National Consciousness and Literary Cosmopolitics

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Kazuo Ishiguro’s
Negation of National Nostalgia

If Kazuo Ishiguro did not exist, British literature would have had to invent him. His novels have been acclaimed as diasporic, international, or cosmopolitan, and Ishiguro’s own Japanese-British cultural hybridity has often been lauded as the basis of his transnational perspectives. However, in this chapter my analysis of *The Remains of the Day*, *The Unconsoled*, and *When We Were Orphans* suggests that Ishiguro adopts a diasporic perspective toward an insular and patriotic British nationalism. However, this diasporic approach does not, as common wisdom would have it, distance him from a critical national consciousness; it instead enables his cogent analysis of late twentieth-century British identity and culture. Specifically, Ishiguro takes up two literary and cultural discourses in late twentieth-century Britain: first, the “condition-of-England” narrative and fiction’s cultural-ethnographic turn, and second, the recovery of cultural authenticity embodied in romances of the archive. Ishiguro advocates what one critic in another context calls “critical nostalgia” (Brown-Rose 2009), taking issue with these two imaginative modes that, together with Britain’s burgeoning heritage industry expressing a desire for bygone national glory, constitute a determinate and exclusive patriotic identity centered on an essentialist notion of what Britain was, is, and should be.
Ishiguro’s Double Structure of Diaspora and National Consciousness

Born in Nagasaki, Japan, but living in Britain since the age of six, Kazuo Ishiguro is a prize-winning novelist who elicits curiosity among British and American critics about his background as an anglophone writer with a Japanese name and East Asian features. It is therefore necessary to consider Ishiguro’s positioning and self-positioning as an ethnically marked anglophone British writer in terms of what Rey Chow calls “a coercive mimeticism—a process (identitarian, existential, cultural, or textual) in which those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected […] to resemble and replicate the very banal preoccupations that have been appended to them” (Protestant Ethnic 107). I will therefore spend some time discussing reviews of and commentary on Ishiguro’s novels and his extensive interview with Japanese Nobel Laureate Kenzaburo Oe to illuminate the mimeticist expectations that Ishiguro is implicitly called upon to resemble and replicate and his own contestation of these ethnic appendages.

Several interviews with Ishiguro and commentaries on his work dwell on his “Japaneseness”: his childhood in Nagasaki, his parents’ relocation to Britain, his first visit to Japan as an adult after winning the Booker Prize, and the authenticity and artificiality of Japanese society and the Japanese characters in his first two novels, A Pale View of Hills and An Artist of the Floating World. Ishiguro’s cultural Japaneseness is often highlighted and contrasted with his Britishness, and this fascination with Ishiguro’s hybrid diasporic Japanese-cum-British nationality is sometimes expressed in bizarre ways: one interviewer is fascinated by the “startling juxtaposition” of Ishiguro’s face, “with its broad Oriental planes and features,” and his “clipped British accent,” which makes his stature as an emerging young British writer all the more remarkable (Vorda and Herzinger 4). Such interest in Ishiguro’s apparently Japanese name and appearance but lack of Japanese cultural familiarity together with corresponding affirmations of his British nationality suggest a cultural exoticism at work that makes Ishiguro’s Anglo-Japanese hybridity a boon for British national identity. Japan and Japaneseness, embodied and represented by Ishiguro, are coercively mimeticized as a transnational cultural supplement that is incorporated into British national identity, “a process in which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imaginings of them as ethnics” (Chow, Protestant Ethnic 107) and to make British literature more innovative and marketable.
Within the context of an instrumental nationality in which culture and ethnicity are used to authenticate the familiar imaginings of a national identity, Ishiguro comes across as a diasporic Japanese who crosses over Japanese national boundaries (he is not a Japanese citizen), but whose very lack of authentic Japanese identity (he neither reads nor speaks the Japanese language fluently) allows him to be incorporated into a British identity that celebrates itself as exuberantly multicultural such that Ishiguro can be included in a stable of young British writers of color who express “a new internationalism” (King, “The New Internationalism” 193). Ishiguro’s Japanese identity is authenticated by artistic and cultural comparisons: his writing style is akin to “the deft brushwork of Japanese paintings” and “the way Japanese conversations move politely around the matter at issue” (207). Ishiguro’s cultural but non-national Japaneseness enables him, along with others of this new generation, to “criticise the Third World both as insiders and as Westerners” (209) by showing “the contrast between older Japanese culture and the modern Westernised world” (206), with the implicit privileging of the latter, modernized world. However, Ishiguro himself is quite aware of this exotic fascination with his Japanese background; in both his interviews and his novels he contests the cultural and racial essentialism that undergirds this exoticism and reinforces a homogeneous white, British national identity.

Shortly after the prize-winning success of The Remains of the Day in 1989, Ishiguro was invited by the Japan Foundation to visit Japan for the first time since he moved to Britain as a child. During this visit, Ishiguro “spoke English all the time” as he knew Japanese well enough to be understood but not to observe the various social formalities in Japanese speech (Vorda and Herzinger 5). Ishiguro observes that he “touched a strange nerve” on “a live wire issue” in Japan; specifically, “this idea that somebody who is racially Japanese and looks very Japanese could go to England and have lost his Japaneseness in some ways is at the same time fascinating and [. . .] rather threatening” to people in Japan (Vorda and Herzinger 4). Ishiguro concludes that this anxiety over racial and national identity stems from Japanese people “spending more time abroad” on “business and international trade,” and having “children who are growing up abroad”; this in turn leads to the “fear” that “their Japanese-ness is going to become dissipated” (Vorda and Herzinger 5–6). In Japan, Ishiguro finds himself treated as a diasporic subject, as someone who looks Japanese with received but not intimate knowledge of the language and customs of his ancestral culture; who, having grown up in a European country, is suddenly expected to tell people in the homeland “what the West thought about Japan” (Vorda and Herzinger 4); who represents a threat and fear that Japanese cultural, racial, and national identity will be diluted or dissipated in
diaspora. Although Ishiguro’s remark (laced, perhaps, with a touch of resentment) that “just [his] very being is a kind of embodiment of the whole issue” (Vorda and Herzinger 4) may suggest that he ultimately rejects Japaneseeness, his interview with the Japanese writer and Nobel Laureate Kenzaburo Oe (which occurred during his 1989 visit) points to some abiding personal and intellectual connections with Japan.

When Oe asks Ishiguro how he accurately described life in Japan in his first two novels, Ishiguro replies that he was fashioning his “own personal, imaginary Japan” as a writer in diaspora who remembers and reinscribes his homeland: “All the way through my childhood, I couldn’t forget Japan, because I had to prepare myself for returning to it. [. . .] So I grew up with a very strong image in my head of this other country, a very important other country to which I had a strong emotional tie” (Ishiguro and Oe 164). Ishiguro admits that “one of the real reasons why [he] turned to writing novels was because [he] wished to recreate this Japan [. . .] to make it safe, preserve it in a book, before it faded away from [his] memory altogether” (164). We can infer from this that even though Ishiguro’s later work neither is set in Japan nor features Japanese protagonists, this diasporic longing for an imagined Japan was crucial—even foundational—to his self-fashioning as a writer. Furthermore, even though Ishiguro stresses that he is not interested in recreating an authentic or historical Japan, Kenzaburo Oe observes that Ishiguro’s novels—given his name and the publication of his work in English and in a Western country—will have some impact on the way Western readers perceive Japan. As Oe says, “the conception of Japanese people held by most Europeans has [the writer Yukio] Mishima at the one pole and people like Akio Morita, chairman of Sony, at the other pole. In my opinion, both poles are mistaken. [. . .] I think that your novel exerted a good influence on perceptions of Japan in Europe, a kind of antidote to the image of Mishima” (168). But Oe also argues that Ishiguro’s representations of Japan cut both ways. Ishiguro’s imagined Japaneseeness challenges some of the myths the Japanese have of themselves in the late twentieth century, such as the desire “to be perceived as peaceful and gentle, like Japanese art [. . .] They don’t want to be seen as economic imperialists or military invaders. They would like others to think of flower paintings, something quiet and beautiful, when they think of Japan” (168). While Ishiguro’s reputation in Japan was at first that of “a very quiet author, and, therefore, a very Japanese author,” Oe shrewdly detects in his writing “a tough intelligence” that “always involves a double structure, with two or more intertwined elements” and a “kind of strength [that] was not very Japanese” but “rather, from England” (169). Ishiguro, picking up on Oe’s observation, elaborates on this double consciousness and twofold
structure with appropriately twinned explanations: first, he reflects that his “very lack of authority and lack of knowledge about Japan” made him think of himself “as a kind of homeless writer” who “had no obvious social role” because he was neither “a very English Englishman” nor “a very Japanese Japanese either” (169). Second, he feels that his generation of British writers “have a kind of inferiority complex” because the important international issues of the late twentieth century seem to be occurring elsewhere in the world, whereas “that feeling doesn't exist in the United States or Japan, in that there is a strong sense that these two societies are now somehow at the center of the world, and the twenty-first century is going to be somehow dominated by these two powers” (173).

Of course, geopolitical events have not unfolded exactly according to Ishiguro's prediction, nor is his sense of frustrated provincialism necessarily widespread among other contemporary British writers. But what is significant here is that, taken together, Ishiguro's double consciousness, his ambivalent but abiding connections to Japan, his concern about Western stereotyping of both himself and Japanese society, and his sense of Britain's diminished international importance vis-à-vis Japan, point to a diasporic subjectivity simultaneously engaging with a national consciousness. Ishiguro's diasporic subjectivity is culturally productive and socially consequential as opposed to consummately deterritorialized and smugly cosmopolitan. Eschewing transnational mobility or hybrid exuberance, Ishiguro describes his situation as both peripheral and rooted; he is “stuck on the margins” and “looking for other ways in which to work” as a writer, ultimately deciding “to use the landscape” he knows about “in a metaphorical way” (Vorda and Herzinger 12). Ishiguro's employment of landscape as metaphor—the troping or turning of denotative meaning toward connotative associations—recalls Khachig Tölölyan's understanding of “diasporic existence as not necessarily involving a return but rather a re-turn, a repeated turning to the concept and/or the reality of the homeland and other diasporic kin through memory, written texts,” and other “symbolic, ritual, religious” forms of expression (“Rethinking Diaspora(s)” 14–15). To make this connection is not to conflate cultural representations with social formations, because, as Kenzaburo Oe points out, whether Ishiguro intended to or not, his first two novels in which Japan appears as a metaphorical landscape have contributed to both the symbolic and the social discourse about Japan both in the West and in Japan itself. To wit: some are born in diaspora, some achieve diasporic consciousness, while some have diaspora thrust upon them by both countries of ancestry and countries of residence. Ishiguro belongs to this third category of diasporic subjects, and he makes a virtue of necessity by writing
with what Oe calls a tough intelligence and double consciousness, exposing the essentialist stereotypes that nations use to fashion their self-identities. Ishiguro’s literary cosmopolitics can be seen from his conversation with Oe and his reflections on the role that Japan—the country itself as well as his imagination and recollections of it—plays in his creative work. This cosmopolitics is connected to a critical national consciousness concerned with the social and cultural politics of late twentieth-century Britain as it contests two important discourses that construct national identity as cultural insiderism. First, there is the anthropological or ethnographic turn in late modernism described by Jed Esty (2004); second, the romance of the archive discussed by Suzanne Keen (2001). Both these tropes emphasize the recovery of an essential national identity out of (in the first case) the customs and cultures of whole ways of life as well as (in the second case) historical documents and literary archives.

At the social and cultural levels, Ishiguro is also responding to the British government’s official heritage industry. The Department of National Heritage, established in 1992, is “responsible not only for the arts and for historic monuments, but also for tourism” (Stevenson 47). In other words, this Department identifies symbols and icons that embody national culture, and also makes these icons available for circulation and consumption within global capital. Furthermore, Ishiguro’s rewriting of Englishness also interrogates the concept of “race relations” emerging in British politics and society since the 1970s. Race relations is a framework established for “the national accommodation of ‘non-white’ immigration” into Britain and sets up “a social equation in ‘British’ common sense between draconian, racialized immigration controls and good or harmonious ‘race-relations’” (Hesse 7). This form of multiculturalism runs the danger of producing “showcases of culture” and leaving racism to be “perceived as merely resulting from ignorance, personal prejudice or mutual difficulties of cultural adjustment between majority and minority cultures” instead of a historical and political problem (Hesse 8). In short, the concept of race relations in Britain “incorporates yet disavows its indebtedness to a racist discourse, structured discursively around a racially unmarked (i.e. white) British perception of the problem of national identity induced by post-1945 non-white immigration from the New Commonwealth” (Hesse 11, original emphasis). Britishness as a national identity is perceived as under threat from nonwhite communities precisely because this idea of the nation is identified with one specific white ethnicity or race—specifically, the English—and that this Englishness is something the other “immigrant” or “diasporic” communities should aspire to. Stuart Hall further observes that throughout the twentieth century, “Britishness” has apparently served as
“the empty signifier, the norm, against which ‘difference’ (ethnicity) is measured,” but in fact, “as a category [it] has always been racialized through and through,” connoting “whiteness” (“Multi-cultural Question” 221–22). With regard to race relations in Britain and British culture, Hall’s critical attitude toward nationalism is more favorable than in his discussion of Caribbean cultural identity and diaspora. Hall argues for “a new multi-cultural political logic” (236) that can help in “the process of defining a more inclusive ‘Britishness’ with which, only then, might everyone be legitimately invited to identify. This constitutes the democratic or cosmopolitan limit on both liberal and communitarian alternatives” (237, original emphasis). The significance of Hesse’s and Hall’s examinations of the normative assumptions of Anglo-Saxon whiteness underlying British race relations for my analysis of Ishiguro’s work is that the genre of the British archival romance, exemplified by A. S. Byatt’s 1990 Booker-Prize-winning Possession, often features a heterosexual white scholarly couple whose affectionate sentiments develop in tandem with their literary quest for an authentic cultural tradition and national heritage. Ishiguro, on the other hand, departs from this essentially racialized and conservative vision of British national identity by inverting the assumptions that connect race with nation and literature.

**Ishiguro’s Landscapes of the Imagination and Adorno’s Late Style**

As Ishiguro states in an interview, he creates “a landscape of imagination” (Krider 151) rather than a fictional backdrop or cultural diorama determined by ethnic particularities or national heritage. His remarks suggest an affinity between his literary technique and thematic concerns and Theodor Adorno’s formulation of the politics of late style and aesthetic form; they depart from a psychological realist or psychoanalytical reading of his novels that drives a substantial amount of criticism about his work. A fictional landscape that is primarily imaginary or imaginative undermines the tendency to treat Ishiguro’s first-person narrators as realistically drawn or psychologically believable individuals and points toward the formal strategies Ishiguro employs in aesthetically framing and refiguring the historical and political realities his novels evoke. One important strategy—Ishiguro’s use of nostalgia—has a strong connection with Adorno’s ideas about late style in some of Beethoven’s final musical pieces. In discussing Ishiguro’s fiction in terms of late style, I am not implying that Ishiguro has reached a late or final stage in his career as a writer. Rather, I contend that the nostalgia exhibited by all of Ishiguro’s
narrators—a sense of belatedness and longing for a real or imagined past—animates his writing with the formal features Adorno discusses regarding late style in Beethoven. Nostalgia for Ishiguro is more than a simple longing to return to halcyon days; although he does acknowledge that in the British context nostalgia can glorify a history of imperial conquest, he also suggests rethinking the concept:

nostalgia is a way of imagining the possibility of a world that is actually purer, one less flawed than the one we know we must inhabit. This is why I say that nostalgia is the emotional equivalent or intellectual cousin of idealism. It’s something that anchors us emotionally to a sense that things should and can be repaired. We can feel our way towards a better world because we’ve had an experience of it. (“An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro by Brian Shaffer” 7)

While it may be that “nostalgic dreams have become almost habitual, if not epidemic,” such that “no better term expresses modern malaise” (Lowenthal 4), Ishiguro’s comments are in line with recent scholarship on nostalgia and British literature revising the commonly held notion that nostalgia is a regressive sentiment expressing a misguided longing for a happier or more fulfilling past that never actually existed. Contrary to the claim that “a past nostalgically enjoyed does not need to be taken seriously” (Lowenthal 7), Ishiguro and revisionist accounts of nostalgia associate longing with an ethical turn in contemporary anglophone fiction, arguing that “fantasies of lost or imagined homelands do not serve to lament or restore through language a purported premodern purity; rather, they provide a means of establishing ethical ideals that can be shared by diverse groups who have in common only a longing for a past that never was” (Su 3). Such ethical ideals may be considered part of a national consciousness, a critical rather than redemptive understanding of nostalgia that interrogates and inverts instrumental nationality and the patriotic recovery of a glorious national past. Ishiguro distinguishes between nostalgia as “a bad political force” reinforcing a national identity “without actually taking into account all of the true costs and true evils of Empire,” on the one hand, and nostalgia as a positive cognate to idealism, on the other (“An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro by Brian Shaffer” 7). Whereas nostalgia as a bad political force involves “excursions” into the past that “are often brief, circumscribed, inconsequential” (Lowenthal 7), Ishiguro’s extended journeys into a fictional landscape of memory and his literary attempts to imagine the possibility of a better world recall Theodor Adorno’s reflections on nostalgia in two consecutive meditative pieces. Both pieces were written during
Adorno’s period of exile from Germany in the United States, and in the first, bleakly titled “To them shall no thoughts be turned,” Adorno issues a familiar lament of someone who has been estranged from his homeland: “The past life of émigrés is, as we know, annulled,” and in the present time “anything that lives on merely as thought and recollection” is objectified and turned into information contained within “a special rubric […] called ‘background’” listed on official immigration and government documents (Minima Moralia 46, 47). This nullification of the past is nothing less than a “violation” for the émigré in which “life is dragged along on the triumphal automobile of the united statisticians, and even the past is no longer safe from the present, whose remembrance of it consigns it a second time to oblivion” (47). Picking up on the fatal encounter between an American present with a German past, in the next essay “#26. English spoken,” Adorno summons a childhood memory, recalling how “some elderly English ladies with whom my parents kept up relations often gave me books as presents: richly illustrated works for the young, also a green bible bound in Morocco leather. All were in the language of the donors: whether I could read it none of them paused to reflect” (Minima Moralia 47). Adorno’s recollection, however, does not offer the satisfaction of nostalgic enjoyment; as he dwells on the striking visual images of those incomprehensible English books of his childhood, he begins connecting those printed texts with both past and present industrial production and material culture:

The peculiar inaccessibility of the books, with their glaring pictures, titles and vignettes, and their indecipherable text, filled me with the belief that in general objects of this kind were not books at all, but advertisements perhaps for machines like those my uncle produced in his London factory. Since I came to live in Anglo-Saxon countries and to understand English, this awareness has not been dispelled but strengthened. (Minima Moralia 47)

Adorno becomes aware that with the instrumentalization of culture and language in modern mass production, “culture displays its character as advertising” (Minima Moralia 47). Far from “alienating people from the present” (Lowenthal 13), Adorno’s nostalgic remembrance of the English books and their powerful sensory impressions connects the past with the present, suggesting that “to ‘indulge’ in nostalgia need not imply an effort to escape present circumstances or to deceive oneself about the past; rather, it can represent the conscious decision to reject the logic of modernity” (Su 4). Adorno’s nostalgia inverts the halcyon logic of selective remembrance and recovery in
order to illustrate and reject the commodification of culture inherent in the logic of modernity. His childhood memories strengthen his awareness of this commodification, recalling what Kenzaburo Oe detects in Ishiguro’s writing: “a tough intelligence” that “always involves a double structure, with two or more intertwined elements” (“The Novelist in Today’s World” 169), the intertwined elements in Adorno’s case being his childhood in Germany and his exile in America. Adorno reverses nostalgia’s backward gaze by following the grain of its longing for the past and then turning that longing around toward the present, a move he explains elsewhere: “nothing past is proof, through its translation into mere imagination, against the curse of the empirical present. The most blissful memory of a person can be revoked in its very substance by later experience” (Minima Moralia 166). This chiasmus, or reversal, of nostalgia through the nostalgic’s imagination in the face of the empirical present does not, however, result in an accursed or odious predicament, because “no other hope is left to the past than that, exposed defencelessly to disaster, it shall emerge from it as something different” (167). The difference that emerges from the reversal of a nostalgic imagination of the past in the face of a disastrous present is akin to the difference between a national identity that emphasizes the continuity and traditions of a homogeneous community extending backward through time, and a critical national consciousness that engages with such a determinate national identity through negative dialectics. Ishiguro makes a similar move by revising nostalgia chiasmatically, reversing its conventional associations of halcyon recovery and historical evasion. His novels exceed their narrators’ attempts to reconcile their present disillusionment with past optimism and engage with the cultural politics of the heritage industry and national identity in late twentieth-century Britain. This explains why Ishiguro characterizes the narrative voice of Stevens (the butler in The Remains of the Day) as “an exaggerated version of this buttoned-up stuff” about English decorum and diction, a “stylized version, almost a caricature” of English demeanor (Jaggi 162); Stevens inhabits “a mythical England,” a world “which at first resembles that of those writers such as P. G. Wodehouse” that Ishiguro “undermine[s] [. . .] in a slightly twisted and different way” (Vorda and Herzinger 14, 15). Ishiguro foregrounds his own reception (in Britain) as a diasporic Japanese subject in order to question the exclusionary construction of an insular British national identity. Hence his comment that The Remains of the Day “has the tone of a very English book, but actually I’m using that as a kind of shock tactic: this relatively young person with a Japanese name and a Japanese face who produces this extra-English novel or [. . .] a super-English novel. It’s more English than English” (Vorda and Herzinger 14, original emphasis). Ishiguro combines
his diasporic perspective and his recasting of nostalgia to advance a literary cosmopolitics paired with a critical nationalism, taking issue with “an enormous nostalgia industry” that “is used as a political tool” by “the political right who say England was this beautiful place before the trade unions tried to make it more egalitarian or before the immigrants started to come” (Vorda and Herzinger 14, 15). By writing a super-English novel, Ishiguro works in the mode of what Mark Stein calls “posed-ethnicity,” where the prose is “self-consciously post-colonial” such that “the expectations of the field are neither rejected wholesale nor noiselessly imbibed. Instead, these expectations are embraced, parodied, and tampered with” (115, original emphasis). I suggest that not only *The Remains of the Day* but all of Ishiguro’s novels work along these lines: they at first seem to embrace but subsequently parody and tamper with literary and cultural conventions of patriotic and nostalgic British national identity.

To put Stein’s observation about posed ethnicity in different terms, the self-consciousness at work in the fiction of black British writers who share thematic and formal concerns with Ishiguro reflects upon and refigures literary and cultural expectations and conventions rather than establishing a coherent and vivid portrait of a character as a lifelike individual. This formal refiguring is similar to the role that the subject and subjectivity play in Adorno’s essay on late style and Beethoven’s final musical compositions. The subject—the conscious mind that is aware of itself and capable of action and change—is for Adorno never autotelic or self-enclosed even in moments when it appears to be wholly independent or completely dominant, because “the mind will then usurp the place of something absolutely independent—which it is not; its claim of independence heralds the claim of dominance. Once radically parted from the object, the subject reduces it to its own measure; the subject swallows the object, forgetting how much it is an object itself” (“Subject and Object” 499). I have already discussed in chapter 1 how for Adorno the concept-subject is mutually imbricated with the object and the other; what is important here is how Adorno’s explanation of late style can illuminate the stylistic representation of objects (figures and conventions associated with Britishness) in Ishiguro’s fiction as a turn away from the subject of a British literary and liberal humanist tradition toward a critical nationalism and literary cosmopolitics.

An artist’s late or mature works, Adorno argues, “often lack sweetness, and their bristly, austere husk resists straightforward tasting,” and critics often explain this “by declaring them to be the products of a subjectivity, or rather a ‘personality,’ ruthlessly expressing itself,” that “scorns sensuous charm in favor of the autocratic gestures of the liberated spirit,” hence the
willful disregard of a pleasing or harmonious form and content in the work (“Beethoven’s Late Style” 295). That Ishiguro’s novels all have first-person narrators offering their personal perceptions and interpretations of events gives his writing an appearance of such subjective and psychological analysis. Adorno, however, begs to differ by focusing instead on the formal evocations of earlier artistic conventions and tropes as a way of understanding how subjectivity is represented and at the same time problematized within the work of art. In late work, “formulae and phrases drawn from convention are scattered throughout. [. . .] the conventions become visible in a quite open, undisguised, and unmodified way” (“Late Style” 296). But these conventions are not guarantees of subjectivity, because “the power of subjectivity in late works of art is the sudden flaring up with which it abandons the work of art” (297). In the wake of subjectivity’s departure, the artistic conventions become “splinters, fragmented and abandoned,” an “expression no longer of the isolated self but of the mythical nature of the living creature and its demise” (297). Because “subjectivity communicates itself [. . .] only through the hollowed-out forms from which it escapes” (297), the work of art dialectically transforms subjectivity into a negative presence within an objective structure of conventional elements and tropes; subjectivity is therefore not a controlling or determining consciousness that subordinates these objective conventions. As Adorno remarks, in his late work “Beethoven no longer gathers up the landscape, assembling it [. . .] into a picture,” but “irradiates it with the fire that subjectivity ignites by bursting out and colliding with the walls of the work” (298), or, as one commentator observes, “late works are characterized by the disappearance of the work from the work as such; by the dematerialization of the work, its liberation from the inadequacy of its material form [. . .] this eventuality represents the highest fulfilment of the work itself” (Bewes 173). In his novels, Ishiguro attempts to “purify the clichés” of instrumental nationality “of control by subjective spirit” and to subject the determinate identity between the nation and essentialized culture “to a series of shocks” (Adorno, “Late Style” 298). The flaring up and abandonment of subjectivity—to wit, the artwork’s emphasis on and subsequent negation of subjectivity—is the formal process enacted by Ishiguro’s employment of nostalgia within his fictional landscapes. Nostalgia for Ishiguro means more than a longing to reassemble the emotional landscape of a novel into a halcyon picture of the past; it has a radical impulse similar to what Adorno describes as the irradiating fire that bursts out and collides with the walls of the artwork and gives us “a way of imagining the possibility of a world that is actually purer, one less flawed than the one we know we must inhabit” (“An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro by Brian Shaffer” 7), even though Ishiguro’s
narrators themselves may not be aware of these other possibilities. Ishiguro’s landscapes of the imagination perform a chiasmatic literary maneuver that pushes subjectivity to its limits in order to negate it and to draw our attention to the objective conventions and tropes of literary and cultural Britishness that both constitute and frame this narrating subjectivity.

Ishiguro’s chiasmatic negation of instrumental nationality as a controlling subjectivity contests the patriotic sentiment of late twentieth-century Britain embodied in literary romances of the archive and the heritage industry, which can be described as a culture industry that plays on nostalgia in its reactionary or escapist sense to create a national identity. To paraphrase Adorno, neither the concept of nationalism nor that of culture in the subjective position exhausts the other term in the objective position; complete subordination of the object by the subject does not occur. Instead, through the force of the encounter, the connections between the constitutive parts that make up the apparent wholes of both terms are illuminated across the subject-object relationship, negating the initial semblance of wholeness in both subject and object. Ishiguro’s novels also reveal the terms on which a normative, white Anglo-Saxon ethnicity is constructed, interrogating the apparent naturalness of this ethnicity as the basis of British national identity. Ishiguro’s novels confound readerly expectations that formal genres should correspond to certain cultural and national communities, thereby challenging his “commodification as a supplier of English and Japanese authenticity” and the idea that literary texts and their narrators should be native informants of a culture and nation (Sim 103, original emphasis). This refusal to fulfill conventional expectations has also been read as “the treason of representation” that Ishiguro commits by showing “how cultural stereotypes work by constructing his novels as national allegories, allowing the characteristics of his texts to stand for the characteristics of the cultures they seem to describe,” but then disrupting these allegories by foregrounding how his novels are “fictionalization[s] of cultural truths” (Walkowitz, “Ishiguro’s Floating Worlds” 1052). Understood in terms of a negative dialectic, the critical cosmopolitanism Sim and Walkowitz detect in Ishiguro may be understood as the failure or interruption of an enforced identification between nationalism and cultural insiderism or ethnic particularity. In Ishiguro’s fiction, the relationship between national consciousness and culture is not a subordination of culture to nationalism or vice versa, but a constellation that reveals the discursive suturing inherent in the apparently seamless identification and one-to-one correspondence between the two terms. As Jed Esty persuasively argues, “culturalism” and “the anthropological turn” in late modernist and post-imperial British fiction is “the discursive process by which English intellectuals translated the end of
empire into a resurgent concept of national culture,” and this process took shape as “an ethnographic and anti-elitist approach to symbolic practices” and as “the rise of an Anglocentric culture paradigm” (2). As my readings of *The Unconsoled, The Remains of the Day*, and *When We Were Orphans* will show, Ishiguro’s late style and his vivid evocations of cultural and social landscapes (whether Japanese or English) contest and invert this resurgent concept of the nation as patriotic subject by working through the ethnocentric expectations and conventions of the heritage culture industry itself.

**The Unconsoled and the Reversal of the Archival Romance**

Even though *The Unconsoled* was published after *The Remains of the Day*, I examine this text first as an articulation of Ishiguro’s aesthetic theory that provides a hermeneutic for comprehending the literary strategies he employs in his other novels. *The Unconsoled* evokes and inverts contemporary romances of the archive, a genre in which the discovery and recovery of art and culture through literary scholarship and investigation play key roles in consolidating a homogeneous British national identity. Romances of the archive are extremely popular and critically acclaimed—A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*, often considered an exemplary text of this particular genre, won the Booker Prize in 1990 (the year after Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day*), and was adapted into a film featuring Hollywood stars Gwyneth Paltrow and Aaron Eckhart. This particular genre details “the emergence of the library and the archive as privileged cultural sites, and the elevation of research questers to popular protagonists” and is “not only redemptive, but escapist, defensive, nostalgic, and revisionist in both traditional historical and postmodern senses” (Keen 215, 34). Romances of the archive often “contribute to nostalgic fantasies about the uses of the past,” as “the endogamous Englishness of the past discovered within romances of the archive can add to a celebratory narrative of homogeneity, continuity, native virtues, and cultural survival” (Keen 215). They play up an evasive and escapist patriotic nostalgia because of Britain’s apparent lack of purpose and impotence on the global stage of a post-imperial world where cultural survival and the reinforcement of a national identity become paramount through the work of scholars who become paramours. Culture, in the form of a recoverable literary archive, recuperates national identity as heritage or hidden essence tucked away in dusty documents waiting to be discovered by the right person rather than as a historically inflected and shifting discursive formation. It should come as no surprise that the rise of the heritage industry in Britain coincides with the increasing prominence of
the romance of the archive in fiction during the late twentieth century. Literature and art become key elements in a national identity expressed as an essentially cultural possession through the conventions of the romance: heterosexual love, genealogical inheritance, foreign adversaries, heroic expertise, and affectionate consummation of the central pair of protagonists.

*The Unconsoled* is an anti-romance that takes issue with the instrumental use of literature and art by official or state nationalism for the suturing of a national identity, and it does so by inverting and exaggerating the manner in which literature is often employed as a corporeal embodiment and expression of such an identity. I am reading *The Unconsoled* as Ishiguro’s fictional equivalent of Adorno’s formulations of negative dialectics in his aesthetic theory: a recasting of the relationship of equivalence and identity (in which the subject or concept dominates the object) into one of mutuality and reciprocity. The identification of literature with nation and its function as collective *Bildung* is paralleled in *The Unconsoled* by the importance that the inhabitants of an unnamed, possibly Eastern European city ascribe to music as the basis of their social and cultural identity. The first-person narrator, Ryder, is a world-renowned music expert and “the finest pianist in the world” (507), invited by the city to resolve a terrible crisis. The citizens want to choose a new direction for the city by removing the incumbent musical doyen, Mr Christoff, whose style is too formal and functional, and replacing him with an inspiring but temperamental conductor, Mr Brodsky. They invite Ryder to give a piano recital and a speech on Thursday night to champion Mr Brodsky as the city’s new artistic luminary. Ryder also meets various people who ask him for many favors and requests—his estranged wife and son, his aging father-in-law, old schoolmates from England, the hotel manager and his wife and son—and he realizes that he needs to make arrangements for his parents’ arrival and attendance at his recital. In the end, both Christoff and Brodsky fall from grace, Ryder’s attempts at reconciliation with his wife and child fail, his parents never arrive, he is unable to deliver his speech or perform his piece, and he fails to fulfill any request made by the citizens except one.

The citizens’ obsession with music as the guiding force for their community and the absurdly comic downfall of both Christoff and Brodsky suggest that Ishiguro is satirizing a deeply held humanist belief in British letters, namely that art and literature can serve as a cultural bulwark against the social alienation and potential anarchy caused by the increasingly industrialized and economically based relations among people. This view is most firmly expressed in the late nineteenth century by Matthew Arnold, whose argument for culture as “sweetness and light” (78) providing “a national glow
of life and thought” (79, original emphasis) has close connections to the corporeal theories of literary nationalism proposed by Herder and Fichte I discussed in chapter 1. Picking up where Arnold left off, F. R. Leavis argues that the critic also contributes to the luminescence of British literature as a cultural tradition by showing that “it is alive in so far as it is alive for us” as “a kind of ideal and impersonal living memory” (Living Principle 2)—in other words, a cultural heritage that, in the romance of the archive, can be recovered by deserving individuals who are the true heirs of British national identity. *The Unconsoled* undermines this romanticized and corporeal conjunction of literature and nationalism by showing Ryder’s inability to resolve the cultural crisis plaguing the city and denigrating Christoff and Brodsky, the two resident maestros. The idea of a great tradition of culture and literature passed down as a living memory to future generations and embodying a vital national identity is further contested by the twists and turns of *The Unconsoled*’s plot, its dreamlike displacement and condensation of people and places, and a writing style that one critic calls “oneiric realism” (François 79). Because of its Kafkaesque style, many commentators interpret the book as a psychoanalytical treatment of Ryder’s personality, while others offer a humanist and cosmopolitan perspective suggesting that Ryder’s harried professionalism advocates “a broader and more inclusive civility” as a way of “cohabit[ing] with less indecency in a world of immigrants, refugees, and strangers” (Robbins 439–40). However, such readings conflate literary psyche for psychological being and do not pay adequate attention to the ways in which *The Unconsoled* itself turns away from a psychoanalytical framing of Ryder’s personality toward a discussion of aesthetics, cultural politics, and national identity. While *The Unconsoled* seems to lend itself to or temptingly invite “psychological interpretation” of Ryder’s thoughts and feelings, in treating fiction as if it were “the expression of subjectivity” that can be correlated or reconciled with a human psyche, these interpretations do not consider how “the power of subjectivity in late works of art is the sudden flaring up with which it abandons the work of art” rather than its expression through the voice or thoughts of a character or narrator (Adorno, “Beethoven’s Late Style” 297). *The Unconsoled*’s flaring up of subjectivity is most evident in the exaggerated, almost absurd, emphasis on music as the moral compass for the city and on musicians as messianic figures who can both cause and resolve a social and cultural crisis and subsequently restore the community to its original state of happiness. Instead of assuming that the dominant subjectivity in the novel is Ryder’s and examining his flawed personality through psychoanalysis, we should direct our attention to the treatment and function of music in order to better understand *The Unconsoled*’s negation of Ryder’s
subjectivity and interrogation of literature’s instrumentalization within a collective, national identity.

Music takes the place of literature in the eyes of the city’s inhabitants in providing a way back to a prelapsarian past, expressing a nostalgia that Ishiguro would call both evasive and escapist. Mr Pedersen, a member of the city council, is achingly nostalgic for a time when “this was a very happy community” with “large happy families here” and “real lasting friendships” where “people treated one another with warmth and affection” (Unconsoled 97). The current unhappy state of the city is due to Mr Christoff, the incumbent artistic leader, whose approach is rigorously formalist. As Mr Pedersen explains the problem to Ryder, it becomes evident that he and the rest of the citizens conflate art, culture, and identity when he acknowledges with “profound shame” that the people of the city “must look to an outsider, to someone like [Ryder]” in order to “rectify” the mistake of following Mr Christoff’s artistic and cultural leadership “for so long” (100). Speaking in his own defense, Christoff argues that what “he has come to represent” is a much-needed hermeneutic for art and, by extension, culture and nationalism:

They say my approach celebrates the mechanical, that I stifle natural emotion. [...] I merely introduced an approach, a system that would allow people like this some way into the likes of Kazan and Mullery. Some way of discovering meaning and value in the works. I tell you, sir, when I first came here, they were crying out for precisely this. For some ordering, for a system they could comprehend. The people here, they were out of their depth, things were breaking down. People were afraid, they felt things slipping out of control. (Unconsoled 190)

Christoff advocates a tightly systematic form of analysis and performance, “a system” that clarifies the nuances of art so that most people “could comprehend” it, rather than an intuitive mode that depends on or appeals to “natural emotion.” However, the “widespread misery” in the city comes from his artistic style, described as “functional,” “cold,” with a “dryness” (Unconsoled 101, 102) that “celebrates the mechanical” and “stifle[s] natural emotion” (190). Ryder himself denounces Christoff at a public gathering originally meant to garner support for the embattled luminary. In response to a question about the “circular dynamic in Kazan,” Ryder condemns the schematic approach that Christoff represents: “My own view is that Kazan never benefits from formalised restraints. [...] There are simply too many layers, too many emotions, especially in the later works” (201). With this denunciation, “an angry circle” (203) of audience members surrounds and physically assaults Christ-
off, which is ironic since Christoff himself adheres to a strict dynamic of circularity.

A similar fate befalls Mr Brodsky, whose musical approach is the antithesis of Christoff’s. Brodsky’s emotional depth is matched by his legendary moodiness: he becomes a loud, abusive drunk because of a failed romance; he has an amputated leg that will not heal properly, and both his romance and his music are just “a wonderful consolation” for his festering and fascinating wound (Unconsolated 313). But when the city’s leaders listen to a recording of Brodsky’s music, they are lulled into tranquility and moved to tears by what they praise as “true music,” something that “shared [their] values” and that they had “so sorely missed over the years” under Christoff (113). However, during his performance at the end of the novel, Brodsky reveals that his passionate approach produces results equally unwelcome and discordant as Christoff’s artistic direction. If Christoff’s mechanical approach seems to be too functional and “cold” by its focus on formal details, then Brodsky’s approach represents the other extreme that stresses the artist’s subjectivity over the artwork. Brodsky’s conducting excavates “the peculiar life-forms hiding just under the shell,” but, because it is “something close to exhibitionism,” whatever “life-forms” are hiding there come not from the music itself but from Brodsky’s own tortured and ecstatic mental state while he conducts, a state in which he loses volition and cannot “resist the compulsion to go yet further,” exposing himself to the audience (492). Indeed, Brodsky’s conducting becomes progressively “unnerving” as the performance unfolds: “that tentativeness of technique that so often signals a disaffinity between a conductor and his musicians had entered the orchestra’s sound. The musicians […] were wearing expressions of incredulity, distress, even disgust” as Brodsky’s “conducting now took on a manic quality and the music veered dangerously towards the realms of perversity” (494). The audience members also begin expressing a “disaffinity” between Brodsky and the civic and cultural values they originally thought he shared: they “were now exchanging worried looks, coughing uneasily, shaking their heads,” while “one woman stood up to leave” (494). Brodsky finally collapses before he can finish his performance, and his former lover, Miss Collins, rebukes him on stage in a way that parallels Ryder’s earlier denunciation of Christoff. Miss Collins prophesies that Brodsky is destined for someplace “dark and lonely” because his music is “only ever about that silly wound”—his amputated leg—and for that reason Brodsky will “never be able to serve the people of this city,” because “[he] care[s] nothing for their lives” (499). If Christoff is condemned by the city council to “some dark corner of [the city’s] history” (100) because his music is only ever about formal constraints, then Brodsky is condemned to somewhere dark
and lonely because his music is only ever about the turbulent emotion of his own pain and suffering, which, when translated into artistic performance, is at first compelling but becomes unnerving and perverse. Like Christoff, who is assaulted by an angry circle of former fans of his circular dynamic, Brodsky is also hoisted by his own musical petard. His methodology uses music to manifest and assuage his own aggrieved emotions, and as a result a serious disaffinity emerges between him, his orchestra, and his originally sympathetic audience through his resolutely subjective artistic expression. As a symbolic parallel, the ironing board Brodsky uses as a crutch during his final performance also collapses under him, signaling the breakdown of both the artist and his artistic composition. If the city were to “build something all over again” based on Brodsky’s music, it would only magnify the wonderful consolation for Brodsky’s leg wound, “the one true love of [his] life,” and “destroy everything” in the end because it is so subjectively focused on the musician’s natural emotions (498).

Within the formal logic of a romance of the archive, Christoff and Brodsky would be scholarly antagonists caught up in the central struggle of cultural survival through artistic recuperation. But The Unconsoled, as an anti-archival romance, negates such projects that attempt to justify a national identity based on the instrumentalization and corporatization of art as an embodiment of cultural tradition. Mr Pedersen and the city council are a miniature national community desiring a cultural framework, and the corresponding national culture is narrow and exclusive: it must be either Christoff’s formalism or Brodsky’s romanticism, nothing in between. At the very moment in which Christoff and Brodsky appear to be at the height of their powers in the novel—Christoff at his public address about the circular dynamic, Brodsky conducting the orchestra to mark his ascendency—they fall from grace in a darkly comic way, marking the initial flaring up and subsequent failure of their subjectivity as a guiding force for the community. What The Unconsoled shows us, however, is the potential of the work of art as framework that negates instrumental rationality and reveals the reciprocal relationship between concept and object, nation and culture. The relationship between concept-subject and object outlined by the artwork is “strictly negative. Artworks say what is more than the existing, and they do this exclusively by making a constellation of how it is” (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 133). The focal point—rather than the dominant subjectivity—of this constellation is Ryder and the manner in which he performs his music. The Unconsoled presents the failures of Christoff’s and Brodsky’s music as the basis for the city’s insular national culture in a darkly comic and satirical manner to foreground Ryder’s own artistic style, which combines both Christoff’s formal
restraint and Brodsky’s natural emotion. Ryder’s music functions as the negative dialectic between nationalism and culture that disrupts the objectifying power of instrumental rationality. The only time Ryder succeeds in playing the piano is when he thinks he is alone in a hut near a graveyard, but it turns out he is unwittingly providing musical accompaniment for Mr Brodsky as the older musician buries his dog. I focus on this seemingly minor episode in the novel because, although its context may sound ludicrous, it is the only instance of Ryder performing as a musician rather than acting like a beleaguered artistic consultant; it also serves as an excellent example with which to elucidate how the negative dialectic works in the novel through the formal framing of the participants and their actions.

Ryder, anxious to rehearse before his scheduled concert later that evening, finds a small hut on a hillside with a piano and begins playing. On hearing the noise of someone digging a grave outside the hut, Ryder suddenly remembers that he had earlier agreed to play the piano while Brodsky buries his pet dog Bruno, and he obliges by continuing his musical accompaniment. The significance of this is that Ryder’s incidental elegy for Brodsky’s dog is the only request that Ryder agrees to and successfully completes in the entire book. There are three diegetic frames nested within the overall action of Ryder’s piano-playing: Ryder remembering his childhood in England, Brodsky burying his dog, Brodsky remembering his failed romance with his ex-lover Miss Collins. While Ryder plays, his reactions evince his combination of Christoff’s “tight control of dynamics” (Unconsoled 136) and Brodsky’s penchant for “natural emotion” (190): “I was in absolute control of every dimension of the composition” and “enjoying the ease with which the tangled knots of emotion rose languidly to the surface and separated” (357). This unique piano performance is also the moment where Ryder is most at home and at ease with himself, and the “sublime melancholy of the third movement” of Asbestos and Fibre evokes a specific impression tied to a national geography that forms the first nested frame in this scene:

> before long [I] began to picture the faces of my parents, sitting side by side, listening with looks of solemn concentration. Oddly I did not picture them sitting in a concert hall—as I knew I would see them later in the evening—but in the living room of a neighbour in Worcestershire, a certain Mrs Clarkson, a widow with whom my mother had for a time been friendly. (Unconsoled 357)

The novel drops numerous hints that Ryder is English and grew up in Worcestershire, but unlike a romance of the archive in which ethnicity and place
of birth would be crucial to recovering a national identity, in *The Unconsoled* such references to England’s West Midlands have another function. Ryder’s music evokes a past grounded in one national milieu, but instead of nostalgically emphasizing a British national identity, it moves toward a connection with “none other than Brodsky in the process of burying his dog” (*Unconsoled* 358)—the second nested frame of this episode. Brodsky’s grave-digging quickly gives way to the third nested frame, in which Ryder empathetically recalls Brodsky’s tragic romance with Miss Collins through free indirect style:

> At first, naturally enough, Brodsky would have turned over memories of his late companion [his dog Bruno]. But as the minutes had ticked by and there continued to be no sign of me, his thoughts had turned to Miss Collins and their forthcoming rendez-vous at the cemetery. Before long, Brodsky had found himself remembering again a particular spring morning of many years ago, when he had carried two wicker chairs out into the field behind their cottage. That had been no more than a fortnight after their arrival in the city, and despite their depleted funds Miss Collins had been going about furnishing their new home with considerable energy. (*Unconsoled* 359)

Just as the reference to Worcestershire in the earlier passage is a marker of national geography, the cottage beside the field inhabited by a poor but genteel couple is a pastoral image that *The Unconsoled* invokes but undermines. This scene of pastoral tranquility quickly sours as Miss Collins inadvertently refers to Brodsky’s “recent failures” (*Unconsoled* 359) and he in turn is offended by “her perfectionism” and “high-mindedness” (360); as a result “something cold had remained in their lives” (361). Despite this bucolic image of an affectionate couple living in foreign seclusion, Ishiguro’s free indirect discourse pulls us away from the certainty of ethnographic detail and the resolution of personal difficulties that are staples of an archival romance. Instead, *The Unconsoled* matches Brodsky’s thoughts and actions with Ryder’s music and moves outward from the innermost frame of Brodsky’s memories back to the diegetic present of Ryder’s piano-playing:

> It was while he had been lost in such memories [of Miss Collins] that I had finally arrived at the hut and begun to play. For the first several bars, Brodsky had gone on staring emptily into the distance. Then, with a sigh, he had brought his mind back to the task in hand and picked up his spade. [ . . . ] He had actually started to shovel some earth back when something, perhaps the sadness of the music, had finally made him pause.
As I concluded the third movement, I could hear Brodsky still hard at work and decided to forget the final movement—it was hardly suitable for the proceedings—and simply recommence the third once more. This, I felt, was the least I could do for Brodsky after having kept him waiting. [. . .] (Unconsoled 361)

As Ryder plays the third movement of *Asbestos and Fibre* again, he finds himself “lending a greater emphasis to the elegiac nuances than [he] had previously” (Unconsoled 362). When he concludes his playing, Ryder finds himself in a state of peace and tranquility, a rarity in this novel whose dominant tone is one of harried, dreamlike—almost nightmarish—bustling and busyness: “When I had come once more to the end of the movement, I remained sitting quietly at the piano for several minutes before rising to stretch my limbs in the combined space. The afternoon sun was now filling the hut, and I could hear crickets in the grass nearby” (362). When Ryder steps out of the hut, Brodsky, also in a rare moment of lucidity and sincerity, thanks the younger musician profusely: “That was very beautiful. I’m grateful, very grateful” (362).

What is important in this episode is how Ryder combines both Christoff’s formal constraints and Brodsky’s emotional expressiveness without turning either artistic methodology into an instrument or scaffolding for a determinate cultural or national identity. *The Unconsoled* asks us to consider how the symbols and structures of feeling commonly associated with such identities are literary figures and clichés rather than the foundations of cultural tradition or national heritage. *The Unconsoled* focuses on the manner in which these national and cultural figures are worked over and connected through the formal frames in this episode instead of identifying them with a national subject or cultural tradition. When Ryder repeats the third movement of *Asbestos and Fibre*, the passage of music moves him and the reader into and out of the narrative frames, thereby using Christoff’s circular dynamic, not as a formal constraint, but as a means of coalescing his own memories, and then leaving them behind as he enters Brodsky’s point of view and emotional recollections. Ryder’s music fulfills, but not through his own volition, the unspoken expectations raised in the first and third frames: Ryder’s parents watching him with “solemn concentration” as he plays, and Miss Collins’s “perfectionism” and “high-mindedness” toward Brodsky’s failures. By playing the third movement over again, giving Brodsky “a little more time to stand over the grave with his thoughts” and playing “the very best music” he is capable of (Unconsoled 361, 362), Ryder belatedly fulfills these unspoken expectations by providing musical accompaniment for the burial of Brodsky’s
dog—the only request he is able to complete in the entire novel. Brodsky fails to live up to Miss Collins’s and the city council’s expectations later in the novel during his own musical performance because his music is centered on his own wounded subjectivity. But Ryder’s fulfillment comes precisely when his subjectivity is emptied out through music, when conventional markers of nationalism and culture “are no longer permeated and overwhelmed by subjectivity but simply allowed to stand” and “end up transforming themselves into expressions” (“Late Style” 297). Ryder’s music offers a negatively dialectical alternative to the corporeal theory of literary nationalism, as the artwork is no longer an embodiment of cultural tradition. Instead, the artwork moves toward a sense of community by relating one subjectivity to another (Ryder to Brodsky, in this case) without subordinating one to the other or objectifying one at the expense of the other. It is in this reconfigured constellation of subject and object that a sincere compassion and peaceful, mutual recognition—evoked in the tranquil scene at the end of Ryder’s piano-playing—may come about. Ryder’s music in *The Unconsoled* works through conventions and clichés of nationalism and culture in order to throw into sharp relief their objectification, reconfiguring them as constellations rather than absolutes to help us glimpse the connections that are possible between both terms.

**Professional Landscaping:**

*The Remains of the Day* and National Identity

The objectification of the landscape into an embodiment of national identity is a crucial part of the posed-ethnic representation Ishiguro undertakes in *The Remains of the Day*. Ishiguro reveals what seems to be a readily apparent landscape of identification as a landscape of the imagination through the negation of that identity’s grounding assumptions. *The Remains of the Day* appears at first glance to be a condition-of-England novel, with Stevens, the aging butler of Darlington Hall, deeply concerned with the general loss of prestige and dignity in his profession as well as in his personal life. His journey in the countryside and his reflections on the greatness of the English landscape echo the sentiments of works that sound an elegiac note about Britain’s national identity and its natural environs such as Margaret Drabble’s *A Writer’s Britain*, published in 1979, the same year Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher assumed office. Drabble’s book combines numerous photographs of the British landscape with summaries of important literary works set in these geographical regions, illustrating how “English writers have persisted in seeing and praising the distinctive beauties of their own
country” due to their “passionate attachment to the places of childhood, and an almost mystic devotion to the land itself” (7). Yet this photographic-cum-literary tour of Britain is also an elegy for its fading pastoral heritage, as Drabble concludes that the conflict between town and country “today is deeper, perhaps, than it has ever been” in modern Britain, but what keeps this heritage alive is literature itself, “a tradition unbroken from the days of Marvell and Vaughan” linking twentieth-century poets such as Ted Hughes and Geoffrey Hill (277). Drabble’s detailed description of the British landscape and its literary incarnations is, ultimately, laced with an escapist and evasive nostalgia, as she concludes that “The Golden Age [of pastoral bliss] never existed, but by the same token it will never die, while there is a writer left to embody our desire” (277). This notion of writers and their literature embodying a collective desire to retrieve a Golden Age of pastoral simplicity is an extension of the corporeal idea of literature as an embodiment of a collective Bildung espoused by eighteenth-century philosophers of nationalism, and, as Drabble avers, it is British writers who must profess this mystic devotion to and desire for the natural landscape and its corresponding national heritage. Rather than affirm this profession of the landscape as a key characteristic of national identity, Ishiguro in The Remains of the Day negates its identification with the nation as well as two other cultural and literary tropes closely identified with being British: the figures of the butler and the aristocratic great house. The novel gestures toward a different kind of professionalism linked with a critical national consciousness that is beyond the narrator’s ken but which we, as readers, can recognize. Furthermore, Stevens’s continued reference to his national and cultural identity as essentially English brings to mind white, Anglo-Saxon Englishness as the normative model in British race relations. It is this unspoken norm that Ishiguro interrogates because it is linked with the instrumentalization of nationalism, even though Stevens is blithely unaware of its racist and essentialist implications.

Set in 1956, The Remains of the Day is a first-person narrative by Stevens, an aging butler who formerly served Lord Darlington, an English aristocrat and diplomat, in the 1930s. The international context of the novel emerges on two levels: 1956 marked Britain’s involvement in the Suez Crisis; Stevens’s flashbacks show us Lord Darlington’s gentleman diplomacy in the 1930s to prevent World War II. However, Lord Darlington unwittingly becomes a Nazi sympathizer, is publicly disgraced, and dies soon after the war. Stevens now works for an American employer, John Farraday, who has recently bought Darlington Hall. On Mr Farraday’s advice, Stevens takes a trip into the country to visit a former housekeeper, Miss Kenton, with whom he once shared some romantic affection. Miss Kenton is now unhappily married, and Stevens
concludes the novel wondering whether his professionalism and loyalty to Lord Darlington were misplaced.

*Remains of the Day* reveals the instrumentalization of nationalism through the antagonism between Britishness and Americanness as seen in the exchanges between Stevens the butler, his former employer Lord Darlington, and the new owner of Darlington Hall, Mr Farraday. The opposition is apparently simple: for Stevens, Englishness and its representative figures appear to be grounded in an essential heritage and dignity that smugly confounds the craftiness and crass mercantilism of the Americans. Early in the novel, Mr Farraday suggests that Stevens should take a vacation and “see around this beautiful country of [his]” (*Remains* 4). Stevens’s both unspoken and spoken responses suggest a depth of Englishness that his new American employer can never fathom, but in ways that highlight the clichés of the country house and aristocrat–servant relationship. Stevens reflects that “those of our profession, although we did not see a great deal of the country in the sense of touring the countryside and visiting the picturesque sites, did actually ‘see’ more of England than most, placed as we were in houses where the greatest ladies and gentlemen of the land gathered,” and that “it has been [Stevens’s] privilege to see the best of England over the years [. . .] within these very walls” of Darlington Hall (4). Stevens emphasizes his own national identity by appealing to the idea of the landed aristocracy as embodiments of the nation’s nobility and greatness. Seeing one’s country involves not touring the countryside but being in the immediate presence of “the greatest ladies and gentlemen of the land” who themselves experience the state of the nation firsthand. For example, Lord Darlington witnessed “with [his] own eyes” how “ordinary, decent working people are suffering terribly” when he “went north” to look at the state of Britain in the 1930s, but his admiration for the German and Italian fascist regimes’ “strong leadership” in “set[ting] their houses in order” (198) tragically leads him to support Nazi Germany during the buildup to World War II. Yet Darlington represents a typically English sense of fair play and dignity, lamenting that his country’s complicity with the harsh French and American treatment of a defeated Germany after World War I is “deeply disturbing” and “a complete break with the traditions of this country” (71). Second, Stevens reckons national greatness in very formal terms: it lies embodied within physical structures such as “these very walls” of Darlington Hall as well as the social hierarchy with its “ladies and gentlemen of the land” and those who serve them, such as Stevens himself. Moreover, this formal greatness must be earned through hard work, for Stevens stresses that it is “those of [his] profession” who serve and wait upon ladies and gentlemen that earn the “privilege” to share in that greatness. Lord
Darlington, whose title comes through aristocratic birthright, makes a committed effort at gentleman diplomacy and “close personal contact” (91) with the other foreign dignitaries gathered at the 1923 conference he organizes to defuse the growing international tensions in Europe. For Stevens, Darlington earns and performs his nationally derived greatness as an aristocrat by opposing the “cheating and manipulating” Americans in the sphere of international relations, challenging Senator Lewis’s idea of “professionalism” with his commitment to a sense of “honour” and “the desire to see justice prevail in the world” (103). Even if those efforts prove to be “misguided,” as Stevens remarks at the end of the novel, “at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he had made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man” (243). Such courage and commitment to either a principle or an employer that “embodies all that [one] finds noble and admirable” (200), even if the principle or employer eventually causes harm, seems to bestow the privilege of dignity to its adherents, and this quality is glossed by Stevens as an essential feature of being English.

In contrast, Stevens implicitly finds his new employer Mr Farraday and the other Americans lacking the sterling qualities found in Lord Darlington and himself. The Americans’ shallowness is emphasized by their amateurish desire for an authentic Englishness and their unwillingness to dedicate any labor and effort to achieving it. Mr Farraday is neither an aristocrat nor a peer; he belongs to a new class of rich Americans who enjoy travelling and owning properties in Europe. As Stevens reflects with more than a touch of regret, Mr Farraday’s purchase of Darlington Hall has taken “this house out of the hands of the Darlington family after two centuries” (Remains 6) and broken the distinguished lineage that ties this aristocratic family with its eponymous abode. The grand social functions that Lord Darlington enjoyed are also to disappear, for Mr Farraday “made it clear that he planned to hold only very rarely the sort of large social occasions Darlington Hall had seen frequently in the past” (7). With the passing of the hereditary residence of an English peer into a bourgeois American’s hands, both the greatness of the house and Stevens’s occasions for basking in that greatness are diminished. Moreover, Mr Farraday’s calculating and miserly streak comes across when he asks Stevens to run the large estate with a staff of only four members (as opposed to seventeen in Lord Darlington’s day), and, while admitting that “this might [. . .] mean putting sections of the house ‘under wraps,’” instructs Stevens to “bring all [his] experience and expertise to bear to ensure such losses were kept to a minimum” (7). The degradation of Darlington Hall and the loss of its symbolic Englishness are palpable in Stevens’s restrained reflections on Mr Farraday’s instructions. Although the butler does not directly
accuse Mr Farraday, “something of [his] scepticism” toward his new American employer’s fitness to own and occupy a great English house is indeed “betrayed” (7) by his constant comparison of how things were under Lord Darlington and how things will be under Mr Farraday. Without the social occasions to serve “the greatest ladies and gentlemen of the land,” and bereft of his impressively large household staff to manage Darlington Hall, Stevens can neither enter the presence of those who embody great Englishness nor perform the expert butlering that also marks his essential Englishness.

Within America’s global compass, Englishness as symbolized by Darlington Hall and Stevens himself becomes a commodity to be consumed and enjoyed, a leisurely pastime to be indulged in rather than a consciousness of national purpose and greatness. “At a time when his enthusiasm for his acquisition was at a height,” Mr Farraday shows some visiting American friends, the Wakefields, around Darlington Hall like a child showing off a new toy, and their “various American exclamations of delight” (Remains 122) as they tour the Hall earn Stevens’s silent disapproval. Mr Farraday, with his “deep enthusiasm for English ways,” and the Wakefields, who themselves “were owners of an English house of some splendour” (122, 123), are depicted as connoisseurs of Englishness, hobbyists purchasing and collecting relics of English national culture for fun. As Mr Farraday says to Stevens with typical American frankness, “This is a genuine grand old English house, isn’t it? That’s what I paid for. And you’re a genuine old-fashioned English butler, not just some waiter pretending to be one. You’re the real thing, aren’t you? That’s what I wanted, isn’t that what I have?” (124). Within the novel’s internal logic defined by Stevens’s inherent sense of Englishness, Mr Farraday and the Wakefields can never be truly English, because their pursuit of “the real thing” is something they have “paid for” financially rather than a professional dedication to an ideal or committed effort to serve a dignified personage.

At first glance, Stevens, through the fate of the once-glorious Darlington Hall, seems to express a sense of national decline in the face of American economic power and commodity culture akin to what Margaret Drabble observes in her lament that Britain’s pastoral heritage is going gently into the good night of the twentieth century. But Ishiguro takes issue with this essentialist identification of the nation with its landscape and landed aristocracy by stressing how Stevens constructs nationalism as “cultural insiderism” and “ethnic absolutism” (Gilroy 3, 2). On his journey to see Miss Kenton, Stevens takes a break in Salisbury and marvels at the countryside as he pontificates on what makes up the “greatness” of “Great Britain”: “it is the very lack of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart. What is pertinent is the calmness of that beauty, its sense of restraint. It is as though the
For Stevens, national identity, or Great Britain’s “greatness,” is defined by a “lack of obvious drama or spectacle” that cannot be explained. It can be intuited only by someone truly in the know, with an innate connection to the landscape and its unsurpassed restraint and calmness, such as Stevens himself. Here, national greatness is embodied in a landscape that itself embodies the conventional idea of British reserve or the dignified “stiff upper lip.” Furthermore, Ishiguro shows us the colonial discourse underlying Stevens’s appreciation of national greatness: Great Britain is defined by a relative lack; it is superior only in relation to “such places as Africa and America,” which are “inferior” due to their “unseemly demonstrativeness” (29). This colonialisit vocabulary becomes more pronounced when Stevens discusses butlering as an essentially English profession. After opining how truly great butlers “wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit” and “will not let ruffians or circumstance tear it off him in the public gaze,” Stevens emphasizes that “butlers only truly exist in England,” defining butlers as paragons of national identity, of an Englishness formed through the vocabulary of class, colonialism, and race (43). The class hierarchy can be seen from the way Stevens compares his professionalism to a gentleman’s attire that no ruffians will tear off him in public. The butler becomes a class all to himself, slightly below the “decent gentleman” whom he serves, but far and above the crowd of “ruffians” and “manservants” (43). Stevens further explains his idea of dignity in decidedly colonialist and racist terms: the “Continents” are likened to savages, “a breed incapable of emotional restraint,” who will rip off their clothes and “run about screaming”; dignity is “beyond such persons,” simply because they are not part of the “English race” (43). Stevens’s circular logic at the end of this passage—“it is for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman”—echoes his earlier idea of Britain’s greatness embodied in a landscape that always already “knows of its own beauty, of its own greatness” (43). Ishiguro critiques an exclusionary and homogeneous national identity by evoking symbols and icons we would readily associate with Englishness—the butler, the decent gentleman, the pastoral countryside, unflappable dignity. Ishiguro pushes the internal logic of these symbols to the extreme in order to show the underlying discourses of class, colonialism, and race. Even though Stevens's narration is sincere, Ishiguro’s narrative is ironic: as readers, we do not necessarily agree with Stevens’s equation of greatness and dignity with a self-evident and holistic national identity of “Great Britain.” In other words, Ishiguro critiques the idea of nationalism as nativism, as an essential cultural or racial identity existing outside of time and space, and
this critique occurs within a transnational context because Ishiguro connects Stevens’s insular national identity with the larger framework of American global ascendancy and the post-imperial world situation.

Stevens’s nostalgia for a time when Lord Darlington and Darlington Hall’s fortunes were at their height and when Stevens himself enjoyed the privilege of waiting on the aristocracy who personify Britain’s greatness is essentially conservative and regressive. Ishiguro and the novel, however, evince a different kind of nostalgia of the sort that Ishiguro himself explains in his interview, which involves a “feeli[ng] our way towards a better world because we’ve had an experience of it” (“An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro by Brian Shaffer” 7). This more idealistic form of nostalgia that points toward the possibility of change can be seen in two minor characters in *The Remains of the Day*: Doctor Carlisle and Mr Cardinal. Dr Carlisle is the local physician in the village of Moscombe where Stevens spends the night after his car runs out of fuel, and as he tells Stevens, “when I first came out here, I was a committed socialist. Believed in the best services for all the people and all the rest of it. First came here in ’forty-nine. Socialism would allow people to live with dignity” (*Remains* 210). However, Dr Carlisle comes to the bitter conclusion that while the people of Moscombe “do have a political conscience of sorts,” in the end “no one in the village wants upheaval even if it might benefit them. People here want to be left alone to lead their quiet little lives” (209–10). Dr Carlisle represents a residual form of critical national consciousness that works toward equality and liberation through a thorough transformation of political and economic structures. However, the ideal of “dignity” as social justice and an equitable distribution of services and resources is marginalized by the more patriotic strand of nationalism espoused by a character such as Harry Smith, another Moscombe villager. Smith argues that what the British “fought Hitler for” was dignity: “dignity’s something every man and woman in this country can strive for and get,” and what it means for Smith is that “you’re born free, and you’re born so that you can express your opinion freely, and vote in your member of parliament or vote him out” (186). Harry Smith’s idea of dignity becomes simply a matter of freedom of speech and expression, but this freedom is limited only to people who are British, as Smith also opposes Dr Carlisle’s view that Britain’s former colonies should be allowed to attain independence (192). Therefore, Harry Smith’s notions of dignity and freedom match Stevens’s own nostalgia for the halcyon days of dignity and freedom in his profession and at Darlington Hall, and both forms of nationalism appear to marginalize the critical nationalism represented by Dr Carlisle. However, Dr Carlisle marks the presence of a nostalgia pointing toward the novel’s abiding attachment to the possibility of a critical nation-
alism, or, as Ishiguro says, “the possibility of a world that is actually purer, one less flawed than the one we know we must inhabit” (“An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro by Brian Shaffer” 7). That Dr Carlisle is the only person in the entire village of Moscombe who can see through Stevens’s charade as a gentleman from Darlington Hall emphasizes his perspicacity and does not allow us to dismiss his socialist ideals. Instead, the doctor’s own nostalgia for a time when socialism was meaningful both as a personal goal and as a social vision represents a national consciousness that has not yet been achieved or attained within the contemporary climate of patriotic exhortation and a burgeoning heritage industry.

This critical national consciousness is also exemplified in less socialist but more personal tones through the character of Mr Cardinal, who is Lord Darlington’s godson and a journalist for a left-wing newspaper, and who is later killed in action in World War II as an indirect consequence of Lord Darlington’s actions. Toward the end of the novel, Lord Darlington arranges secret meetings at Darlington Hall with the German foreign minister, and Mr Cardinal tries to get hold of the details. Mr Cardinal employs his professional skills as a journalist to the fullest, doing “a lot of investigating” in order to “know the situation in Germany [...] as well as anyone” in England, and realizes that Lord Darlington is being manipulated by the Nazis “like a pawn” (Remains 222). He confronts Stevens, arguing that Darlington is being manipulated by the Nazis, but the butler will not be moved. Stevens’s conflation of dignity, greatness, and national identity creates a professional devotion that places “every trust” in Lord Darlington, an unshakeable belief that his lord and master is doing “that which is highest and noblest” (225). Although his appeals to Stevens to use his own judgment fall on deaf ears, Mr Cardinal represents a salutary professionalism. Mr Cardinal belongs to the same social class as Lord Darlington, for his father Sir David Cardinal was “his lordship’s closest friend and colleague” (212). But the novel highlights Mr Cardinal’s journalistic skills and critical thinking—his professional acumen—rather than his national and cultural heritage as an English peer. Mr Cardinal’s critical nationalism is motivated by his professionalism as a journalist and an active social and political consciousness, a skepticism about “that which is highest and noblest,” and the “good judgement” that is not afraid to criticize a prominent national figure when he is “out of his depth” (225). That Stevens’s recollections of Mr Cardinal in the present time of the novel are tinged with nostalgia is especially telling, as it suggests he finally recognizes the importance of Mr Cardinal’s salutary professionalism: “We had been enjoying some recollection or other concerning the young Mr Cardinal, so that I was then obliged to inform Miss Kenton of the gentleman’s
being killed in Belgium during the war. And I had gone on to say: ‘Of course, his lordship was very fond of Mr Cardinal and took it very badly’” (234). Stevens feels obliged to recount Mr Cardinal's death as a war casualty, a death that is the indirect result of Lord Darlington's appeasement efforts toward Nazi Germany. Furthermore, because Stevens hastily adds that Lord Darlington was “very fond” of Mr Cardinal, we may infer that Stevens himself too held some affection for the young journalist and feels remorse and regret over his death. What Stevens feels or senses but cannot articulate directly is that Mr Cardinal's pointed words to him during the night of the fateful meeting between Lord Darlington, the German ambassador, and the British Prime Minister are an accurate critique of Stevens's blind faith in and patriotic loyalty toward his master's actions. It is therefore no surprise that when, toward the end of the novel, Stevens finally admits that Mr Cardinal was correct, that he had “trusted” Lord Darlington so completely such that “[he] can't even say [he] made [his] own mistakes,” he takes this realization very badly, as badly as Lord Darlington took Mr Cardinal's death (243). The feelings invoked by Dr Carlisle and Mr Cardinal are a chiasmatic inversion of the sentimental ideals held by Lord Darlington and the younger Stevens who believed in professional dignity and greatness. The sense of loss and nostalgia associated with both these seemingly minor characters is, to use Ishiguro's words, “the emotional equivalent or intellectual cousin of idealism” that “anchors us emotionally to a sense that things should and can be repaired” (“An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro by Brian Shaffer” 7). Just as Mr Cardinal points out that “no one with good judgement could persist in believing anything Herr Hitler says after the Rhineland” (Remains 225), in the same way, no reader with good judgment can believe Stevens's ideas of a “great” national identity, defined by an inherent cultural and racial dignity, after the history of colonialism. The Remains of the Day is a study of the clichés and stereotypes resulting from the hypostasized identification of particular cultural objects and figures with a dominant national identity. In Stevens's case, a sense of professionalism has become conflated with an essential Englishness based on dignity and hierarchy, whereas Mr Cardinal's professionalism is a critical negation that points out the hypostatization of Darlington's and Stevens's authoritarian nationalism behind a cultural mask of English fair play. To return to the interview between Ishiguro and Kenzaburo Oe, Ishiguro's writing does not affirm such an essentialist national identity, just as he is not “a very English Englishman” nor “a very Japanese Japanese” (169). Instead, Ishiguro rethinks nationalism as a sustained political and cultural critique, as a literary and discursive counterpoint to the symbolic objectification of nationalism by a heritage industry and its corresponding fictional counter-
part in the romance of the archive. This critical national consciousness is closely linked and not opposed to Ishiguro’s diasporic subjectivity, a subjectivity that—far from valorizing dispersal and mobility—offers an intertwined literary-symbolic and sociopolitical intervention in both national and transnational representations of Britain and Japan.

**The Empire Within:**

**When We Were Orphans and Cosmopolitical Critique**

While *The Remains of the Day* offers a critique of a patriotic national identity through its representations of essentialist ideas of dignity and greatness embodied in the English landscape and aristocracy and narrated by a butler, *When We Were Orphans* presents a similar critique-cum-inversion of a nostalgic and patriotic sense of nationalism through another conventional literary figure—the private detective. The feeling of British diminishment on the world stage after World War II, evidenced by Stevens’s carefully veiled resentment toward Mr Farraday and the other Americans in *The Remains of the Day*, seemed to be assuaged by the military victory over Argentina in 1982 in the Falklands War, and then compounded by the handover of Hong Kong, Britain’s last colonial possession, to China in 1997. Ishiguro uses Christopher Banks, the detective narrator of *When We Were Orphans*, as a figure who represents this nostalgic desire for recuperating national greatness on an international level and, at the same time, through his (mis)adventures and self-discoveries, destabilizes the insularity and homogeneity upon which such greatness is predicated, revealing what is domestic and national to be always already intermingled with and interdependent upon what is foreign and international. In other words, to invert a famous phrase in postcolonial criticism coined by Salman Rushdie, *When We Were Orphans* shows us that the Empire does not simply write back to Britain; rather, it is always standing back-to-back with modern British self-fashioning.

*When We Were Orphans* is an amalgam of domestic detective story and colonial adventure tale, with its protagonist Christopher Banks born in the International Settlement in Shanghai at the turn of the century and losing both his parents, who, he believes, were zealous anti-opium crusaders kidnapped by the Chinese. Dedicating his life to his parents’ rescue, and believing that accomplishing this rescue will strike a blow for justice in the grand global scheme of things, Banks comes of age in Britain and becomes a celebrated detective, eventually returning to Shanghai in 1937 as the Japanese military invades the city and reduces most of it to rubble. Banks reaches the
house where he believes his parents are being held, but he does not find them. Instead, both his investigation and his heroic sense of self are gravely undermined when he learns the truth about his parents from Uncle Philip, an old family friend who now works for the Chinese military: his father abandoned Banks and his mother for another woman and died overseas; his mother was kidnapped by Wang Ku, a Chinese warlord in the opium trade, and acquiesced to a life of sexual slavery in return for Wang providing financial support for Banks's upbringing and education in Britain. In an epilogue set twenty years later, Banks reunites with his aged and senile mother in a nursing home in Hong Kong, and muses on the prospects of spending his remaining years with his adopted daughter Jennifer. Both the British detective story and the tale of colonial espionage became popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the literary and scholarly gulf between the two genres helped maintain the demarcation between “the nation as a domestic core that was purely English and a colonial periphery that was foreign and racially marked,” and this distinction “prevented the reader from acknowledging the manifold interdependencies between the two domains” (Reitz xvii). Detectives, it would seem, are concerned with criminals at home, while spies are engaged with enemies abroad. This generic boundary, however, obscures the ways in which “detective fiction [. . .] refashioned Englishness as an imperial instead of an insular identity” (Reitz xxv), such that the detective and the imperial explorer “collaborated to make understanding the interpenetration of core and periphery essential to the integrity of the nation” and need to be considered “together in their proper global context [. . .] in which the detective is brought to life amidst anxieties about increasing imperial power and the imperial explorer is shaped by domestic ideas about power” (Reitz 65, 80, original emphasis). In light of Britain's global situation in the late twentieth century, Christopher Banks, as a detective implicated in Britain's imperial adventure, offers a more recent incarnation of the desires and anxieties of a nation trying to retain a key role in international affairs.

Throughout the novel, Ishiguro foregrounds the extremely studied efforts Banks undertakes to fashion himself as a typically British subject through the figures and tropes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and culture, even though these details seem to elude Banks and appear to be second nature in his own character formation. As an adult, he lives in a London flat furnished “in a tasteful manner that evoked an unhurried Victorian past” (Orphans 3), and he remembers his mother, Diana, as “a beauty in an older, Victorian tradition” who “is certainly elegant, stiff-backed, perhaps even haughty, but not without the gentleness around her eyes that [he] remember[s] well” (58). Banks's mother's physical beauty, coupled with her
ardent opposition to the British opium trade with China, makes her a para-
gon of Victorian feminine virtue and therefore an object to be protected and
rescued from the clutches of the Chinese. Banks's father, on the other hand,
does not appear in any descriptive detail in Banks's childhood recollections,
and Banks's belief, up till Uncle Philip's revelation at the end of the novel,
that his "father made a stand, a courageous stand against his own employers
concerning the profits from the opium trade [. . . ] and was thus removed”
(306) actually projects his mother's principles onto his father's character and
covers up the sordid truth of his father's elopement. The central role played
by an idealized image of British culture and history in Banks's self-fashioning
is further evinced by his memories of young men from Britain who visited
his parents and "brought with them the air of the English lanes and mead-
ows [he] knew from The Wind in the Willows, or else the foggy streets of the
Conan Doyle mysteries," young men whom Banks felt "were all of them fig-
ures to study closely and emulate” (54). Not only does Banks read the adven-
tures of Conan Doyle's most famous detective, Sherlock Holmes, who serves
as the template for Banks's own detective persona; his imagined geography of
English lanes, meadows, and the streets of London are also formed through
literary texts. Bank's observation, thrown in as an afterthought, that the
visitors were figures to study and emulate for their inherent national iden-
tity belies Banks's own protestations as an adult that he “blended perfectly
into English school life” and had no trouble “grasping the deeper mores and
etiquettes” of life in Britain (7). The adult Banks, like Stevens gazing upon
the plain features of the English countryside, believes that national iden-
tity can be readily grasped and attained if—and only if—one has an innate
connection with the landscape and country, but this confidence in a rooted
national identity is continually questioned in Banks's own childhood memo-
ries, where he is often beset by doubts about being (in the words of his Japa-
nese friend Akira) “not enough Englishman” (76). Uncle Philip, to whom
the young Banks turns in an effort to “become more English,” readily admits
that, being raised in the International Settlement “with a lot of different sorts
around [him],” Banks is “a bit of a mongrel” (79), but Philip also recognizes
that “people need to feel they belong. To a nation, to a race”; otherwise “this
civilisation of ours, perhaps it'll just collapse” (80). Uncle Philip's words are
important here for two reasons: first, his observation that Banks is a bit of a
mongrel is forgotten or repressed by the adult Banks, who rejects any hint
that he is not English enough and maintains he can fit seamlessly into an ide-
alized version of his national identity back in London; second, his equation of
national identity and racial belonging with civilizational survival is taken up
by Banks as an adult as the key principle in his crime-solving methodology.
Banks cannot admit that he does not have an Antaeus-like relationship with Britain and its culture and history; therefore, he must construct a national identity out of an idealized and imagined detective persona gleaned from the pages of Conan Doyle's mysteries he read as a child and then endow this persona with a sense of national destiny and purpose on par with that of Sherlock Holmes. Banks states with adamant determination that “[his] intention was to combat evil—in particular, evil of the insidious, furtive kind” (*Orphans* 22), and “that the task of rooting out evil in its most devious forms, often just when it is about to go unchecked, is a crucial and solemn undertaking” (31). Banks finds his sentiments mirrored by other characters in Britain who remind him that evil is “conspiring to put civilisation to the torch” (45) and that “the eye of the storm” that is building up into World War II “is to be found not in Europe at all, but in the Far East” (146). The sheer absurdity of the idea that a world war can be caused by the abduction of Banks's parents and that their rescue can avert the impending global catastrophe shows us that Banks is absolutely caught up in playing the role of a detective to the extent that the role itself has taken over—Banks views the world through the lens of a Conan Doyle mystery that pits himself, the heroic detective, against innumerable and implacable forces of evil. But, as one commentator points out, “despite his gumshoe appellation, Banks never gets to exhibit ratiocinative brilliance or to engage in intricate spadework” (Sim 108). Our only knowledge of Banks's acumen as a detective is hearsay from other characters who describe him as “the most brilliant investigative mind in England” (*Orphans* 34) and “a greater man” than run-of-the-mill police inspectors (144). Unlike in a typical Conan Doyle mystery, we only see Banks wearing the persona of a detective—just as Stevens the butler dons his professionalism like a gentleman puts on his suit—without any evidence of the perspicacity or deductive powers possessed by a literary antecedent such as Sherlock Holmes. Ishiguro shows us that Banks must first construct the persona of a detective to create the fiction of national identity rather than allow his professional self to be an emanation or outgrowth of a pre-existing and determinate nationalism. In *The Remains of the Day*, butlering is Stevens’s way of participating in a national greatness he feels is innate but that he never actually possesses; in *When We Were Orphans*, detecting crime is Banks's mode of maintaining a national identity through a civilizational struggle that divides the world into two clear camps of good and evil, domestic and foreign.

Ishiguro’s literary cosmopolitics extends beyond its interrogation of Banks’s self-deluding detective role-playing and points out that the same cultural discourses of national identity and civilizational greatness are at work
in other societies besides Britain. Banks, having concluded a fruitless search for his parents in Shanghai’s war zone, is escorted back to the British Consulate by a Japanese officer, Colonel Hasegawa, who spent some time in Britain before the war. Hasegawa fondly recalls the “calm, dignified” and “beautiful green fields” and—more important—English literature: “Dickens, Thackeray. Wuthering Heights. I am especially fond of your Dickens” (Orphans 296). When Banks questions how such a cultured man such as Hasegawa could participate in the brutal invasion of China, the colonel chillingly echoes Stevens’s earlier remarks about greatness when he replies that “if Japan is to become a great nation” then the violence is “necessary. Just as it once was for England” (297). Although there are, of course, myriad historical and geopolitical reasons for Japan’s militarism during World War II, what Ishiguro points out here is the continuity between Eastern and Western discourses of national identity, imperial expansion, and military conquest, since Hasegawa’s replies juxtapose the apparent tranquility of the English countryside and the domestic context of English literature with Japanese national aggrandizement linked to an earlier period of British imperialism. It is this continuity between and interpenetration of the domestic and the foreign that Banks, in his Manichean ordering of the world into good and evil through a fictional detective’s eyes, cannot possibly comprehend.

This interpenetration of the nation and what lies outside of it destabilizes any attempt to forge a national identity premised on cultural characteristics that are supposedly innate or inherent, and it comes to a climax when Banks learns from his old family friend, Uncle Philip (now a shadowy, ex-Communist informer for the Chinese Kuomintang military regime), that his mother’s agreed to be Wang Ku’s concubine in return for the Chinese warlord’s provision of opium money for Bank’s education and life in Britain: “Your schooling. Your place in London society. The fact that you made of yourself what you have. You owe it to Wang Ku. Or rather, to your mother’s sacrifice” (Orphans 313). Uncle Philip’s revelation is an inversion of the usual climactic scene of a detective story, in which the indefatigable investigator unveils the truth of the crime before an assembled cast of characters and suspects. Uncle Philip’s anguished disclosure is the final demonstration of Banks’s investigative ineptitude and acts as the final blow to the fictional persona Banks has built up over the years:

You see what made possible your comfortable life in England? How you were able to become a celebrated detective? A detective! What good is that to anyone? Stolen jewels, aristocrats murdered for their inheritance. Do you suppose that’s all there is to contend with? Your mother, she wanted you to
live in your enchanted world for ever. But it’s impossible. In the end it has to shatter. (Orphans 315)

The point Ishiguro drives home in this final confrontation between Banks and Uncle Philip is similar to what Edward Said calls contrapuntal reading, “a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (Culture and Imperialism 51). The enchanted world of the celebrated detective fighting a shadowy worldwide conspiracy of evil that Banks has been living in is premised on the obscuring and denial of the simultaneous awareness of Britain’s imperial enterprise and the opium trade that was actively encouraged by the British government and trading companies, as well as certain Chinese authorities such as Wang Ku. Just as Colonel Hasegawa argues that Japan’s military ambitions are a counterpoint to an earlier era of British imperial expansion, so too Uncle Philip’s revelation points out that the suturing of Banks’s apparently seamless national identity is possible only with the threads of empire and exploitation, and that “we are dealing with the formation of cultural identities understood not as essentializations [. . .] but as contrapuntal ensembles, for it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions” (Said, Culture and Imperialism 52). The contemporary relevance of Said’s and Ishiguro’s contrapuntal and cosmopolitical critique of a determinate and instrumental national identity can be seen from British reactions to the handover of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China on July 1, 1997, during which “Britain stressed its own contribution to Hong Kong’s prosperity while China barely acknowledged Britain’s presence” and the outgoing governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten, opined that “this is a Chinese city, a very Chinese city with British characteristics” (Higgins para 11). While the British authorities and Governor Patten were trying to protect Hong Kong’s democratic and capitalist political and economic systems from rapid dismantling by the new Chinese government, read contrapuntally their emphases on British contributions to Hong Kong and the city’s very Chinese—but-also-British character cuts both ways—Hong Kong has contributed significantly to Britain’s prosperity, and Britain is a country that has also taken on Chinese characteristics. In the context of black British literature and culture, Ashley Dawson argues that since the influx of immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia after World War II—if not earlier—Britain has undergone what Jamaican poet Louise Bennet calls a colonization in reverse and is now undeniably a mongrel nation (Dawson 2007). Christopher Banks, if we recall, is also “a bit of mongrel,” having grown up in Shanghai’s International
Settlement surrounded by various people from different Asian and European cultures; hence Ishiguro’s literary cosmopolitics insists that a critical national consciousness must acknowledge and affirm these international and “mongrel” elements in the nation’s social body and cultural community.

Moreover, just as Mr Cardinal the journalist offers a note of critical nationalism in a narrative that is dominated by Stevens’s professional voice, so too When We Were Orphans gestures toward cosmopolitical connections that cannot be actualized or realized because of Banks’s steadfast identification with his heroic mission. Returning to the International Settlement in Shanghai in 1937, Banks is “shocked” by “the refusal of everyone here to acknowledge their drastic culpability” in the brutal violence of the Sino-Japanese War; he is appalled by “a denial of responsibility which has turned in on itself and gone sour, manifesting itself in the sort of pompous defensiveness” among “the so-called elite of Shanghai” who are “treating with such contempt the suffering of their Chinese neighbours across the canal” (Orphans 173). At the beginning of the next chapter following this acerbic observation, Banks appears to be doing his part to alleviate the suffering of the Chinese as he helps the local police investigate a boathouse where “three bodies had been discovered,” but he quickly leaves the crime scene and winds up in a “small club” where “a lone French pianist will give melancholy renditions of Bizet or Gershwin” (175). Nothing more is ever heard about this case of the three boathouse bodies once Banks is further drawn into the improbable attempt to rescue his parents. Banks’s retreat into the melancholic comfort of the International Settlement’s entertainment marks his complicity with the indifference he chastises in his fellow Europeans, but his initial response to this contempt for the Chinese is Ishiguro’s way of gesturing toward a more active and engaged cosmopolitical consciousness that echoes Mr Cardinal’s willingness to challenge the noble but misguided instincts of Lord Darlington in The Remains of the Day. Just as Banks’s British national identity is constituted in no small part by Chinese culture and coin, so too the Sino-Japanese conflict is, as Colonel Hasegawa reminds the crestfallen detective, connected to a history of British imperial exploits against China during the Opium Wars and, as such, cannot be disowned with a flourish as simply a foreign affair.

Read in this contrapuntal fashion, Banks’s sense of belatedness and nostalgia for a childhood in which his parents seemed to be virtuous and heroic figures should be thought of as affective expressions of what Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling,” made up of “characteristic elements of impulse, restraints, and tone” (132). Williams’s explication of a structure of feeling as “affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (132), reminds
us of Ishiguro’s own description of nostalgia’s critical and idealistic aspects as opposed to its more conventionally accepted conservative and imperialistic forms. Williams’s characterization of a structure of feeling in the sense of “thought as felt and feeling as thought” is itself a chiasmatic formulation that inverts the commonly held assumption that feelings are opposed or subordinate to rational and critical thinking. The difference here lies in a state of belonging as opposed to a condition of longing: in the former, as Uncle Philip says, “people need to feel they belong. To a nation, to a race,” and thus, to a determinate form of national identity that offers a secure sense of subjectivity; in the latter, one feels that something is out of joint in the present and works toward setting things aright, and this structure of feeling highlights the “specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension” within British culture and society and between Britain and its former empire as “a social experience which is still in process” (Williams 132, original emphasis) rather than institutionalized or determined. Banks’s persistent need to maintain and perform his British identity through the figure of the fictional detective and Uncle Philip’s final shattering of this persona are a critique of the British heritage industry and its attempts to recover an authentic cultural and national identity through the commodification and preservation of landscapes, landmarks, and monuments. But Banks’s persistent efforts to overcome his predicament of being “not enough Englishman” also points to a constitutive lack or absence in any determinate national identity and, beyond that, to the always already hybrid and mongrelized conditions of British culture and society thanks to the nation’s history of colonialism, slavery, and immigration.

In The Remains of the Day, Ishiguro inverts the condition-of-England narrative and signature figures of Englishness such as the country house and the impeccable butler to interrogate the pretensions of a national identity premised on an essentialized greatness and dignity; in When We Were Orphans, his diasporic perspective enables a chiasmic maneuver that inverts the Victorian detective story and colonial adventure precisely by combining them in the dissatisfying figure of Christopher Banks, the flawed detective and inept explorer. Ishiguro accomplishes in fiction what Caroline Reitz and other recent studies of detective stories have done in criticism: “the detective [. . .] shows us how national identity is at once a part you play and a thing you become,” and that we need to contextualize this identity by placing it “back into the vast, interconnected world that produced it” (87). The contextualization of national identity in Ishiguro’s novels not only offers a specific cultural and historical framework for its construction but also interrogates the regressive form of nostalgia inherent in late twentieth-century British
invocations of national symbols and heritage. If “nostalgia is often for past thoughts rather than past things” and “less the memory of what actually was than of what was once thought possible” (Lowenthal 9), then Ishiguro’s novels underscore Adorno’s observation that “just as no experience is real that has not been loosed by involuntary remembrance from the deathly fixity of its isolated existence, so conversely, no memory is guaranteed, existent in itself, indifferent to the future of him who harbours it” (Minima Moralia 166). Ishiguro’s negation of nostalgia follows the grain of a contemporary yearning for past thoughts and experiences without hypostasizing these thoughts and experiences within their isolated existences or recreating the present as a pristine, unaltered version of the past. His novels do not maintain indifference to the possibilities of the future, as they offer “a sense that things should and can be repaired” (“An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro by Brian Shaffer” 7) even though his characters may not be aware of it. It is this revised understanding of nostalgia, combined with posed-ethnic style, tacking between cosmopolitical structures of feeling and national symbols of heritage, that characterizes Ishiguro’s tough intelligence.