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Reading Kazuo Ishiguro's "Bewilderment Trilogy"  
as *Bildungsromane*

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**Abstract**

In this essay, Kazuo Ishiguro's "Bewilderment Trilogy" is read as a series of *Bildungsromane* that test the limits of that genre. In these thematically unrelated novels, characters reach critical points in their lives when they are confronted with the ways in which their respective childhoods have shaped their grownup expectations and professional careers. In each, the protagonist has a successful career, whether as a musician (*The Unconsoled*), a detective (*When We Were Orphans*), or a carer (*Never Let Me Go*), but finds it difficult to overcome childhood trauma. Ishiguro's treatment of childhood in these novels foregrounds the tension between individual subjectivity and the formal strictures and moral rigors of socialisation. In this respect, he comes close to modernist narratives of becoming, particularly James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Narrative strategies such as epiphanies and the control of distance and tropes such as boarding schools and journeys to foreign lands provide the analytical coordinates of my comparative study. While raising the customary questions of the *Bildungsroman* concerning socialisation and morality, I argue, Ishiguro manipulates narration very carefully in order to maintain a non-standard yet meaningful gap between his protagonists' understanding of their lives and the reader's.

**Keywords:** Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, *When We Were Orphans*, *Never Let Me Go*, childhood, memory, *Bildungsroman*, James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Kazuo Ishiguro has long been recognised as a writer whose subtle treatment of memory and of "the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world" (Nobel Prize press release) is not only formally outstanding but epistemologically complex. His first three

novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), portray aging protagonists who look back apprehensively to experiences and decisions of their younger selves and manage to not quite face the consequences. In his next three, *The Unconsoled* (1995), *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005), characters reach critical points in their lives when they are confronted with the ways in which their respective childhoods, particularly the experience of orphanhood and abandonment, have shaped their grownup expectations and professional careers. Ishiguro's latest book, *The Buried Giant* (2015), continues this thematic preoccupation, inviting us to meditate on the need for memory as well as forgetfulness in individual and communal life.

It is the narrative strategies of the second triad that I intend to focus on in this essay, interrogating their appurtenance to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of formation. In each of these novels, the protagonist has a successful career, whether as a musician (*The Unconsoled*), a detective (*When We Were Orphans*), or a carer (*Never Let Me Go*), and entertains hopes of achieving something beyond professional duty, whether it is the reconciliation of a community, amnesty for the International Settlement of Shanghai, or the postponement of death for organ-donating clones. Despite these apparently promising circumstances, there is something off-kilter about the way in which the protagonists relate to their own past and current experiences, leading reviewers to sometimes refer to these three novels as "the Bewilderment Trilogy" (Kemp). In each of these novels there is a mystery which the protagonist-narrator must unravel by going back in time. However, the discovery does not hinge on the protagonist's retracing the steps in reverse order, as in classic detective and mystery fiction. Neither does the discovery reinstate the *status quo* or the certainty that good prevails over evil. Instead, the process of unravelling itself is the focal point of the narrative and it unfolds at a double pace: while the readers are allowed to guess what is happening fairly early on, the protagonists only achieve a partial understanding by the end of the novel. As James Wood rightly points out in a review of *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro's "real interest is not in what we discover but in what his characters discover, and how it will affect them." How the

characters are affected by their discoveries is heavily influenced by their experience of orphanhood or rejection in childhood and by their strict upbringing at boarding schools. The persistent gap between the reader's privileged insight and the protagonist's overdetermined, limited understanding is part of the meaning of each novel and it distinguishes it from the *Bildungsroman*, where the gap is closed by the end.

Thus, although tracing complex relationships between childhood and maturity and raising the crucial question of the moral reconciliation of individual subject and society, Ishiguro's novels are not *Bildungsromane* in the realist tradition. Instead, they include elements of other genres, such as the detective novel or dystopian fiction, but also of the surrealist and expressionist modes. Mapping the protagonists' extensive journeys, the novels propose a spatial disposition of events, whereby several avatars of the same character, *déjà vu* and temporal overlaps are laid out paratactically rather than chronologically. However, as in the *Bildungsroman*, the narrative logic is temporal, rather than spatial; i.e., the narration, albeit moving freely between anticipation and retrospection, is premised on the progression from childhood to adulthood. Each of the three novels experiments with temporal structures and modes that demand to be read metaphorically, as correlatives of the moral dilemmas attendant on the transition from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience and from sheltered inaction to agency and responsibility. Despite these generic and formal irregularities, I argue, Ishiguro's treatment of childhood raises many of the familiar questions of the *Bildungsroman*, specifically questions concerning socialisation, memory and accountability.

Although the contemporary of Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan, Ishiguro has often been read in the company of modernist novelists. In an essay about his "credentials as an 'International Novelist'," Patricia Waugh argues that Ishiguro's ambivalence towards "the globalized, diasporic forces of postmodernism" (in Groes and Lewis 13) and his concern to render a depth of truth and a depth of feeling in his work place him securely alongside both the High Modernists (Waugh mentions EM Forster, TS Eliot, DH Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, FR Leavis)

and the late Modernists (Kafka, Beckett, Camus, Robbe-Grillet) (15-16).  
Waugh summarises:

Throughout his work ... he explores loss, nostalgia and disorientation, the kinds of mental dislocation produced by traumatic histories and producing, in turn, a sense of blockage, suspension, the inability to move on. As much Beckettian as Forsterian in its effects, this impetus arises similarly out of the need to make meaningful narratives out of broken histories. The novels abound with traumas – personal, national, international; creativity is seen to arise out of the need to heal wounds, to find a consolation which, if it comes at all, comes almost always too late. Ishiguro might be thought of as an almost *too late, late* modernist. (in Groes and Lewis 16, italics in the original)

Waugh's description of Ishiguro's novels in terms of certain kinds of mental dislocation and blockage is evocative both of the spatial organisation of the events and of the modernist assumption that healing and consolation are attainable. On this view, Ishiguro's novels where the protagonists embark on a journey to heal the traumas of their childhood are more productively compared with the modernist *Bildungsroman par excellence*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), than with postmodern instances of that genre.

In interrogating the appurtenance of Ishiguro's novels to the *Bildungsroman*, I rely on the synthetic definition given in Peter Childs's revised edition of Roger Fowler's *Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* and on Franco Moretti's comparative study of the 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-centuries European *Bildungsroman*. Originating in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-6), Childs and Fowler point out, the coming-of-age genre preserved from its originator an awareness that

the gradual growth to self-awareness of his [Goethe's] protagonist depends on a harmonious negotiation of interior and exterior selfhoods, a reconciliation that involves the balancing of social role with individual fulfilment. Crucial to that holistic rapprochement is the educative journey that the hero undergoes: completion through enlightenment has been, from its earliest days, a cornerstone of the *Bildungsroman*. The focus on the integration of the self and society made the genre a particularly apposite embodiment of bourgeois capitalistic values and the apotheosis of the form in the mid-nineteenth century reflects both the wide-ranging social impacts of revolutionary and industrial histories and the difficulties of positioning

subjectivity within this rapidly changing geo-political environment.  
(Childs and Fowler 18-19)

To put it differently, by tracing the all-rounded – intellectual, emotional and moral – development of the protagonist, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Bildungsroman* capitalises on the “recognition that the perspective of a child or young individual was the best vantagepoint for analysing divisions within a given society and the working out of historical destinies” (Fogarty 14). The “negotiation of *interior* and *exterior* selfhoods” mentioned by Childs and Fowler establishes a spatial coordinate that is variously thematised in *Bildungsromane*, most frequently as a formative journey to a foreign land, with the journey itself as a metaphor for life.

The authors of the *Dictionary* go on to describe more recent evolutions: “Twentieth-century interpretations of the genre have seen its subversion, fragmentation and reinvention but have not diminished its compelling narrative importance. Modernism’s addiction to the revelation of the interior life tended to focus attention away from the social interaction of the individual and towards the ineffability of the fractured self” (Childs and Fowler 19). Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist* instantiates this fascination with introspection and the difficulties of rendering the fractured self persuasively. On the other hand, “Postmodernism’s cynicism towards fixed and stable subjectivity constitutes a serious ideological blow to the relevance of the *Bildungsroman*, but rather than dispense with the genre altogether, contemporary writers appear intent on redeveloping it for the twenty-first century” (20).<sup>1</sup> Unlike postmodern fiction, Ishiguro’s novels do not question the feasibility of assuming a stable subjectivity; instead, they reveal the limits of introspection, the kinds of mental blockages that make certain areas of the psyche unavailable to rational interrogation. In the terms set forth by Brian McHale, Ishiguro’s novels enable questions that have to do with cognition rather than ontology and thus subscribe to the modernist period code.

More conservative, Moretti argues in his influential monograph that when new social and psychological theories emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, shattering the conception of the subject as coherent and in harmony with his community, the notion of a child’s perspective as a moral standard was abandoned. According to him, George Eliot is the first to signal the shift

to a different representation of modernity – indeed, a new historical phase (Moretti 228). Irish critic Anne Fogarty however challenges this clear temporal demarcation of the genre, averring that “James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is one of the works most responsible for the reinvention of the twentieth-century *Bildungsroman*” (14). Focusing on the thematic staples of the *Bildungsroman* and their evolution in Irish literature, Fogarty elaborates on Joyce’s contribution to bringing that genre into the twentieth century:

[The novel’s] five discrete and discontinuous vignettes which track the schooling and moral and emotional development of Stephen Dedalus from childhood to adulthood depict his clashes with social and religious figures of authority, his dissent from the ideological constraints of nationalism, his radical insistence on the abjection of the body and of an untrammelled sexuality as a mode of release and rebellion and his urgent quest for forms of expression and a new aesthetic that will allow him to liberate himself and those around him from colonial passivity and entrapment. The ending of *A Portrait*, even though it suggests that escape and emigration might acts [sic] as routes to some form of salvation for Stephen, also hints at irresolution and even failure. Dedalus in soaring free like his mythical predecessor may fly too near the sun and thus come to grief. (14)

The rejection of social integration and the refusal of clear-cut endings, Fogarty submits, set Joyce’s novel apart as a modernist reworking of the *Bildungsroman*.

More specifically, where the realist *Bildungsroman* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century typically concluded with the hero reaching moral maturation and social acceptance, “Joyce’s overt interests are entirely in matters of truth and beauty” (Booth 132). And yet, as Wayne Booth rightly observes,

the full force of *A Portrait of the Artist* depends on the essentially moral quality of Stephen’s discovery of his artistic vocation and of his integrity in following where it leads. His repudiations of conventional morality – his refusal to enter the priesthood, his rejection of communion, his decision to become an exile – are in fact read as signs of aesthetic integrity – that is, of superior morality. (132)

Joyce's rejection of conventional morality is shown by Booth to be symptomatic of his age and to have a significant correspondent at the formal level:

Joyce's explorations came just at a time when the traditional devices for control of distance were being repudiated, when doctrines of objectivity were in the air, and when people were taking seriously the idea that to evoke "reality" was a sufficient aim in art; the artist need not concern himself with judging or with specifying whether the reader should approve or disapprove, laugh or cry. (331)

As Booth goes on to explain, the repudiation of the control of distance made it difficult for Joyce's early readers to perceive the irony of the novel. The epiphanies concluding each chapter of the novel, in particular, were taken to be the representation of a shared vision of "the inner reality of things" (331). It was not until the publication of the fragment *Stephen Hero* in 1944, and then of Richard Ellmann's pivotal biography in 1959, that critics began to read *A Portrait's* epiphanies both seriously, as marking the end of a developmental stage, and ironically, as the young artist's *faux* revelations and posturing. Yet, despite Joyce's irony, there is a high seriousness to his treatment of his protagonist's becoming and to his search for corresponding literary forms to render that evolution.

Several of the points about *A Portrait* that emerge from Booth's analysis will prove helpful in reading Ishiguro's three novels: Firstly, in thematic terms, the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, is presented not so much as rebelling against the authority figures of his family, the Roman-Catholic religion, Irish nationalism, the English literary tradition etc., but resisting all the causes endorsed by people around him in favour of his artistic calling. Secondly, Joyce's own conflicted relation with the English literary tradition and Victorian realism in particular is manifested formally, by discarding conventions such as control of distance, social realism, the moral stance etc. Of these, Booth singles out the control of distance as a highly revealing analytical framework. It refers essentially to the distance "between the fallible or unreliable narrator and the implied author who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator" (Booth 158). Booth also enumerates other kinds of distance: spatial, temporal, intellectual, aesthetic etc. These too, with the exception perhaps of

aesthetic distance, are largely erased in *A Portrait* in an attempt to create an immediacy of experience that precludes judgement and results in the peculiar and complicated dramatic quality of the novel. As Booth, again, observes:

We are not told about Stephen. He is placed on the stage before us, acting out his destiny with only disguised helps or comments from his author. But it is not his actions that are dramatized directly, not his speech that we hear unmediated. What is dramatized is his mental record of everything that happens. We see his consciousness at work on the world. ... The report is direct, and it is clearly unmodified by any "dramatic" context – that is, unlike a speech in a dramatic scene, it does not lead us to suspect that the thoughts have been in any way aimed at an effect. (162-163)

In other words, we are invited neither to judge nor sympathise, but are left to draw conclusions that are pertinent to our own experience of Joyce's textual performance.

Although they, too, end in ways that suggest incomplete socialisation and stunted moral and emotional development, at first sight Ishiguro's three novels seem to have more in common with 19<sup>th</sup>-century fiction than Joyce, and at least one of them, *When We Were Orphans*, has been persuasively compared to Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (Cunningham 4-6). Like many 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Bildungsromane*, but unlike *A Portrait*, Ishiguro's are first-person narratives; while much of the structure and verisimilitude of the novels hinges on rendering credibly the limited understanding of their respective situations by the narrators' younger selves, the narration is explicit about its adult vantagepoint. Unlike Joyce, Ishiguro has always tried, by his own account, to minimise and efface his formal experimentalism. Although his protagonists are occasionally artists (Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ryder in *The Unconsoled*), he cares neither for metafiction nor intertextuality, the two great markers of his moment in the history of the novel (interview in Matthews and Groes 117, 124). Despite this overt disinterest in a kind of postmodern self-reflexivity, as Waugh notes, there is a pervasive faith in creativity as a means of healing past trauma, both individual and communal. While he shares this faith with the Modernists, Ishiguro is interested in creating narrative voices that resonate with the people of his time (in Matthews and

Groes 119-121), and to that effect he is very careful to control the distance between narrator and reader (Currie in Matthews and Groes 103). In *A Portrait* in particular, Joyce foregrounds an artist who sets himself apart from his contemporaries and expresses his repudiation by emigrating. Also unlike Joyce, Ishiguro seldom encourages ironic readings of his protagonists, of their self-involvement and short-sightedness. Christopher Banks of *When We Were Orphans* is a rare exception in that respect, and even in his case ironic readings produce only a limited understanding of his predicament. Instead, Ishiguro writes parables that raise existential and ethical questions.

Of the three narrators of the "Bewilderment Trilogy," only Ryder of *The Unconsoled* is an artist; the others are more conventionally *Bildungs-*, rather than *Künstlerroman*, heroes: in Moretti's terms, they are "normal" or "insipid", i.e., unmarked, unexceptional (11). Nonetheless, they all think of themselves as exceptionally good at their work. Both Christopher Banks (*When We Were Orphans*) and Kathy H (*Never Let Me Go*) recognise the foundational role of childhood not only in their personal becoming, but in their current professional and social status, and therefore rememorate definitive incidents and, at times of crisis, regress to a state that had, at the time, seemed sheltered and safe. Nonetheless, by the end of these novels, the protagonists must face the fact that, try as they may, they can neither return to childhood and its illusions, nor lay claim to the wisdom of maturity. Formally more experimental, *The Unconsoled*, on the other hand, is a tale about the perils of attempting to repress childhood memories and displacing conflicts and dissatisfactions onto other, real or imaginary, people. In *When We Were Orphans* childhood is explicitly said to become "like a foreign land once we have grown" (277); *Never Let Me Go* is set in an alternative 1990s England, in which clones walk the streets alongside people, but Hailsham, the boarding school of their childhood, can never be found again. In *The Unconsoled* that which is repressed is displaced to another country, which Ryder visits as if in a dream: it is a deterritorialised space, which is not only unplaceable, but shapeshifting.

While Ishiguro is one of those rare writers who reinvent themselves with each new book, as Barry Lewis explains in his 2000 monograph, there are significant continuities and common traits from one Ishiguro

novel to the next. In all three, for instance, childhood is represented spatially, as a foreign place which has not quite been left behind and yet it cannot be revisited. Maturity, on the other hand, is a state of orphanhood,<sup>2</sup> that is, a state that belongs to the temporal logic of narrative. This allows Ishiguro to experiment with time and juxtapose his grownup protagonists with their younger selves, most plainly in *The Unconsoled*, where Ryder encounters two younger and one older versions of himself. Moreover, as in his earlier novels, Ishiguro establishes subtle correlations between the lives of his protagonists and their historical setting (see Lewis 100, Holmes 14), although he never describes the historical circumstances in any kind of detail. Discussing the classical *Bildungsroman*, Moretti proposes that this “connection” of the individual to the collectivity “tells us that a life is meaningful if the *internal* interconnections of individual temporality (‘the plot of all life’) imply at the same time an opening up to the *outside*, an ever wider and thicker network of external relationships with ‘human things’” (18). In this early version of the novel of formation, typified by *Wilhelm Meister*, “One must learn first and foremost, like Wilhelm, to direct ‘the plot of [his own] life’ so that each moment strengthens one’s *sense of belonging* to a wider community. Time must be used to find a homeland” (Moretti 19), that is, a home-like space. The failure to establish such connections, emplotted as the impossibility to reach a balance between self-determination and socialisation, results in a wasted life. The attempt to find meaning in their lives despite the inability to connect is at the centre of Ishiguro’s protagonists’ narrations.

I take my cue from Moretti in foregrounding the narration itself, rather than the ending, or the outcome of the events, as meaningful. Indeed, Ishiguro’s endings can at best be described as open: in *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy does not learn anything that she did not already know; she merely comes to acknowledge its inexorableness. In *When We Were Orphans*, Banks eventually discovers what he had set out to learn, but finds that he cannot act upon his new knowledge. *The Unconsoled* ends with Ryder, rejected by his partner Sophie and their son Boris, boarding a tramway which, appropriately, has a circular itinerary, and ordering breakfast, thus signalling the beginning of a new day of renewed incomprehension. In view of these unsatisfactory endings, what sets

Ishiguro's three novels apart from the *Bildungsroman* is the distance between the narrator's account and the reader's understanding. Ishiguro achieves this by manipulating the narrative voice in very unobtrusive ways. As with most postmodern narrators, Ryder is not reliable, but Ishiguro propagates the notion that, while Ryder is not deliberately lying, what he describes are dreams, rather than realities: each of Parts Two through Four and chapter 2 of Part One begin with Ryder awaking in a panic from a fitful and all-too-short slumber. When he meets his son Boris and then his admirer, the young pianist Stephen, it becomes clear that these are younger versions of himself, and by including them as minor characters in his narrative he is trying to work through traumas and conflicts of his past. In *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro uses more conventional means of signalling his narrators' skewed perspectives, usually by having their versions conflict with stories told by other characters. Ishiguro insists in interviews, however, that his protagonists are not unreliable in the postmodern fashion: they have no ulterior motive in concealing the truth. On the contrary, the will to truth is always there. Kathy H's recurrent returns and reconsiderations of what has happened are a very convincing instance. Ishiguro's narrators are only unreliable to the extent to which they fail to grasp the truth of their stories. In Booth's taxonomy, they are unreliable inasmuch as their accounts do not coincide with "the implied author's norms" (158). Like Ryder, Banks exists alongside his childhood self in *When We Were Orphans*, and yet, as Alyn Webley observes, his recollections of his childhood "give a far more direct and extended account of his childhood experience than that of other characters from Ishiguro's novels" (in Groes and Lewis 185).

As the fictional expression of Modernity, Moretti argues, the *Bildungsroman* is best placed to attach meaning to that paradigm because it focuses on youth, which shares with Modernity the "attributes of mobility and inner restlessness," but also the "sense of an ending," a "protean elusiveness" (9). One of the ways in which English *Bildung* plots differ from continental ones is in their stress on childhood, rather than youth: "Contrary to *Wilhelm Meister*, in the English novel the most significant experiences are not those that alter but those which *confirm* the choices made by childhood 'innocence'" (Moretti 182). The preference

for childhood, Moretti avers, reveals a stable society, whose value system centres on stability (185). In some ways, the early English tradition of this genre – from *Tom Jones* to *David Copperfield* and beyond – narrativizes the impossibility of escaping childhood as the “ethical-hermeneutic foundation” of such novels (Moretti 183). In other words, the moral and intellectual system of English *Bildungsromane* is constructed around childhood insights which are then confirmed by later experiences and youthful errors, according to Moretti (184). This theory is disproved by evolutions of the genre in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and thereafter: neither Joyce nor Ishiguro, for instance, takes childhood insights as an infallible judgment of society. In *A Portrait*, the revelations of each successive stage in the young artist’s development are displaced by the next section’s insights. Less self-conscious, Ishiguro’s protagonists typically look back to their childhood as a source of solace rather than insight. It is only in *Never Let Me Go* that the narrator searches her past for clues about her condition and her conditioning, whereas in the other two novels the protagonists seek confirmation of what they already know about their past because it gives them comfort: their childhoods seem more like a fixed reference point. Childhood as the “ethical-hermeneutic foundation” of their stories is indeed inescapable, but Joyce and Ishiguro, unlike the Victorians, are far from upholding it as the stable paradigm of a stable society.

Moretti further argues that much of the appeal of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century English *Bildungsroman* stems from the fact that it is structured like a fairy tale, polarising right and wrong in unambiguous ways and providing an opportunity for the disenfranchised to tell their story and receive justice (186, 213). This seems to be almost precisely the framework of Ishiguro’s novels, although it yields very different outcomes from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Bildungsroman*. Joyce both recognises and parodies this device in the opening of *A Portrait*: “Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo” (1). In Joyce’s novel the fairy tale does not yield any kind of system of moral values; on the contrary, it dissolves into nonsense. The “once upon a time” cliché and the baby-talk-like style of the early pages not only imitate the young protagonist’s limited yet imaginative

understanding of the world, but they also signal Joyce's ambivalent relation to the tradition of "Lives" in English literature and the uses that can be made of atemporal narratives.

By contrast, Ishiguro's novels do not engage openly with the literary tradition, although *When We Were Orphans* simultaneously bows to and parodies the detective fiction of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and *Never Let Me Go* shows its protagonists reading and discussing major 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels. In other words, the former partly relies for its structure and meaning on another formulaic genre which polarises right and wrong and proffers straightforward solutions to the temporary problems of a community. The latter book, more than any other of Ishiguro's, comes close to a realist, chronological account of three lives, and although told retrospectively it saves the more mature and problematic insights for the ending. However, Kathy H does not seem to be aware that she is a narrator in a novel: her voice is so unassuming and unaffected as to seem quite unliterary. In Moretti's terms, it is a "plain" and "natural" voice, one which effectively puts the world it describes on trial (211-212). And while the polarisation of good and evil provides all kinds of comforting certitudes – chief among them, Moretti shows, the certainty that "everyone ... receives justice" (213, italics in the original) –, it also precludes more complex modes of knowledge.

In none of these three Ishiguro novels does one come across revelations (or epiphanies) commensurate with various stages in the young man's psychological development such as the ones that mark the passage of time in Joyce's novel. A world-renowned pianist who has just landed in an unnamed, vaguely central-European city, in order to give a concert and participate in a number of events, Ryder displays the kind of exhaustion and confusion that is common to touring artists in foreign countries. The illusion of realism is soon dispelled, as a conversation ostensibly taking place during a lift ride unfolds over several pages, a new character materialises in the lift where she had not been noticed before, and the protagonist becomes convinced that his hotel room "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" (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled* 16). Like Joyce's epiphanies, this latter

revelation, which closes the first chapter of *The Unconsoled*, demands to be taken on faith: not, perhaps, that Ryder's recognition is to be trusted as an accurate description of his whereabouts, but certainly as his honest conviction that he is indeed in the same – though substantially modified and displaced – room. In his helpful chapter devoted to *The Unconsoled*, Lewis proposes that the country to which Ryder travels is “palpably a displaced England of his memory and imagination” (110): he meets school mates from England, without any explanation as to how they came to be there; houses metamorphose into places where he grew up in Wales and Worcestershire; even the old family car turns up, rusty and dilapidated, on the lawn in front of an art gallery (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled* 260-265). The accrual of biographical details suggests that rather than travel in space to deal with an unnamed town's problems, Ryder goes back in time in an attempt to confront sites of trauma and work out his own conflicts. It is suggestive in this respect that he has lost his schedule and must rely on anyone with an agenda to take him to his next appointment and the next revelation. His predicament is the more poignant as his revelations do not mark any kind of progress towards an understanding of his past: he is always whisked off to his next appointment before he can contemplate the truth of the previous one.

*When We Were Orphans*, too, abounds in instances when the protagonist seems to simultaneously inhabit two moments in time, his childhood and the present. In an interview with Linda Richards, Ishiguro describes the novel as “an attempt to paint a picture according to what the world would look like according to someone's crazy logic. So a lot of the time the world actually adopts the craziness of his logic. It's not full of people doing surprised double takes when he comes out with certain statements. On the contrary, they go along with it.” Towards the end, lost in the war-ravaged Shanghai warren, where he believes his parents are still imprisoned twenty years after their ostensible abduction, Banks frees a Japanese prisoner who he deludes himself into thinking is his childhood friend, Akira. As children, Banks and Akira used to pretend they were detectives searching for Banks's father, and the adult Banks now regressively re-enacts those games. Their conversations, and “Akira's” hesitant resistance to Banks's skewed view of the world, for the first time

puncture the illusion that Shanghai has remained frozen as Banks left it twenty years earlier:

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

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

"I know what you mean," I said. "And when we were children, it seemed so solid to us. But as you put it just now. It's our home village. The only one we have." (Ishiguro, *Orphans* 255-256)

What is acknowledged here, beyond the fragility of cities in war time, is the precariousness of childhood as a comfort zone. As he emerges from his regression into that nightmarish deterioration of his childhood haunts, Banks is consoled by one of the paternal defenders of the International Settlement with the reverse of the metaphor of childhood as home:

"...One of our Japanese poets, a court lady many years ago, wrote of how ... our childhood becomes like a foreign land once we have grown."

"Well, Colonel, it's hardly a foreign land to me. In many ways, it's where I've continued to live all my life. It's only now I've started to make my journey from it." (Ishiguro, *Orphans* 277)

A thinly disguised paraphrase of LP Hartley's memorable "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there," the Colonel's attempt to offer consolation strikes a complex chord as it condenses, once more, a sense of temporal dislocation and incomplete socialisation. Conversely, such moments, when the hero confesses his attachment and belonging to an idealised space of the perfect childhood, emphasise the precarious nature of material reality when it is not supported by the psychological reality of the protagonist.

Christopher Banks's socialization ends with his half-hearted acceptance of London as his home and the promise to consider his adopted daughter, the orphan Jennifer's proposal that he live with her in Gloucestershire after she will have started a family of her own (Ishiguro, *Orphans* 313). The reader recognises, both in Jennifer's invitation and in Banks's promise, affectionate reassuring gestures but an unlikely

eventuality. At all events, joining his daughter and her children would be just another way of regressing to childhood. As in other Ishiguro novels, this inconclusive ending suggests neither that the hero has found the peace of mind that remembering is expected to bring about, nor that he has reached the level of mature socialisation with which *Bildungsromane* typically end. Instead, by closing the gap between the narrated past and the present of the narration, it seeks to re-establish an empathetic relation between reader and narrator by bringing the plot back into the reader's comfort zone, that of realism and psycho-normality.

*Never Let Me Go* treats a comparatively more common predicament, that of accepting the biological limitations of the human condition, but it uses the trope of the boarding school to thematise childhood. Like Stephen Dedalus for a while, all the protagonists of Ishiguro's "Bewilderment Trilogy" have been educated at boarding schools, but those of *Never Let Me Go* never knew another home. In a 2006 Guardian essay, "Future Imperfect," Ishiguro explains the appeal of the boarding school setting:

... it struck me as a physical manifestation of the way all children are separated off from the adult world, and are drip-fed little pieces of information about the world that awaits them, often with generous doses of deception – kindly meant or otherwise. In other words, it serves as a decent metaphor for childhood in general.

Critic Mark Currie, however, perceives the boarding school as a more sinister "total institution" which is best adapted to exert the kind of social control described by WG Runciman as "relative deprivation," a means of normalising deprivation and alleviating it gradually in order to propagate a sense of being privileged (Currie in Matthews and Groes 101). Indeed, the "students" of Hailsham in *Never Let Me Go* are brought up to think that their circumstances are superior to comparable boarding schools. Currie explains:

As a socialization process, the function of relative deprivation is observed in effects on behaviour and values that survive the experience of the total institution itself, and that persist in life afterwards. Such effects might include a generalized legitimization of social inequality, or a feeling of

privilege in relation to conditions perceived by others as deprived. (in Matthews and Groes 101)

This explains why Ishiguro's clones never try to escape their condition, although it becomes clear to them fairly early on that their fate involves premature and painful death. The paradox of relative, or privileged, deprivation, according to Currie, "presides over the novel" and it brings together other paradoxes that organise it, such as "[t]he paradox of unwanted freedom and the temporal paradoxes of remembered forgetting and the recollection of anticipation" (in Matthews and Groes 100).

Currie's analysis is pertinent to the other two Ishiguro novels under scrutiny here as well. Of the three protagonists, only Ryder attempts – albeit unconsciously – to free himself of the limitations that boarding schools have imposed on his understanding of the world, while Banks and Kathy remain to the very end unable to perceive the injustices of their condition. Thus, Kathy holds to the very end that she will be relieved to start her donations, although that means she will soon die, while still in her early thirties. Banks, on the other hand, although informed that it was the very opium trade he had set out to eradicate that had paid for his privileged life and upbringing in England, does not seem to grasp the socio-economic implications of his mother's sacrifice but prefers to think of it as a prolongation of her maternal care and thus of his childhood. It is with great difficulty and only after great postponement – he eventually finds (a woman like) her in a nursing home in Hong Kong sixteen years later and goes to see her "on the third day" of his stay in town – that he musters the courage to face her. By then it is too late, as she is in no condition to recognise him. The coda, in which Banks contemplates moving in with his adoptive daughter Jennifer, seems more like sentimental wishful thinking than a conscious decision to embrace the passage of time and maturity.

According to Moretti, the hallmark of the *Bildungsroman* was that it "had always held fast to the notion that *the biography of a young individual was the most meaningful viewpoint for the understanding and the evaluation of history*" (227, emphasis in the original). Joyce's treatment of childhood, at once ironic and sentimental, does not proffer it as the most meaningful viewpoint. Rather, as in the continental

*Bildungsroman*, it privileges youth with its emancipation from social, religious, familial and even national strictures and its self-confident aesthetic pronouncements. The ending of *A Portrait* does not confirm the values discovered in childhood as, say, Dickens's *Great Expectations* does; neither does it "proffer the closure of social acceptance and advance typical of earlier *Bildungsromane*" (Fogarty 14). Joyce's dismissal of the distance between protagonist and reader precludes some of the judgments of society and history upon which the *Bildungsroman* is premised. Nonetheless, the novel's temporal structure, charting the protagonist's evolution from childhood to moral and artistic maturity and suggesting the possibility of further reinvention and mobility, is quintessentially *Bildungsroman*esque. In Ishiguro's "Bewilderment Trilogy," on the other hand, the protagonists hold fast to their childish understanding of the world. Their failure to let go exposes the bankruptcy and pathos of favouring childhood innocence and the privileged deprivation that is enforced by institutions such as boarding schools. The spatial disposition of mental processes in these novels is given cohesion not by evolution but by remembrance. By maintaining a tight control of the distance between reader and protagonist despite the first-person perspective, Ishiguro creates characters who are both distinctly different from us and oddly relatable, both eccentric and pertinent in an almost allegorical way. Similarly, these novels both revisit the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* and, by not allowing the understanding of the narrator to converge with the reader's, raise questions about its assumptions. Thus, although wary of metafiction, intertextuality and other self-reflective strategies, in these three novels Ishiguro tests the formal limits of the *Bildungsroman* genre while he reaffirms its relevance.

**Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Other scholars have debated the definition of this genre. Marianne Hirsch Gottfried, for instance, follows the German fashion of drawing distinctions between the picaresque, the confessional novel, and the *Bildungsroman*. David Miles, on the other hand, considers the picaresque and confessional to be the two poles of the *Bildungsroman* genre. He eschews clear distinctions of Gottfried's kind, arguing instead that concrete instances of this genre reveal the degree of hybridisation that most genres have undergone in recent times (123).

<sup>2</sup> In interviews and elsewhere, Ishiguro compares growing up to a journey away from parental protection. See Shaffer and Ishiguro 9, Wong in Shaffer and Wong 183, etc., but also Holmes 17.

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