemed contemporaneous” (197). The reader, similarly, learns the story of Ryder through many characters that operate on the same timeline, and his entire life is played out as if it were contemporaneous.

While other critics have posited that, for example, Ryder's fellow characters are "projections" (Villar Flor), "doubles" (Adelman), or "versions" of himself (Singh), it is my conviction that these interpretations do not go far enough in rejecting Ryder as a conventional character. Though these critics all agree that the realist mould has been shattered in the making of this novel, they still read it as if the mould were merely chipped. It does make immediate sense to see the other characters as projections of the protagonist – but in doing so one grants him the privilege of centre stage, of a unified whole from which all else stems. All does – somehow – stem from Ryder (in that we seemingly experience the world of the novel through his perspective), but I argue that *so does the character of Ryder*. Treating him like a conventional character while all others occupy a secondary, less "real" position is misguided. The self is fragmented and lost; the world of the novel itself, as well as Ryder and the other characters, all form part of this fragmentary whole. It is a game of smoke and mirrors in which trying to locate fire is a futile game. Still, Ryder must be considered both the spark that started it all, and the vessel housing the spectacle. In this interpretation, the concept of Ryder as protagonist, and Ryder as imaginary persona, must necessarily intermingle.

In *The Divided Self* Laing develops a framework for making sense of schizophrenia based on existentialist phenomenology. His key pillar, as sociologists Susie Scott and Charles Thorpe put it, is a view of "human experience and behavior as socially meaningful" (332). That might not seem a radical starting point, but in applying this basic premise to the domain of schizophrenia Laing did something altogether novel, as the manifestations of this mental illness were usually defined as falling outside the realms of decipherable human communication.

The Divided Self elaborates on the conditions that, in Laing's view, might set off schizophrenia,³⁷ as much as it demonstrates that the patients' utterances take on meaning when interpreted within this context of dysfunctional family dynamics. Laing coined the term

³⁷ Laing has frequently been accused of blaming the family for inflicting schizophrenia on their children, but he himself often was quick to point out that his intentions were not to localize a single, immediate source of madness, but simply to theorize on the social origins of the illness.

“ontological insecurity” to describe the mental state of a person who "cannot take the realness, aliveness, autonomy and identity of himself and others for granted" (42), and who ends up making use of various desperate strategies to avoid losing his/her self. All sorts of seemingly meaningless statements made by the schizophrenic, Laing argues, can be made sense of if, for example, they are understood as a set of exchanges between an ontologically insecure child and an exceedingly dominating mother.³⁸ If we do not take this context into concern, Laing, argues, the schizophrenic will remain “essentially a closed book”³⁹ (17).

To elaborate on the difference between the healthy state of *primary security*, and ontological insecurity, Laing turns to a literary example. He cites a passage from Lionel Trilling (1955), in which the literary critic contrasts the worlds of Keats and Shakespeare with that of Kafka. Laing makes the point that in the former world the characters are marked by primary security, while Kafka’s creations exist in a state of ontological insecurity. In Kafka, Trilling writes,

... long before the sentence is executed, even long before the malign legal process is even instituted, something terrible has been done to the accused. We all know what that is – he has been stripped of all that is becoming of man except his abstract humanity, which, like his skeleton, never is quite becoming to a man... [We] may say that Kafka’s knowledge of evil exists without the contradictory knowledge of the self in health and validity, that Shakespeare’s knowledge of evil exists with that contradiction in its fullest possible force (pp. 38-39) (qtd in Laing 40)

It is no coincidence that the adjective that most readers gravitate toward in trying to describe the universe of *The Unconsoled* is “Kafkaesque”; in Ishiguro’s novel too, the protagonist is, in Laing’s words, “alive without being alive” (40). Unlike Shakespeare’s characters who, despite their doubts and anxieties, know with full security that they are real, alive and complete, the world of *The Unconsoled* communicates “what it’s like being alive in the absence of such

³⁸ Laing focused in particular on the mother’s function; the father was mostly absent from the picture. In fact, the distant, unengaged father – contrasting the overpowering mother – often figures as a set figure in the dysfunctional family dynamics described in the study.

³⁹ It can be added that for many, *The Unconsoled* has either remained, or quickly become, *literally* a closed book, due to its rather bizarre content. As such, this thesis aims to open it by contextualizing its discourse.

assurances” (40). With that in mind, I maintain that Laing’s existentialist framework opens up for an interpretation of the novel that clarifies more than it obscures.

The schizophrenic is caught in a world in which he or she is as unreal and in which the self appears fragile and penetrable, forever in danger of disintegrating in a world that is largely perceived as a threat.⁴⁰ “The person... feels at this phase persecuted by reality itself. The world as it is, and other people as they are, are the dangers” (80). However, other people are also needed simply to provide the vulnerable person with what should have come from within:

[There is] a failure to sustain the sense of oneself as a person with the other, and a failure to sustain it alone. There is a failure to sustain a sense of one’s own being without the presence of other people. It is a failure *to be* by oneself, a failure to exist alone. As [schizophrenic] James put it “other people supply me with my identity.” (52)

The schizophrenic, hence, invents a “false self,” a persona (that might harbour several distinct personalities) with which they confront the world as well as themselves. However, what was initially developed as a protective device, a guard or barrier “to prevent disruptive impingement on the self,” often ends up becoming “the walls of a prison from which the self cannot escape” (138). The antidote, thus, ends up the poison.

Laing had read anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s paper *Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia* (1956), in which the author suggests that we understand the schizophrenic as having been caught in an unliveable situation – one marked by the simultaneous presence of mutually exclusive injunctions. Bateson referred to this situation as a *double bind*, and described it as exhibiting the following characteristics: the individual is involved in an important relationship in which the other communicates in a way that one “order” of the

⁴⁰ Laing localizes four types of perceived threat: *engulfment* (“there is the antithesis between complete loss of being by absorption into the other person (engulfment), and complete aloneness (isolation)” (44)); *implosion* (“the full terror of the experience of the world as liable at any moment to crash in and obliterate all identity, as a gas will obliterate a vacuum.” (45)); and finally *petrification and depersonalization* (a fear of turning into stone, and a fear of turning into a thing (46).)

message denies the other. In other words, it somehow contradicts itself. Further, the individual at the receiving end of this dynamic is *unable* to comment on the situation and “make a metacommunicative statement” (208).

Laing incorporated this theory in his own work, and described a typical set of family “rules” as follows, "Rule A: Don't. Rule A.1: Rule A does not exist. Rule A.2: Do not discuss the existence or non-existence of Rules A, A.1, or A.2" (qtd. in Scott and Thorpe, 345). Laing himself favoured the expression *untenable position* (used in *Self and Others*), which essentially characterizes the nature of the double-bind situation, but I will here adopt Bateson's original term.

Closely related to the theory of the double bind is Laing's concept of the schizophrenic as an expositor of familial hypocrisy. Observing how his patients interacted with their parents, Laing concluded that some of his patients acted as “hyperproficient members of the culture of the middle-class family,” exposing what went on underneath the composed surface: “Rather like the anthropologist's ‘key informant,’ they held a unique position as both insiders and outsiders to their everyday social world, having a particularly clear perception of the dynamics of that culture with its secret rituals and hidden mystifications” (Scott and Thorpe 333).

I will use Bateson's theory to show how Ryder comes to take on this function in the novel. By focusing on familial hypocrisy, I want to draw attention to the way in which Ryder acts as an unknowing whistleblower to the “terrible things” that have been done to him in the past. The novel is in many ways a perpetual re-playing and re-imagining of a childhood gone wrong, and while a few things about Ryder's childhood are related through flashbacks, we learn just as much through the way doublespeak, flattery, deception and wishful thinking are employed in the novel.

My first part will explore the notion of Ryder as an ontologically insecure individual. As a character, he is inherently self-contradictory: exceedingly exhibitionist yet void without the gaze of the other; megalomaniacal yet crippled with self-doubt; and relying on a combination of escapism, fantasy and denial to ward off any outside threats to his incoherent self. Additionally, Ryder's fervent insistence that he is an outsider signals a fundamental disengagement with his surroundings that bespeak an ontologically cut-off self. On that tangent, I will move on to discuss the function of a *false self* in the novel. As in chapter one, I will regard Ryder's mirror characters as his mental projections, and the protagonist himself as the manifest fantasy of a superhero persona. In this case, however, I will investigate the issue as something rising out of existentialist needs rooted specifically in the dysfunctional family. Here, I regard the text as the product of a threatened self rather than as a dream, using the particular metaphor of (Laingian) schizophrenia to understand this peculiar universe. It is important to note that this thesis does not propose schizophrenia as a *diagnosis*, but merely uses it as a trope with which to understand the text. The second part engages with the concept of the *double bind*, which is not only displayed in Ryder's childhood memories, but is also one of the defining characteristics of his interaction with others. There is frequently a clear and disturbing discrepancy between what is being said and what is being expressed in, e.g., body language. Drawing on this general elaboration on Bateson's theory, I will in the next part move on to show that, firstly, the topic of familial hypocrisy and two-facedness is central to the universe of the novel; and that, secondly, Ryder's interaction with his entourage offers a damning exposé of these hidden dynamics. The fourth part of this chapter focuses on the paradoxical dual position of unknown outsider and messianic celebrity that Ryder occupies in the novel; a position that I show is tightly tied up to, and made intelligible by the interpretations preceding this discussion. Then follows a discussion of music and high culture in the novel, before I move on to explore the use of animal imagery, which I show is the

feared opposite of Ryder's idealized persona. Finally, I round off with a short discussion of Ryder as someone who is caught in (in Laing's term) a *false position*.

Ontological Insecurity: The Starved Ego

"With these types, you just have to keep up the flattery. So all the time you snap [pictures of Ryder], keep shouting "great". Keep exclaiming. Don't stop feeding his ego" (167)

"It's not fair," Pedro said smiling. "Mr Ryder's so gifted, and then on top of it all, to be blessed with such athleticism. Some of us aren't so lucky" (181)

In *The Unconsoled*, Ryder and his mirror characters' self-images are entirely founded on others' impressions and judgements of them. Like schizophrenic James in *The Divided Self*, Ryder has "no identity of [his] own." Like him he is "only a response to other people" (47). Ryder is basking in the glory of being a star pianist one minute, and is designated "a difficult shit" (166) the next. Everything that Ryder thinks he is others will verbally confirm (and vice versa). The most fervent devotee of the doomed venture for others' admiration that exists in the novel is Gustav. The old porter, whom Ryder lauds for having created the "desired impact" on him by pointlessly carrying heavy suitcases, ends up dying in the farcical Porters' Dance. Cavorting around with heavy luggage on a café-table to impress on his audience the valour of his trade, the extortion ends up costing him his life.⁴¹

⁴¹ Gustav echoes Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*, who also refuses to put down his bags. Estragon and Vladimir keep pressing Pozzo for answers as to why this is, and finally Pozzo reports that "[he] wants to impress me, so that I'll keep him." He reflects on this, and then alters his answer: "He wants to mollify me, so that I'll give up the idea of parting with him." But this also doesn't strike him as quite right. Pozzo, each time embellishing Lucky's perceived powerlessness and deluded state of mind little more, concludes that Lucky "imagines that when I see how well he carries I'll be tempted to keep him on in that capacity" ("Waiting for Godot: Act I"). A usefulness that far outstretches its own usefulness is hence conflated with worth. As such, it can be argued that Gustav personified the kind of person that Pozzo scorns: someone who has convinced himself that he can gain social standing (and by proxy, self-worth) by impressing others with a pantomime of professional usefulness.

With his dying breath he asks his colleagues if Ryder has commended his profession in a speech yet, cementing the view that his existence has primarily been founded firstly on his profession, and secondly on a need to find his identity through the eyes of others.

The overarching obsession with “creating the right impression” pervades not only Ryder’s psyche, but also that of Boris, Hoffman, Gustav, Brodsky and Sophie. It could be argued that this is better interpreted as an exposition of garden-variety insecurity than as ponderous and intangible *ontological* insecurity. However, I would like to make the point that the novel revolves around the concept of an inability to *be for oneself*, rather than mere social anxiety. A small observation might make the difference between these two clearer: Laingian ontological insecurity, unlike “regular” insecurity (or social anxiety), is not remedied by solitude. In fact, the ontological insecure individual often needs others to confirm her realness and supply her with an identity; hence the presence of exhibitionism in some of these individuals. It is important to note that Laing makes the distinction between a necessary form of being-for-others (37) – the meta-perspective of “my perception-of-your-perception-of-me” that informs human interaction (qtd. in Scott & Thorpe 336) and shapes our identities – and the dysfunctional kind that wholly comes to dominate a person’s psyche.

In their discussion of Laing’s impact on sociology, Scott and Thorpe invoke Erving Goffman’s work *Presentations of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), which launched the concept of *symbolic interactionism*. Echoing Laing, his straightforward starting position is that all our actions, as well as the interpretations and meanings we give to those actions, are essentially social in nature. Goffman makes the analogy to theatre and, like Bateson and Laing, he focuses on the part of communication that goes beyond the inherent meaning of the message; in this case, on the part of communication whose aim it is to give off certain positive impressions of the self to others. This focus on communication and action as performance is described as potentially taxing:

Goffman's (1959) remarks about performative identity being divided into backstage and frontstage regions suggests that "civilized" interaction places oppressive demands upon the self. If we were not able to relax in the backstage arena and step out of role, he implies, we would surely become alienated from who we "really" are: the self as performer might be consumed by the self as performed (Scott & Thorpe 337).

However, while Goffman still sees "normal" people as being able to form a coherent whole out of these two divergent aspects – the frontstage and the backstage – of the self, Laing's focus lies on those whose internal worlds have become so fragmented that their selves cannot be assimilated and hence perpetually appear under threat from the outside world. The character of Ryder is, I would maintain, a portrait of someone who has no backstage area in which to relax. As we will see in the discussion of the double bind, the result is that Ryder lacks an ability to form meta-communicative comments on others' statements, has no memories except for those relating to childhood, and can not be said to be in possession of integrity or internal consistency. Per definition, he cannot stand by his promises, since he forgets them unless he has accidentally fulfilled them.

When Ryder reflects about communication, he invariably obsesses about his own behaviour and speech, and wonders how best to present himself to instil in others the right impression. Two scenes in the book in particular exemplify this anxious exhibitionism. There are several situations in which Ryder senses with some acuteness that he is called upon to act, and one of these occurs as Ryder is witnessing Brodsky's rapidly crashing performance. Ryder ponders: "The more I thought about it, the more obvious it became that the performance had to be brought to a halt," yet goes on to falter fatally and makes no move for several minutes. He is, of course, "preoccupied with the question of how precisely to execute such an intervention." Most of all he fears creating "a disastrous impression" on the audience (495). Always the actor, Ryder's main fixation is with his own performance, and evidently Brodsky's is sidelined in the process. The ontologically insecure individual, Laing

comments, is “preoccupied with presenting rather than gratifying himself” (42). Another example occurs when Ryder is to hold a speech at the Countess’s banquet. As Ryder turns over two options for a good opening in his mind, Hoffman, “a horrible grin on his face” (144), rabidly signals for him to start speaking, incidentally at the worst possibly time as the room erupts in chaos. The audience freezes in anticipation, but Ryder only manages to bellow “Collapsing curtain rails! Poisoned rodents! Misprinted score sheets!” (145) before he is interrupted by Miss Collins calmly asking him a question. Then things peter out into nothing as he forgets all about his speech. (But no matter: the next day the whole town expresses the utmost delight with his “marvellously witty address” (155).⁴²) Thus, Ryder’s self is a *public* self, and his absolute self-consciousness should be understood in existential terms. Laing points out that the individual who has developed a false self is “invariably terribly ‘self-conscious’ in the sense in which this word is used to mean the exact opposite, namely, the feeling of being under observation by the *other*” (74). The term exhibitionism, he insists, “is only valid if it is to be understood existentially” (57).

I would like to look at another observation that Laing made that offers a way of understanding the character of Ryder. “[A] curious phenomenon,” Laing remarked,

is that in which the individual seems to be the vehicle of a personality that is not his own... from the simple, benign observation that so-and-so “takes after his father” or “that’s her mother’s temper coming out in her,” to the extremes distress of the person who finds himself under a compulsion to take on the characteristics of a personality he may hate and/or feel entirely alien to his own. (58)

I would like to argue that Ryder does not only re-enact his parents, but that his various satellite characters also take on their personalities. When they do not take on the roles of his parents, they are their imagined antidotes: Ryder’s great admirers; cultured, civilized people

⁴² Mr. Ryder “charming speech,” we are told, “went down sensationally.” Just in case we miss the point, also Hilde Strattman makes sure to lavish praise on his spectacular opus later on: “oh, everyone’s talking about how witty and entertaining it was” (253). Thus, Ryder performs a successful act of altering history. If the past does not conform to ego-nourishing ideals, Ryder makes such to alter it.

who revere him. Ryder, meanwhile, often turns into his father in his interaction with his son Boris. The rest of the time the treacherous father is played out by the pathetic, confused, and ghoulish Hoffman.

“No Sir, There Really is Nothing to Worry About”

The character who most often creates a double bind situation in the novel is the ubiquitous Mr. Hoffman. We frequently encounter situations where what is communicated pulls in two distinct directions: what is explicitly said covers up for meaning that denies these very words. Throughout the novel Ryder is again and again told not to worry, all the while the rest of the messages clearly communicate to him that he cannot do anything *but* be terribly concerned.

I will cite an example: one of the first things Hoffman tells him is “[please] don't worry at all about your delayed arrival” (18), and so the matter is communicated to Ryder for the first time while simultaneously giving off the impression that the supposed delay is old news, not to be elaborated upon in order not to cause further embarrassment to Ryder. His statement lands Ryder with several mutually exclusive meanings to deal with. Ryder is told he has failed to live up to his obligations, and inconvenienced a considerable number of people. “[All] the ladies and gentlemen,” we are told, “were very understanding” (18). So not only has Ryder, Hoffman tells him, committed a social blunder, he is also put in a situation of debt to people who have courteously extended him their understanding. Ryder is thus on the one hand made to feel inferior and in the wrong, but on the other told the obverse, because after all, *despite* the alarming news there is “really nothing to worry about.” Ryder cannot in any way comment on this message, since it does not cohere. Yet what is truly tragicomic here is the fact that in the first chapter, Ryder arrives at an empty hotel and is told that Hoffman could not be there to receive him because he was at an “important meeting.” Hence, Ryder is

rebuked in three distinct ways: nobody greets him and he is made to feel unwelcome; he is later told that the fact that there was no-one there is his fault, as he arrived too late; and finally, he is made to feel both guilty for his own behaviour and grateful about the ways others have acted. It is quite a feat of deception.

The mechanism is evidently also displayed in the following passage. Hoffman calls Ryder and seems perturbed that his guest has been sleeping. When Ryder tells Hoffman that he looks forward to meeting him, and that he “no doubt” will be down before long, the latter asks him to please come “absolutely in [his] own time.” “For my part,” Hoffman adds, “I shall continue to wait here – that is, down here in the lobby – however long you care to take. So please don't hurry at all.” Ryder is perturbed, and protests

‘But Mr Hoffman, you must have so many other things to do.’

‘True, this is a very busy part of the day. But for you, Mr Ryder, I will happily wait here for as long as necessary.’

‘Please, Mr Hoffman, don't waste your valuable time on my account. I'll be down presently and then I'll come and find you.’

‘Mr Ryder, it's no bother at all. In fact, I'll be honoured to wait here for you. So as I say, come entirely in your own time. I assure you, I will remain standing here until you arrive.’ (19)

Ryder, hence, is simultaneously told “take your time, it doesn't matter;” “if you do not come down immediately, you will greatly inconvenience and offend me;” and “I am extending you a courtesy that you do not deserve, for this you must be very grateful.” Finally, all along Hoffman acts in an obsequious manner that aims to suggest to Ryder that he is an *immensely* important and valuable guest to his establishment.

According to Bateson's hypothesis, “the term ‘ego function’ (as this term is used when a schizophrenic is described as having “weak ego function”) is *precisely the process of discriminating between communication modes either within the self or between the self and others*” (205; emphasis in the original). Further, the schizophrenic has difficulties in “assigning

the correct communicational mode to messages received and messages he himself utters. Finally, he has “difficulty in assigning the correct communicational mode to his own thoughts, sensations, and percepts” (205). It is clear that Ryder simply cannot discriminate between Hoffman’s communication modes here, as he has, to borrow Goffman’s term, no backstage area in which to conduct this process. Hence, he simply follows what is, in the end, Hoffman’s orders without questioning their underlying complexity and contradictions. Ryder believes that Hoffman is polite, and that he kindly asks him to come down, without fully realizing that he has been duped. He knows with some acuity that there seems “little option” (19) other than going down to see Hoffman, thus he confusedly gets the message: he cannot refuse this supposedly polite recommendation. Ryder does not reflect on how this can be.

In Bateson’s words, he cannot make metacommunicative comments. However, in the usual ego-saving manoeuvre, a strong urge for coffee comes over Ryder; hence his departure from the hotel room is made a matter of his own volition and he recovers his threatened autonomy. When Ryder leaves the room with “some urgency” it is the craving for coffee that drives him to hurry, and not Hoffman.

Performing Happiness

To understand why doublespeak occupies such a central position in the novel, it is necessary to turn to one of Ryder’s flashbacks, which – as previously mentioned – often offer us a context that makes sense of what happens in the novel. This time the theme is familial hypocrisy. The following passage revolves around Ryder’s memory of how he once went for a car ride in the countryside with his parents to look for a used boy’s bike. The family arrives at an old woman’s house, and the woman exclaims that “it is always such a pleasure... to receive people like yourselves” (264). The comment comes to haunt Ryder:

Suddenly... it had dawned on me that to this old woman my parents and I represented an ideal of family happiness. A huge tension had followed this realisation, one which had continued to mount within me throughout the half-hour or so we had stayed. It was not that I had feared my parents would fail to keep up their usual show - it was inconceivable they would have started even the most sanitised version of one of their rows.⁴³ But I had become convinced that at any second some sign, perhaps even some smell, would cause the old woman to realise the enormity of her error, and I had watched with dread for the moment she would suddenly freeze in horror before us. (264)⁴⁴

It is clear from this passage that Ryder's parents are devoted to their performance of the happy family, and that their public personas are deeply at odds with their behaviour in the home. What Ryder is afraid of is that, despite his parents carefully monitoring their performance to leave the old woman with the "right impression," some of the truth might seep out from inside this manufactured exterior. Goffman, here paraphrased by Scott and Thorpe, makes the distinction between "the impressions consciously 'given' by actors through the manifest contents of their speech and actions," and the impressions they inadvertently 'give off,' for example, through nonverbal gestures, which may contradict this first appearance" (336). It is the latter that Ryder, implicated in the family pantomime, fears might end up destroying the good impression. This should also be related to Laing's perception of the schizophrenic as being perpetually afraid of being transparent, penetrable, and defenceless against the world. In the episode preceding the car trip in Ryder's memory, his mother shouts at him that she will "skin [him] alive" (262) if he does not behave. The fear of total vulnerability is thus also rooted in – or worsened by – his mother's abuse.

⁴³ This comment echoes one of Laing's findings: "In *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (Laing and Esterson [1964] 1970), we see how the sanitized versions of events presented by these families conceal an ongoing pattern of distorted communication within the home" (in Scott & Thorpe, 339).

⁴⁴ A similar note is struck in a later passage, in Ryder's fantasy of his parents' grandiose arrival in horse-drawn carriage (related in Chapter One): "And then, as the liveried coachman hurried to help them down, and a line of dignitaries formed to greet them, they would adopt the wilfully calm smiles I recalled from my childhood, from those rare occasions when my parents invited guests to the house for lunch or dinner" (289).

In his discussion of exhibitionism, Laing remarks that “the preoccupation with being seeable may be condensed with the idea of the mental self being penetrable and vulnerable, as when the individual feels that one can look right through him into his ‘mind’ or ‘soul’” (106). What Ryder is terrified of here is that the self cannot be contained – the fear of the woman’s presence and attention signals a danger of being revealed, of being literally *transparent*. As Laing says of a schizophrenic, “she lacked the unified experience on which to base a clear idea of the ‘boundary’ of her being” (197).

The notion of a bad smell revealing hidden ugliness is also related in *The Divided Self*. Laing describes how one of his cases, a young male schizophrenic, is obsessed with the idea that he is emitting an “unpleasant smell.” “He likened it to... the smell that comes from the broken-down ‘closets’ of the slum tenements of the district in which he grew up,” and “could not get away from this smell although he had taken to having several baths a day” (120). Laing roots this (and the man’s intense self-consciousness) in the fact that “[there] was a primary inadequacy in the reality of his own experiences of himself as embodied and it was out of this that his preoccupation with his body-for-others arose, i.e., his body as seeable, hearable, smellable, touchable by others” (127). That Ryder himself is somehow lacking embodiment is also reflected in the malevolent scene in which the journalists discuss what a vain, “difficult shit” (166) he is, all the while Ryder is there in their midst. The absurdity of the situation is underlined by the polite smiles flung in his direction in-between exchanged insults.

Ryder, then, is someone who relies desperately on containment as a governing principle of his life. The body is seen as a vessel that might spill out its poisonous content– in that respect he mirrors Laing’s schizophrenic. A more charitable interpretation of Ryder’s absolute distance from his wife and child, thus, can be that this is seen as a necessary measure to protect *them*.

Someone Very Special

The 'self-conscious' person is caught in a dilemma. He may need to be seen and recognized, in order to maintain his sense of realness and identity. Yet at the same time, the other represents a threat to his identity and reality. One finds extremely subtle efforts expended in order to resolve this dilemma in terms of the secret inner self and behavioural false-self systems already prescribed. (113)

The young man in *The Divided Self* who worried about bad smells found a remedy to his obsessive anxiety: to always aim to be a stranger. "[He] could, he felt, be with others if they knew nothing about him" (132). In a portrayal that comes to spell out Ryder's predicament, this fate is described as follows: "It meant that he had to go to another part of the country where he was a 'stranger.' He would go from place to place, never staying long enough to be known, each time under a different name." This fantasy – of "being a stranger in a strange land" – Laing observes, "is a common one in people with ideas of reference" (128). Notably, there are two things that Ryder persists in telling others about himself in the novel. The first is that he is someone who has to travel from place to place, on a crucial mission whose particular nature is always delicately occluded. ("It's all this travelling, [Ryder said,] "Hotel room after hotel room. Never seeing anyone you know. It's been very tiring" (38).) The second thing is that he is a mere outsider to everything that goes on in the city, and hence is neither responsible for others, nor can he be expected to fully understand local matters.

I have earlier referred to Ryder's "training session," which he starts undertaking when he is nine years old. He is out playing on his own, outside the family's cottage in the countryside, and is suddenly overcome by strong need for his parents. "But for some reason – perhaps I had quickly associated the sensation with immaturity – I had forced myself to delay my departure" (172). He comes to associate his ability to detach himself from his feelings (and his need for human companionship) with power and control, and his "training sessions"

are soon a “regular and important feature” of his life. Moreover, they start to have a “somewhat compulsive hold” (172) over him. I want to interpret this memory of developing a shield against feelings as a defence mechanism arising from having put in an *untenable* – or double bind – situation. The child who is put in an untenable situation ends up being unable to trust any external sources of truth and reality. In Ryder’s own world, however, it is he who defines right and wrong. I would like to draw on a passage from *The Divided Self* to elaborate on this memory. One of the schizophrenics that Laing describes in his book is a young man who relates how his parents would put him in situations in which what was communicated was riddled with such contradictions and hypocrisies that he in the end could not handle it any more. The boy found himself in a complex situation in which he was first accused of stealing and then of lying about stealing, punished for both, and finally understood to be in need of his parents’ forgiveness. Despite having been honest all along, his mother asks him to come to her and kiss and make up. He feels deeply uncomfortable with the situation, which seems “twisted” to him,

yet the longing to go to her, embrace her, and be at one with her was almost unendurable. Although he could not articulate the situation clearly he stood his ground without moving towards her. She then said: “Well if you don’t love your mummy I just have to go away,” and walked out of the room. The room seemed to spin. The longing was unbearable, but suddenly, everything was different yet the same. He saw the room and himself for the first time. The longing to cling had gone. He had somehow broken into a new region. He was alone. Could this woman be connected to him? (163-164)

We have earlier seen that Ryder’s parents, though never explicitly described as communicating with *Ryder* in a manner that might be termed two-faced, are deeply invested in maintaining a proper façade in the face of others, covering up for a more unsavoury truth. Ryder himself is spoken to but once in his childhood memories – and that is when his mother yells at him that she wants to “skin [him] alive” (262). The rest of the memories contain references to his parents fighting, and Ryder being alone. Another look at *The Divided Self*

demonstrates that in Laing's case studies the first thing that generally dominates the patients' family life is the double-bind situation. The second common feature (which may or may not overlap) is that *parents act as if their child does not exist*.⁴⁵ All subsequent anxieties revolve around a persistent fear of having no experience of one's own, and of never being able to be anything but an object in other people's worlds. Paradoxically, in order to neutralize this fear, the threatened person undertakes to become nothing but an object to others. As Laing puts it, "[it] seems a general law that at some point the very dangers most dreaded can themselves be encompassed to forestall their actual occurrence" (51). In order to avoid having someone else turn them into objects, they do it themselves; a dead thing cannot be killed. Thus, it serves as protection against "being sucked into the whirlpool of another person's way to comprehend oneself" (51). It is on the basis of this analysis that I would like to argue that Ryder's position of perpetual outsider is but a protective shield against *the intrusion of others*. Whenever people seem to get too close, he will be the first to point out that as an outsider he can only offer limited help and comprehension. Ryder cannot get too involved in human matters – which is also one of the great ironies of the novel, since people do nothing but try to get him to meddle in their family affairs. However, these are always *other* people's families. When Gustav asks Ryder for help vis-à-vis his daughter, it is never pointed out that Sophie is Ryder's wife, and that Ryder himself is Gustav's son-in-law. As an outsider, Ryder is straining to keep himself out of these family matters: "Suddenly I felt very weary and wished the whole affair to be taken off my hands. I don't know, I don't know," I said. "As I keep saying, these family matters... I'm merely an outsider. How can I judge?" (86)

Lest this notion of finding salvation in being an incognito stranger seem diametrically opposed to at least one facet of Ryder's situation – namely his special status as an eminent celebrity – I want to turn to another passage by Laing that offers some clarification on this

⁴⁵ "[Mrs. R] felt... that her parents were always too engrossed in each other ever to take notice of her" (54); "His mother, [James] felt, had never recognized his existence" (97); "[Peter's] parents simply treated him *as if he wasn't there*" (120; emphasis in the original).

outward incongruity. Laing describes another schizophrenic who also entertains fantasies of being a complete stranger, but reports that this need subsequently took on another characteristic:

“In imagination” the conviction was growing and gathering of having fantastic powers... characteristically vague and undefined but nevertheless contributing to the idea that he was not simply James of this time and this place, of such parents, but someone very special, with an extraordinary mission, a reincarnation perhaps of the Buddha or Christ. (141)

As a result of this sudden perceived omnipotence, the schizophrenic can turn herself into whatever she wants to be; a reaction against a world in which she was perceived as a nobody. However, what masquerades as an all-powerful self, Laing maintains, is anything but: “[its] omnipotence is based on impotence. Its freedom operates in a vacuum” (141). Operating in a world in which he is all-powerful, but supplies himself with this authority himself, Ryder’s real power is nil. Any distance traversed is reduced to nothing; any progress made is hopelessly botched by the fact that, in his effort to repress and ignore any failure, Ryder has lost the only real possibility –and parameter of – progress. Because Ryder cannot fail, he cannot succeed either; hence his only course is stagnation masquerading as movement.

In the novel, Ryder is presented as someone very special, a unique authority on all matters; “not only the world’s finest living pianist, but perhaps the very greatest of the century (11); “a brilliant musician, one of the most gifted presently at work anywhere in the world” (187); “a man of internationally recognised genius” with “unrivalled expertise” (301); someone who, in the words of Miss Collins, has a “calling” (145). Ryder himself insists that “people need me. I arrive in a place and more often than not find terrible problems. Deep-seated, seemingly intractable problems, and people are so grateful I’ve come” (37). Crucially, the “characteristically vague and undefined” nature of Ryder’s supposed power and greatness is maintained. The tenacity of this tacit starting point is made clear when at one point Miss Collins questions Ryder’s authority by rebuking him for making conclusions on Stephan’s

situation. She asks him straight out: “[why] do you take it upon yourself to pronounce like this, as though you're blessed with some extra sense the rest of us lack?” (133) Ryder is deeply uneasy with the question, which seems to hint at something dangerous upon which he *cannot* reflect:

I had been feeling increasingly uncomfortable since Miss Collins's initial intervention, and while she was saying this I had found myself turning away in an effort to avoid her gaze. I could not think of any obvious retort to her questions and after a moment, deciding it best to cut short the encounter, I gave a small laugh and drifted off into the crowd. (133)

In being “unable to think of any obvious retort,” Ryder reveals that he is not able to come to any kind of realization. The question, of course, is nothing but a persistent fear manifesting itself by being pronounced by an extraneous voice. His reaction is always aimed outward: his parameters are external and his reaction must, it follows, solely cater to the outside world. Further, we see that his objective is never to *answer* her question; his intention is to locate the appropriate outward reaction to her injunction. The question is deemed unanswerable because Ryder’s special status is a *sine qua non* which lies outside the realm of the meaningful or the communicable. Hence, a reaction to this baffling piece of *gaucherie* seems impossible to locate, and Ryder does the only thing he can do: masking his sudden insecurity with laughter, he walks away from the troubling situation. Since he has no solid self, no *internal consistency* to speak of; no real memory of recent events (or messages received) in the recent past, nothing going on in the “backstage area,” he is condemned to proceed like an amnesiac chameleon.

A Man of Culture

“I would enjoy nothing better just now than to join you, Mr Ryder,”
[Hoffman said] “Converse in a leisurely way about music and the arts” (24)

I want to discuss another theme that pervades the novel: music. I have previously explained Ryder’s role as a star pianist with the theory that this is a mere fantastic, false identity he inhabits, and that this superhero is a mere disembodied self; an antidote to feelings of worthlessness. However, another aspect of this role should be highlighted. One strand of the novel centres on boys made to be their families’ improbable saviours (Ryder, Stephan, Boris), children who come to see themselves at the root of their families’ problems and hence responsible for retrieving a paradise lost.⁴⁶ This basic premise fuels Ryder in his search for lost happiness: his futile attempt to perform for (what seems to be) the first time for his parents so that they, at last united in their recognition of their son’s talent and value, will love him and each other.⁴⁷ Music figures explicitly but once in Ryder’s own memories, when he joins his parents to visit a neighbour, who has a piano. Ryder remembers this particular episode as he is playing the piano on his own in a small wooden hut in the middle of nowhere, which Hoffman grandiosely refers to it as the hotel’s “annexe”:

There had been a piano in one corner of her living room, which I could not remember ever having seen with the lid raised. For all I knew, it might well have been out of tune or broken. But a particular memory came back to me, of sitting quietly in that room, my cup of tea on my knee, listening to my parents chatting to Mrs Clarkson about music. Perhaps my father had just asked if she ever played her piano, for certainly, music had not been a regular topic with Mrs Clarkson. In any case, for no real logical reason, as I continued with the

⁴⁶ This situation also characterizes Ryder’s relation to the city; like a child he is helpless and lost there, manipulated and deceived, but is still made to be its potential savior, a fundamental betrayal that replays his relationship to his parents.

⁴⁷ Ryder himself cannot seem to make up his mind as to whether this is the *first* time his parents will hear him perform, or if they used to do so many years ago and that this will be his first performance for them *as an adult*. The line between fact, assumption, and mere wish also becomes increasingly blurred as Ryder slowly and painfully comes to realize that his parents were never scheduled to show up at all. “And my poor parents, coming all this way, to hear me perform for the very first time! (272); “The fact of the matter was that finally, after all these years, I was about to perform once more before my parents” (420); “My parents, they’re coming tonight. That’s right! They’re coming at last, tonight!” (444); “[The] fact was, I was sure that this time, at last, they would come. Surely, it wasn’t unreasonable of me to assume they would come this time?” (512)

third movement of *Asbestos and Fibre* there in the wooden hut, I allowed myself the satisfaction of pretending I was back in that room in Mrs Clarkson's cottage, my father, my mother, Mrs Clarkson listening with serious expressions while I played the piano in the corner, the lace curtain threatening to blow across my face in the summer breeze. (358)

Just as I have rooted Ryder's construction of a false self in the memory of the training sessions, I want to trace his particular fantasy of being an eminent musician in this little passage. Ryder merely pictures the respect he would have gained if he *had* played, but it is nothing but an imagined scene. It is a wish that he lives out fully in his dream world. Music is chosen as the means with which he will gain his parents' recognition. Essentially it serves the function of distinguished high-brow culture that seems a refined (and absent) antidote to the poverty and animosity of his childhood home. What he imagines as a discussion about music in his memory turns out to be nothing but a question as to whether Mrs Clarkson plays the piano. Ryder's extraordinary nonsense speeches about music delivered to Christoff, in all their strained attempts at intellectual finesse, are but fantasies of prominence as remedy. Most importantly, as a star pianist he will for the first time *make his parents listen*.

One other memory contains references to music: in Miss Collins's anteroom Jonathan Parkhurst reminds Ryder that the other students used to viciously mock him when he complained about having to miss several days of piano rehearsals on accounts of his exams. Ryder is sent into a distracting reverie, one that makes him feel "very tranquil," and he "hardly care[s]" what Parkhurst is saying (305). He remembers more idyllic times as a student when he lived with other students at a farmhouse in the countryside. Simultaneously, however, it dawns on him that these students, people he considered his friends, are the very people to whom Parkhurst is here referring. This strain of thought is immediately suppressed and Ryder remains calm and relaxed. What dominates his recollection, however, is an image of cultured student life, starkly in contrast with Parkhurst's recollection of the loud, belligerent students heading to the pub to get "pissed out of [their] brain" (304). Ryder's

account sounds not so much like a believable account of student days, as a strained and romanticized expression of what that type of life might look like. As the young Ryder is sitting in his room on a sunny afternoon, the score of “some concerto” he has been “studying in lackadaisical way” rests on his lap, while he considers “abandoning [it] for one of the nineteenth-century novels piled on the wooden floor” (305). Outside, a group of students are arguing about “philosophy or poetry or some such thing,”⁴⁸ and these “companions” will sometimes drop by his room to “spent a casual hour or two [discussing] some novelist or Spanish guitarist” (305). In its improbable arch-civilized way, the description “announce[s] its artificiality” (210).⁴⁹ This memory, thus, departs from other memories in that it is already more marked by fantasy than reality: while other flashbacks picture a lonely and upset Ryder either playing on his own, or confessing his miseries to Geoffrey or Fiona, this one is oddly rose tinted and devoid of disruptive elements. In fact, it is closer to the vision of the star pianist Ryder than to his real childhood

An ox! An ox, an ox, an ox!

The previous section dealt with the function of high culture in the novel; the present turns to its opposite. In memories, Ryder is depicted as a child living in poverty, residing in a cottage in the countryside with his parents. The farmland of his childhood, with its overgrown grass and muddy paths, is repeatedly revived in the novel, and Brodsky’s decrepit farmhouse in particular mirrors the childhood home.

⁴⁸ That last hasty and insecure “or some such thing” is probably the phrase that most of all gives the description a strained tone. It gives the rather sad impression that Ryder *does not quite know what refined students like these would talk about*.

⁴⁹ This is the phrase an admiring Ryder uses to describe the area surrounding the artificial lake and apartment complex. Incidentally, it is a place with “no trace of grass anywhere, [with trees] encased in steel pots and cut precisely into the paving” (210). The place is as clean of anything resembling the nature of his youth as his memory is devoid of drunken schoolmates.

Tellingly, several male characters, in particular Hoffman and Gustav, are described as animals. Hoffman repeatedly scolds himself for being “an ox, an ox!” (123, 383, 507), and Gustav is described as a “beast” in a noteworthy passage

I managed to make out further down the corridor the outline of some large beast, coming towards us slowly, emitting the noise each time it moved. Sophie and Boris had become aware of its presence at the same time and for a moment we all seemed to become transfixed. Then Boris exclaimed in a whisper: “It's Grandfather!” I then saw that the beast was indeed Gustav, hunched right over, holding one suitcase under his arm, a second by its handle and dragging behind him a third - the source of the slithering noise. (280)

In depicting the worker as a slaving, slithering beast the Ryder's more delicate position is highlighted. However, Ryder himself, at a moment when he needs to prove his eminence the most, is described as having swine-like trait: “I saw that my face had become bright red and squashed into pig-like features, while my fists, clenched at chest level, were quivering along with the whole of my torso” (240). Incidentally, the description also fits that of an infant: inarticulate, helpless, and needy. In other words, what is characterised is someone that is exactly the opposite of what Ryder is straining to be in the novel: an eloquent, powerful, self-sufficient man of culture.

The martyred Hoffman, with his savage inferiority-complex, sees himself as a man whose cultured, elegant wife will leave him the moment she finds out what a base brute he really is.

‘Why was I ever allowed to put my clumsy hands anywhere near such divine things as music, art, culture? You, from a talented family, you could have married anyone. What a mistake you made. A tragedy. ...’ Hoffman stooped forward and bringing his fist up to his forehead, performed the movement I had watched him rehearsing earlier in the evening. ... ‘They'll all know it, down to the smallest child in the town. From tonight, whenever they see me *scuttling* about my business, they'll know I have nothing. No talent, no sensitivity, no finesse. Leave me, leave me. I'm nothing but an ox, an ox, an ox!’ (emphasis mine; 507).

While Gustav “slithers,” Hoffman “scuttles” – the former brings a snail to mind; the latter a beetle.⁵⁰ In opposition to this, Hoffman has a fantasy that includes wandering with his wife through “some wonderful gallery full of the most beautiful objects,” which displays a balcony with “great statues of lions at each corner” – noble creatures rather than filthy insects. In the novel the elegant gallery in the countryside, overlooking “vast areas of land” is the Countess’s house, but the only art object that is mentioned explicitly in this gallery is caterpillar vases.

The image of the caterpillars is also picked up by Brodsky, who relates to Ryder how some vague idea of caterpillars keeps menacing him: “These last months. I saw the caterpillars, but I went on, I went on, I made myself ready”; “Sometimes it was so terrible I wanted to die [...] Sometimes it got terrible, the caterpillars...” (326). The caterpillars, of course, as insects, could refer to Hoffman – but seeing as they also symbolise a transition to something potentially more beautiful, it is interesting that they are here seen as a menace. Most of all, however, they represent a definite change, a moment of transition following which everything will be different. Incidentally, this reflects the most idealized and feared symbol in the book, in which characters usually inhabit an indefinite in-between wedged between too early and too late. A caterpillar, finally, is first of all representative of *potential*: in changing into what it is meant to be in dies *qua* caterpillar. As Brodsky becomes conductor, he dies as Brodsky (who relied on his existence on being *former* maestro and *potential* maestro) and is finally taken away to the St. Nicholas clinic for “down and outs.” A more sombre interpretation of Hoffman’s behaviour is suggested by the description of him pounding his own forehead,⁵¹ a movement that hints at the biblical notion of the mark of the beast.⁵² This parallel is highlighted by Hoffman’s position in

⁵⁰ This is an interpretation that Brodsky supports by describing Hoffman as “the lowest!” and himself as “this... this... *piece of dung*” (442) for having let Hoffman manipulate him. The image of the busy little dung beetle Hoffman rolling the confused Brodsky along is indeed oddly apt.

⁵¹ This ritual is described three times in the book. The first time we are told that he does it thrice.

⁵² The idea is strengthened by the name of his opponent and former loadstar, Henri Christoff, whose demise Hoffman has contributed to bringing on. *Henri* references I.N.R.I.; *Christoff* Christ. Christoff has a group of devoted “protégées,” it should be mentioned, who before his fall from grace “found their meaning through [him]” (191). In that respect, the fact that Ryder contributes to his demise him signals that Ryder sees himself as

the novel: masking as Ryder's greatest benefactor, he really is an emblem of disguised bad intentions.

The two named animals in the novel – the hamster Ulrich, and Bruno the dog – meet their demise. Similarly, Hoffman destroys himself, Brodsky is put away, and Gustav dies. The irony is that it is subtly hinted that Hoffman is the one who kills Brodsky's dog,⁵³ In an odd circular fashion, thus, the dog's death safeguard's Brodsky's demise, which then safeguards Hoffman's position as a boorish ox. While also being an antidote to the animosity of his home, Ryder's superhero persona, a sophisticated man above animal needs and brutishness, is also born in opposition to the "farmboys with muddy sticks" who drove cows by his home twice a day (261), and the "disgusting" herd of schoolmates of Pankhurst's story, with their incessant "braying noises" (302).

I suggest that this animal imagery is used to represent Ryder's fear of embodiment, physical needs, and life at large. Ryder refuses to be a biological entity – in his universe time does not even pass. Instead, he is ethereal, timeless, and rootless. Secondly, it suggests the child's fear of dangerous adult sexuality. Having previously tied up Brodsky's vulgar speech about seducing Miss Collins to Ryder's repressed anger with his mother in my previous chapter, I want to root his image of men as beasts to his parents' relationship. His mother's (posited) rejection of his father is replayed again and again in the novel as a representation of beast-like men undeserving of their sophisticated, delicate wives. In conclusion, this polarization of gender roles seems not only a replaying of Ryder's past, but a *justification* of it. Only if his father was a dismal brute would Ryder's mother's rejection of her husband make sense.

someone inherently evil. Additionally, he poses in front of the Sattler monument – a tower whose name brings to mind Satan.

⁵³ "[A] group of gentlemen - Mr .von Winterstein among them - will be taking Mr. Brodsky to the zoo tomorrow. ... His dog can't be admitted, naturally, but Mr. Brodsky has finally consented to leave it in good hands for just a couple of hours" (60). Incidentally, Hoffman is not seen for a while during this period, and when Ryder borrows his car at the end of the novel, it contains muddy boots, a hacksaw, and a torch (442-442)– all suitably suspicious. The dog, is found "virtually hidden between [a] lamp-post and [a] wooden fence" (140); "hidden" being the operative word here.

He Has Lost the Place

I want to turn, briefly, to Laing's *Self and Others* (1961) to conclude this chapter. In it, the author explains what it means to be in what he terms a "false position." This time Laing focuses on interpersonal relations – particularly on how easily they can deteriorate and, in the end, threaten the individual's mental health. In the chapter *False and Untenable Positions*, Laing describes individuals who are not really "in" the positions they hold. In contrast, he holds, the healthy individual truly inhabits his life. With the vulnerable willingness of being "authentic" comes an "intensification of being;" the true meaning of Nietzsche's "will to power" (127). "In 'putting myself into' what I do, I lose myself, and in so doing I seem to become myself. The act that I do is felt to be me, and I become 'me' in and through such action" (126).

I have previously described Ryder as a character who, in detaching *himself* in an absolute way from his parents (rather than letting his parents leave him) he becomes unable to pronounce any judgement on them and is doomed to forever inhabit the object position. He has never asserted his own subjective position; hence he is an "outsider" forever looking to be made real and whole again by his parents' re-appearance. What I want to argue here, moreover, is that he inhabits a *false position*. Having no real self, he can only *be* his role – world-famous Ryder – without truly being *in* it. The individual in the false position may be frantically busy, but as his actions are devoid of any intrinsic meaning, they are futile. Ryder with his exceedingly tight (missing) schedule, who always has "a busy day in front of [him]" (155, 162) cannot manage to accomplish a single meaningful thing.

I ended my last chapter with a short note on the circularity of Ryder's endeavours. I want to end the current chapter with a quote from *Self and Others* which also describes an individual who is going nowhere; a passage that reads like an exposure of the workings of Ryder

The person in a false position has lost a starting-point of his own from which to throw or thrust himself, that is, to project himself forward. He has lost the place. He does not know where he is or where he is going. He cannot get anywhere however hard he tries. In despair, just as one place is the same as another so one time is the same as another. The future is the resultant of the present, the present is the result of the past, and the past is unalterable. (131)

A Page From Real Life

Up until 1995, all of Kazuo Ishiguro's novels had made use of a rather conventional narrative format, with elderly narrators revealing – and reflecting over – their lives through flashbacks as their pasts steadily unravel in a straight line behind them. This technique, Ishiguro states to Tim Adams in *The Observer*, came to seem an inadequate way of representing life as he himself was growing older, one very much expressing “a young person's view of life” (“Mythical Place”). He elaborates: “When I got to 40 or so I realised that was not how we experienced life at all. I had the sense when I looked back over my life I would actually see a mess of decisions, a few of which I had thought about, some of which I had sort of stumbled on and many that I had no control over whatsoever.” Ishiguro decided to write a novel that better reflected this perspective, a book that Adams describes as a “600-page demonstration of the comic, disturbing lack of linear progression in a single life.”⁵⁴ “We go through life rather like this guy goes through these four or five days,” Ishiguro remarks in an interview with the *Kenyon*, and elaborates

Often Ryder looks a bit odd because he promises a kid something and then turns around and forgets. Over the course of a life we do this the whole time. You promise friends that you'll always be friends, or spouses that you'll always be together; or that you're going to live a certain way, and then you meet that same person five or six years later and they're doing something completely different. You don't think that they are completely mad or amnesiac or something, but just that that's the way life is. (153)

Hence, *The Unconsoled* is – among other things – a novel that attempts to throw light on the common but self-deceptive human tendency of thinking, in Ishiguro's words, that “we are far more in control than we are” (153). It can be claimed then, that the novel does what Viktor Shklovsky wanted art to do by means of *ostranenie*; make us

⁵⁴ A more prosaic observer simply described it as “an endless car journey to a concert that never takes place” (Patterson “Samurai”).

look anew and turn the familiar into the unfamiliar. Ishiguro himself makes the observation that “it is only when you look at it from a certain perspective and compress it into a few days that [Ryder’s conduct] starts to look like very strange behaviour” (153). By compressing a life into a few days, then, Ishiguro made it seem bizarre; so much that readers had to resort to explanatory metaphors to make sense of it. In this thesis, I resorted to reading the novel as a mental universe to make it “work.”⁵⁵

The novel indeed offers a sharp representation of real life, and in reading it as a display of mental universe, my aim was precisely to figure out what made it seem so terribly real. What Ishiguro did was to capitalize on human anxieties, letting them govern Ryder’s world without providing the usual buffers of time and distance. In doing so, he alienated a whole slew of readers, many of whom were unwilling to put up with the stress of residing in Ryder’s head. If they could bear it, they were most likely to be bored. Some reviewers, curiously, accused the novel of succeeding too well in resembling a real nightmare. Paul Gray, considering the novel a sad case of “a considerable talent pursuing a questionable achievement,” felt compelled to ask: “Why produce a free-floating nightmare when the real thing lurks each night for millions of people, unbidden and free of charge?” (“Bad Dream”).⁵⁶ Why indeed?

I set out to write this thesis aiming to prove James Wood wrong in his assertion that *The Unconsoled* was “meaningless.” In order to do that, however, I had to choose an approach that simultaneously made sense of the extra-realist, “bizarre” features of the novel, *and* went to the core of what made it oddly recognizable despite these features. In choosing to frame the novel as a mental universe, I believe I have achieved my goal.

⁵⁵ A puzzled reader, however, remarked that he could not understand why reviewers kept referring to the novel as a dream: “I feel like these reviewers must have very... normal lives. Like nothing weird ever happens to them, like they never find themselves in situations where they are not in control, or where agency just doesn't seem to be particularly important. This book is as much a page from real life as any memoir” (Matthew “Goodreads”).

⁵⁶ This argument is oddly akin to asking “why write a novel about unhappy lives when the real thing is experiences every day by millions of people, unbidden and free of charge?”

In Chapter One, I read the novel as a dream; in Chapter Two, as an expression of a split mind. The first had the benefit of capitalizing on the fact that dreams, despite their seemingly nonsensical nature, have their roots in – and provoke – genuine anxieties. Ryder’s universe is often surreal, but it is surreal in a way that is both compelling and unsettling to the reader – hence its origins, I theorized, had to be localizable in real, recognizable childhood traumas. Secondly, in adopting R.D. Laing’s attitude toward his patients for Ryder, my goal was to make sense of the character’s peculiarities. Seemingly nonsensical behaviour came to appear sensible in the light of an understanding of Ryder as a portrayal of someone who cannot sustain his sense of self without the constant validation of others.

The earliest memory Ryder recalls, which I analyzed in chapter one, sheds light on the entire novel. The child Ryder discovers a stain on the floor. Absorbed in a fantasy, he manages to incorporate the fault it. Not only does Ryder pretend that the blemish is part of his fantasy; from that point on the tear in the carpet *is* “a bush terrain for [his] soldiers to cross” (16). A hotel room is a childhood bedroom; a tear in the carpet is toy-soldier’s bush terrain. In one swift ontological move, his psyche takes precedence over reality – the past overwrites the present, and wish overrules actuality. With that basic tenet in mind, I went on to analyze the novel as depicting a world entirely governed by the contradictory forces of wishful thinking and a compulsion to repeat. Further, I showed that the latent content of Ryder’s dream is, in Freud’s words, “[linked] with the most ancient experiences” (252), and that its content is frequently, obliquely communicated in pictorial language.

In Chapter Two I analyzed the novel with the aid of R.D. Laing’s existentialist psychology. This time I approached the novel as a parable of schizophrenia, and focused on the topics of hypocrisy and double-bind situations. In doing that, I exposed the way that Ryder’s initial dysfunctional relationship permeates and is replayed in the novel. Further, I looked at the way his dual position as outsider and celebrity can be read not only as an

expression of wishful thinking, as in Chapter One, but also as psychological necessity arising out of what Laing terms *ontological insecurity*. Ryder's position in the novel, hence, arises out of two conflicting needs. Lacking a solid sense of self, he has an exhibitionist need to be known and admired – a consoling conviction that he is “someone very special.” At the same time, considering people a potential threat to his fragile selfhood, he cannot let others get too close; hence he depicts himself a perpetual “outsider.” Finally, I read the fictional universe as an imagined opposite to Ryder's dysfunctional childhood. Marked by poverty and abuse, his childhood world finds its antidote in a fantasy world in which high-culture is all-important, and Ryder is its high priest.⁵⁷

In conclusion, then, this thesis has set out to read what is posited as the mental universe of the novel through two different lenses. In employing two different yet apparently similar perspectives instead of one, I hope I have achieved to fill out some of the gaps that using a single approach would have resulted in. Using Freud, my primary concern was to go beyond manifest content and ponder the character's repressed childhood memories as presented in the text. With Laing, my focus shifted to the character of Ryder – a character whose self is provided from his surroundings. Other characters were in both cases read as versions of Ryder himself, and as such, mere venues for his mental preoccupations.

I want to end this thesis with a suggestion for further studies of this novel. One aspect which is markedly absent not only from my analysis, but those of most scholars, is gender. *The Unconsoled* is not the type of novel that immediately attracts scholars whose primary interest is gender. As an experimental, Kafkaesque novel set in an unspecified society, it lacks the socio-cultural foundation which characterises novels principally encouraging such

⁵⁷ In this the novel aligns itself with Joanne Greenberg's fictionalized autobiography *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964). In her imaginary world, the schizophrenic protagonist Deborah is simultaneously a person of great power (someone very special indeed), and forever at the mercy of fickle and cruel gods.

analyses.⁵⁸ Somewhat surprisingly, however, there has been no dearth of multicultural readings. The author's exotic name must surely be counted as a factor in that matter, though a more sound reason is the novel's thematic preoccupations with place and community, as well as its peculiar pan-European flavour.

A somewhat anachronistic work of fiction, then, the novel has in my case produced a somewhat anachronistic reading. Having adopted a Freudian stance that takes the constellation of the traditional family unit for granted, it did not occur to me to problematize or theorize, concepts such as "mother." Being preoccupied with Langian ontology and psychopathology, I forgot to ask whether or not it matters that Ryder is a boy. In that respect, I largely emulated both gentlemen. Unlike Freud's oeuvre, one might add, Laing's writing is decidedly compatible with feminism at large.⁵⁹ But if his theories are the ones that display the most sensitivity in the subject of gender, they are also the ones that prove the most problematical in some respect. To put it simply, there are many overpowering mothers producing traumatised, broken children in *The Divided Self*.⁶⁰ More often than not, the largely absent father is granted absolution.

Perhaps it is the fact that *The Unconsoled* is a book largely written about men, by a man, but it is easy to develop something of a blind spot for gender when it comes to this novel. It is my conviction, however, that it remains fertile ground for a gender-oriented reading. A feminist approach could centre on the position of the mother in the novel, its preoccupation with unfaithful women, or (more specifically) the blatant misogyny on display in Brodsky's fantasy of seducing Miss Collins. The role of Sophie is also interesting in the way that she functions as Ryder's scapegoat, as well as a woman obsessed with her father's

⁵⁸ In my Introduction, I refer to Richard Robinson's rejection of the claim that the novel is "utterly detached from social and political determinants, or that it has nothing to say about history" (127), a contention that I agree with.

⁵⁹ Elaine Showalter argues that it is hardly possible to write about Laing's work "without acknowledging the importance of his analysis of madness as a female strategy within the family. For a whole generation of women, Laing's work was a significant validation of perceptions that found little social support elsewhere" (qtd in Kotowicz 102).

⁶⁰ Bateson's text displays the same pattern.

approval.⁶¹ The novel is additionally marked by polarized gender roles; the refined, cultured woman is starkly contrasted with the uneducated working-class man, often pictured as an animal.

Moreover, *The Unconsoled* offers a rich ground for analyses of masculinity. All in all, the masculine position as lived out by Ryder is nothing if not bleak. Detached from his feelings, obsessed with his job and his image, almost incapable of showing affection for anyone, and forever a child preoccupied with gaining his parents' approval, Ryder is an oddly familiar figure. Equally fascinating are the fantasies presented by three male characters in the novel: Boris's daydreams of the fantastic footballer (40) and fighting street thugs with his grandfather (218); Stephan's fantasy of impressing his parents with his piano playing (76); Ryder's soldier games (16, 216); and Hoffman's dream of wandering in a gallery with his wife (345). Finally, as a male protagonist who is nothing without the gaze of the other, and whose preoccupation with his image eclipses all else, Ryder is intriguing in the way he plays out a traditional, dependent female role. Ryder's overblown belief in his own independence and his aggression toward Sophie, thus, resembles an overreaction brought on by the frightening realization that he is merely a puppet in the hands of others.

Above all, I want to encourage further readings of this novel, whichever directions they might take. The novel is, in my opinion, deserving of much more attention than it has hitherto been awarded. While Ishiguro's touching and appealing *The Remains of the Day* deserves to be praised,⁶² and *Never Let me Go* is a remarkable novel, my conviction is that the notorious *The Unconsoled* is Ishiguro's real *magnum opus*. At some point, I might even start recommending it to people.

⁶¹ The chilling fact is that, apart from her preoccupation with her father, her life seems to revolve wholly around Ryder – apart from a short episode involving her sister Kim, she is *only* seen speaking to her son and her husband in the novel. As such, hers is an interesting portrayal of the woman as mother and wife above all.

⁶² Though this time another Wood – Michael Wood – steps in to disagree, labeling *The Remains of the Day* “overrated,” claiming that it “lacks the mystery of Ishiguro's other novels” and that the butler Stephen is his least interesting protagonist (Wood “Sleepless Nights”).

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