Australasian Association of Writing Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUE
Number 68 December 2022

ISSN: 1327-9556 | textjournal.scholasticahq.com

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Dream logic and unreliability in Kazuo Ishiguro's The Unconsoled

Abstract:
Narratologists remain divided over how and if narrative unreliability works in literary dream sequences. Many believe that Wayne C. Booth's idea of unreliable narration as a "secret communion" of author and reader "behind the narrator's back" does not extend to surrealistic prose styles, in which Booth claimed "the author and reader may meet, like Voltaire and God, but they do not speak". While recent scholarship has challenged this notion, few studies have examined how traditional norms of unreliability might function within literary dream logic specifically. My paper aims to reconcile these approaches, using as a case study Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Unconsoled* (1995), a text unique in pairing dream prose with a narrator whose self-deception exemplifies the ironic gap central to unreliable narration. Employing theories of unreliability, narrative processing, and dream interpretation, I analyse the relationship between dream logic and narrative structures in *The Unconsoled*. I argue these dream laws come to signify the narrator's self-deception, rendering his account suspect as an alternative, ironic account emerges in its shadow. Examining these concepts together illuminates how unreliability might operate outside conventional realism while showcasing how dreams can function as literary devices within one of the most enduring frameworks in narratology.

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Keywords: Unreliable narration, dreams, Kazuo Ishiguro, narratology

Introduction

The question of whether narrative unreliability is able to operate within literary dream narratives, and within surrealistic prose styles more generally, has proven controversial among narratologists. Wayne C. Booth, who conceived unreliable narration as a "secret communion" of author and reader "behind the narrator's back" (Booth, 1961, p. 300), envisions this communion as a modern strategy for helping readers "infer the author's position" (p. 301) in a narrative text. Nevertheless, Booth has misgivings about unreliability's potential to function effectively in novels which delve so deeply into the "confused viewpoint" and "beclouded vision" (p. 271) of a narrator's consciousness that conventional realism is lost. Citing novels like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Booth argues in such works, the "lines of communication [between author and reader] have been fouled, and ... this is not a good thing" (p. 372). Contemporary narratological scholarship, despite building on many of Booth's ideas, largely continues to echo this particular assumption. Ansgar Nünning (2008, p. 47) claims a text must "at least [be] compatible with the so-called real world" in order to allow for unreliability; Vera Nünning (2015, p. 103) declares "it does not make sense to look for unreliability in 'unnatural' narratives"; while Bruce Zerweck (2001, p. 165) singles out postmodernist narratives [1] as particularly hostile to unreliable narration because they "violate traditional narrative logic" and thus "are very hard to bring into accord ... with real-world models". The idea that unreliability might be able to operate within a surrealistic framework like dream logic would therefore seem to be unfeasible.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* (1995) represents a challenge to this view. Set in an unnamed central European city, the novel follows Ryder, an internationally acclaimed pianist haunted by memories of an unhappy childhood, as he prepares to deliver a much-anticipated concert. The landscape of the city, however, does not correspond with the "real" world. In this world, Ryder can read minds, project himself astrally across vast distances, and defy the laws of space and time. In one instance, he travels some considerable distance across the city to attend a dinner party, only to have it "suddenly dawn" on him later he has actually been in the atrium of his hotel the whole time (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 148). Often described as an "anxiety dream" (Cusk, 2011, no page; Lieu, 1995, no page; Wyndham, 1995, p. 90), the novel is frequently analysed for its use of dream as narrative technique [2]. Few studies, however, have closely examined the relationship between this prose style and the self-deceptive tendencies Ryder exhibits in his avoidance of his childhood trauma, tendencies which manifest in a kind of narrative irony often considered central to unreliable narration. In reconciling dream logic with an internal structural conflict strongly reminiscent of an unreliable narrator, *The Unconsoled* represents a unique case study for examining how unreliability might operate within literary dream narratives.

This analysis takes place in three stages. By referring to models of narrative processing proposed by Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic (2008), I advocate for a more expansive definition of the stable, or reliable, meaning often identified as a prerequisite for unreliable narration. I then apply this new interpretation of stable meaning to the dream laws governing

Ryder's fictional world, while also investigating the mechanisms of self-deception forming the basis of Ryder's unreliability. Having located these sources of reliability and unreliability in the narrative, I finally examine them together, conducting close analysis of key scenes in *The Unconsoled* in which dream logic and self-deception are both integral to establishing Ryder as an unreliable narrator. By examining these concepts in parallel, I aim to offer a blueprint for how unreliability might work within literary dream narratives, as well as showcase how dreams can function as literary devices within one of the most enduring frameworks in narratology.

Unreliability in dream narratives

Non-realist objectives, despite being viewed as incompatible with unreliability, played a significant role in formulating unreliable narration. The concept originated out of Booth's attempts to create a system to decode the logic of what he called impersonal narration, or texts which sacrifice the omniscient authorial voice for an "authorial silence" which leaves the characters "to work out their own destinies or tell their own stories" (Booth, 1961, p. 273). In many of Booth's listed examples, realism is often sacrificed along with the authorial narrator, often in favour of a style privileging the idiosyncrasies of a narrator's inner consciousness. Using the bigoted Jason Compson in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) as one case study, Booth argues that a narrator who speaks in clear contradiction of the established "norms of the work" (p. 158) could silently be made "the butt of the ironic point" (p. 304). This conflict, in Booth's view, potentially unites author and reader "upon the standard by which he [the narrator] is found wanting" (p. 304) and helps the reader reach a stable interpretation of the narrator's behaviour. Unreliability, far from being mutually exclusive with non-realist modes, was devised to help navigate them.

These origins have likely been obscured because of Booth's own ambivalence about the ambiguities in impersonal narration. While acknowledging that impersonal narration was better able to render the complexity of a narrator's inner consciousness by sacrificing the principles of realism, "we must never pretend", he warns, "that a price was not paid" (Booth, 1961, p. 336) in this trade-off. For Booth, the price is "as rich, as refined, and as varied a conception" (p. 336) of the author's intended meaning as a more traditional, reliable authorial voice might have provided. He points to works like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) as examples of impersonal texts whose representations of inner consciousness have defied fixed interpretation by critics. In Booth's view, the indeterminacy of such narratives is an obstacle to the "sense of collusion" around "an unspoken point" (p. 304) which unreliable narration creates between reader and author, a communication which depends upon clarity. In Booth's thinking, it seems unreliable narration is only an operable strategy within a very specific range of a broader spectrum between realism and impersonal narration. In realist texts with an omniscient narrator, unreliability is not necessary; at the midpoint of *The Sound and the Fury*, it works demonstrably; while at the Joycean end of the scale, "the author and reader may meet, like Voltaire and God, but they do not speak" (Booth, 1961, p. 272). Booth therefore acknowledges that unreliability can operate in texts which bend the laws of realism, while also seeming wary of any connection between the two.

Contemporary scholars have favoured the latter of these dueling instincts. Robert Vogt (2015) employs the term "mimetic-undecidable narration" to describe texts "in which the reader cannot decide what is the case in the fictional world", arguing such narratives possess "no cognitive center". For Vogt, the reader is unable "to construct a coherent narrative world" (2015, p. 133, Footnote 5), which precludes the existence of unreliable narration. Vera Nünning (2015) echoes this assumption, arguing that in

> 'unnatural' or impossible worlds in which a host of internal and external contradictions abound ... it is not possible to create a coherent mental model of the fictional world. There is neither a naturalisation strategy which can explain the contradictions by referring to an unreliable narrator nor a final reversal which provides a coherent interpretation of what has been narrated before. (Nünning, 2015, p. 94)

Despite dismissing the idea that these coherent mental models can be created in more experimental modes like postmodernist fiction, Nünning does allow they can be created in non-realist genres like fantasy, science fiction and magical realism. In these narratives, Nünning contends, the fantastic elements of the storyworlds are less important to unreliability than "the extent that the actions and thoughts of the fictional characters and the causal patterns of the plot appear plausible and coherent" (2015, p. 95). Novels which evoke "perceived realism" Nünning claims, continue to possess the stability of meaning necessary to distinguish between reliable and unreliable narrators (p. 95).

Yet Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic (2008), from whom Nünning draws her ideas on perceived realism, suggest a more nuanced view. Acknowledging that perceived realism depends on both "the extent to which stories or their components are similar to the actual world" as well as "plausibility and coherence within the narrative" (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, p. 256), they argue that "extending the story world rules in deviation from the actual world is a normal activity in processing fiction" (p. 266), and it is "only deviations from the actual world that are not incorporated into a specific story world logic" (p. 273) that disturb narrative coherence. "When the story world is internally consistent and no inconsistencies become evident between the mental models of the narrative and new information coming from the story", they claim, readers will generally have no problem interpreting the narrative world as real (p. 273). Busselle and Bilandzic therefore concur with Nünning and Vogt that coherence is essential for readers to perceive a fictional world as real. They do not, however, attempt to provide any overarching definition for what this coherence can or should look like in any given context, preferring to claim that "content can vary from realistic to unrealistic within the confines of a clearly unrealistic genre or story world" (p. 270). Under Busselle and Bilandzic's rules, it does not matter whether a text is realist, fantastical, unnatural or impersonal. As long as the storyworld adheres to a consistent internal logic, it can be perceived as plausible and coherent – and therefore, perhaps, unreliable. To follow this line of thinking further, a text governed by consistent dream logic might, on some level, retain stable, interpretable meaning – and therefore narrative unreliability – regardless of how unnatural the storyworld might be.

Brigitte Boothe and Dragica Stojkovic (2015), who have conducted one of the few major studies to date linking unreliable narration with dreams, share this view. A psychological examination of unreliability in dream reporting, their work finds a level of stable meaning in the "reliability of the honest reporter", or the dream reporter who tries to recount "the remembered impressions of nightly dreaming to the best of his memory and the best of his abilities to communicate with potential listeners" (Boothe & Stojkovic, 2015, p. 419). Put another way, we find dream reports reliable if we believe the reporter is recounting the events of their dream to the best of their recollection, regardless of how many real-world laws the dream itself may flout. We would not, for example, necessarily detect unreliability in a dream report in which the reporter's dream-self suddenly found themselves inexplicably naked in front of an auditorium full of people while delivering a public address. If we believed this reporter was recounting the events of their dream to the best of their ability, then we would, in accordance with Boothe and Stojkovic's argument, accept their narrative as a reliable one.

If we can believe a dream reporter is reliable, we can also believe them to be unreliable. Among the several potential kinds of unreliability Boothe and Stojkovic (2015) locate is the reporter's "articulative and mnemonic capabilities", which "according to psychoanalytical doctrine ... [are] inevitably influenced by unconscious wish-defence-dynamics" (Boothe & Stojkovic, 2015, p. 419). To extend the previous example, a listener would have no problem interpreting a dream narrative as reliable if the dream reporter described finding himself suddenly naked in front of hundreds of people. Neither would the listener necessarily find it odd if the dream reporter described the entire audience in the dream as also being naked. The listener may have their suspicions raised, however, if the dream reporter's recount suddenly fixated at length on a particular (naked) member of the audience who looked uncannily like the spouse of the reporter's best friend. If we take Boothe and Stojkovic's contention that unconscious wish-defence dynamics may influence the dream reporter – in this case, to prevent the reporter from consciously recognising the naked audience member as their best friend's spouse, and all the painful feelings such recognition might bring – then the reporter might remain oblivious to the resemblance. They would therefore still possess the reliability of the honest dream reporter. For the listener, unblinkered by any such mechanisms and hearing the reporter describe their best friend's (naked) spouse at length, the reporter's reliability would be undermined by a serious gap in the narration. Such a gap would likely point, in the listener's view, to a story within the dream the reporter was unable or unwilling to tell. In such an instance, the reliability of the honest reporter might also allow for an ironic or hidden meaning to be communicated, thus making the reporter an unreliable narrator.

To examine some of these ideas together, one could argue that consistency is the key to achieving reliability in a dream text. Whether consistency manifests in a coherent dream logic governing the storyworld (in line with Busselle and Bilandzic's ideas) or in the stability of an honest reporter relating dream events as faithfully as possible (as Boothe and Stojkovic suggest), this consistency may help readers interpret a form of reliable meaning in the surrealistic code of the narrative dreamworld. By tracing a system of logic in *The Unconsoled*, as the next section aims to do, we might begin to understand how dream texts can build stable

meaning, establishing a form of logical and thematic consistency which permits narrative unreliability to emerge in its shadow.

Dream logic and stable meaning in *The Unconsoled*

From the opening chapter of *The Unconsoled*, we are presented with a landscape which blatantly contravenes the laws of realist fiction. Ryder has arrived in this unnamed city, ostensibly having been invited to deliver a high-profile concert. Over several days he rehearses, meets with the media, attends galas with local functionaries, and conducts many other preparations usual for such an event. These preparations often take some kind of absurdist turn, as when Ryder, insisting on time and space to rehearse for the concert, is driven by his host to a run-down garden shed on a farm outside the city and then abandoned. Further complicating these preparations are the distractions that frequently sidetrack Ryder, often presenting themselves in ways defying the laws of space and time, as when objects, places, and people from his life in England inexplicably crop up on the continent. Throughout, Ryder continually encounters local townspeople who praise him excessively. He is informed that "in the trams, in the cafes, people are talking of virtually nothing else" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 114) but his performance, and his presence in the city is "absolutely crucial" (p. 114) for the town to "re-discover the happiness [they] once had" (p. 115). Evidently, this is not the real world and the rules by which we might usually interpret fictional worlds do not apply.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest there are no rules at all. Ishiguro, describing the narrative technique, refers to the device of appropriation which informs many of Ryder's encounters with other characters:

> The whole thing is supposed to take place in some strange world, where Ryder appropriates the people he encounters to work out parts of his life and his past ... So this is a biography of a person, but instead of using memory and flashback, you have him wandering about this dream world where he bumps into earlier, or later, versions of himself. They're not literally so. They are to some extent other people, but he gives a reading of their life in such a way that they're memories of how his own childhood was, or projections of how he fears he might end up. I don't want to say literally that Stephan is Ryder when he was young, and Boris was Ryder as a kid, but I wanted to create a world where you could get all these different points in his life. Essentially, you're only dealing with one person.
>
> …We might dream about the shopkeeper we encountered earlier in the day, but underneath, it's somebody from the past we're trying to work out. I think we do this when we're awake as well. Our view of other people is often shaped by our need to work certain things out about ourselves. We tend to appropriate other people – more than we perhaps care to admit. We perhaps don't see them for what they are; they become useful tools. (Jaggi, 1995, p. 22)

Aspects of this method mirror psychoanalytic concepts of dream interpretation. Ryder's projection of emotions and experiences onto people appropriated from daily life resembles the Freudian idea of displacement, or what Sue Llewellyn (2020) characterises as the reduction of

psychological conflict "by replacing any disturbing content with something merely associated with it" (Llewellyn, 2020, p. 198). When, for example, Ryder replaces his own childhood difficulties with those of Stephan Hoffman, a local up-and-coming pianist, it "disguises the conflict and renders the dream more acceptable to the dreamer" (p. 198). Similarly, Ryder's combination of people, places, and experiences speaks to Freud's notion of condensation, or the merging of "several associated experiential elements into one image" (Llewellyn, 2020, p. 198), which operates as a similar distancing mechanism. This is particularly evident in the Boris character, a boy who appears to be Ryder's son but who, as Ishiguro alludes, may also be a stand-in for Ryder's childhood self (a tension I will examine in detail later). Viewed through the lens of dream interpretation, coherence and logic gradually emerges within a seemingly chaotic fictional world.

How do these psychoanalytic ideas translate into a form of literary consistency in which readers can find interpretable, stable meaning? In pointing to the laws governing the novel's dreamworld, Ishiguro again directs us toward an answer:

> I think that it is very important to have some kind of laws, just as you do in the waking world, that will maintain consistency throughout. They are different rules from the ones that govern realistic fiction, but I wanted the reader to feel, after the initial period of confusion, that there were new laws. I guess a test of this is to ask: is anything possible in the world of The Unconsoled? Well, probably not. If Ryder or any of the characters suddenly grew wings and flew off on page 300, I think that would seem as wrong as it would in, say, a Henry James novel. So although a lot of strange things happen in *The Unconsoled*, there are only really about eight or nine ways in which they are strange... [There's] no pretense at the omniscience of a detached writer, saying here's this character, here's that character. It basically says here's a world that is seen so much from the point of view of one consciousness that it very boldly appropriates things that it finds to serve its needs. Mr. Ryder can turn certain characters into people from his past, and bend and twist the whole world around into being some big expression of his feelings and emotions. (Krider & Ishiguro, 1998, p. 152)

In jettisoning the omniscience of a detached writer in favour of a world built entirely around the point of view of one consciousness, Ishiguro echoes Booth's language around impersonal narration. Yet by acknowledging that the world of *The Unconsoled*, like the worlds of realist fiction, is governed by laws, Ishiguro challenges Booth's assumption that stability and consistency cannot exist within such a world. While Ryder might be Booth's idea of an impersonal narrator, his narration contains an underlying coherence not unlike the kind which Busselle and Bilandzic describe as fundamental to an interpretable fictional universe.

If we take Ishiguro's statement at face value that there are only around eight or nine strange laws dictating *The Unconsoled*'s fictional world, we might list them as follows:

1. Ryder seems to possess psychic abilities, functioning sometimes like an omniscient narrator by reading other character's minds, eavesdropping on their conversations from

afar**,** and even projecting himself astrally across the city to observe and report on their (inter)actions.
2. Ryder and the people he meets often speak in unnaturally long monologues, which are often incongruous in some way to the situation at hand.
3. Ryder frequently develops obsessions and anxieties, only to immediately drop and seemingly forget about them when distracted by something else.
4. Ryder regularly encounters people, places and objects from his childhood, seemingly transplanted from England to this foreign city.
5. Time, space, and circumstances frequently warp in ways that alternately enable and prevent Ryder from getting what he wants.
6. Ryder and other characters often lose control of their bodies at moments of high stress. For example, trying to speak and managing only "a slightly strangled grunt" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 239).
7. Absurdist developments frequently punctuate the plot, as in Part IV, when Brodsky is involved in a car accident, has his leg amputated, yet still arrives to conduct the concert immediately afterward, using an ironing board as a crutch.

While other scholars have interpreted the novel's dream laws slightly differently [3], these seven points cover most of the strange events which occur consistently in this fictional world. They provide us with a baseline by which we can begin to view the world of *The Unconsoled* as coherent and stable.

It is through the repetition of these laws that Ryder is gradually established as an honest reporter. Early in the novel, when many readers are still in the initial period of confusion, to borrow Ishiguro's phrase, and have not yet learned to read the dream laws for any hidden, ironic meanings, they are largely limited to reading them on a non-ironic, literal level. In the beginning of the novel, the dream laws operate on this literal level to underline the fundamental norms and values of the dream world, later to be subverted through unreliable means. A prime example occurs when Ryder and Boris, lost in town late at night, are rescued by Stephan, amateur pianist and son of Ryder's hotel manager, who appears to be driving around town at a very late (or very early) hour for no apparent reason. Already, in this stroke of unlikely happenstance (law five – circumstances warping), we see the dream laws working to orchestrate a sequence of events too unlikely to be brought about through conventional means. This is not the only operation the dream logic performs here. As they drive back to the hotel, Ryder perceives that Stephan is pondering an unhappy event from his mother's birthday several years previously, in which Stephan, requested to play for his parents, delivered a less than stellar performance. Ryder sees their reaction in Stephan's mind:

> Neither of his parents was looking at him. His father's head had now become so bowed the forehead was almost touching the table surface. His mother was looking in the other direction across the room, wearing the frosty expression Stephan was so familiar with and which, astonishingly, had been absent until that point in the evening. (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 69)

Here, the reader learns that in this fictional world, a piano recital which fails to amaze – even one with an audience of only two people – can have devastating family consequences. This knowledge is essential to establishing the dominance of dysfunctional family dynamics and the critical importance of musical values in the city. Ryder's psychic vision (law one), which transgresses mental boundaries to grant the reader access to a deeply vulnerable moment in Stephan's family, plays a key role in this process. Here, perhaps paradoxically, the unpredictability of the constantly shifting dream landscape is fundamental in representing these themes as something consistent and reliable.

Finally, after Ryder presses him for an explanation, Stephan speaks nearly uninterrupted for six pages about how highly his parents, devoted patrons of the arts, valued his piano lessons as a child. We learn how Stephan's failure to excel in these classes disheartened both his parents; we learn how his mother, after realising how "short of the mark" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 74) Stephan was, "got rather despondent and stopped going out very much" and "seemed to think of it all as a big waste" (p. 75). We also discover, that having "made something of a breakthrough recently" (p. 75), Stephan is confident about opening for Ryder at the much-anticipated concert. He confides his hopes in Ryder about the possibility that a successful performance might be enough to heal his relationship with his parents:

> I've always had this fantasy... One day I'd suddenly come home… I'd come in, hardly say a word, just go to the piano, lift the lid, start playing. I'd not even have taken my coat off. I'd just play and play. Bach, Chopin, Beethoven. Then on to the modern stuff. Grebel. Kazan. Mullery. I'd just play and play. And my parents would have followed me to the dining room and they'd just be looking on in astonishment. It would be beyond their wildest dreams. But then, to their amazement, they'd realise that even as I played I was reaching greater and greater heights. Sublime, sensitive adagios. Astounding fiery bravura passages. I'd climb higher and higher. And they'd be standing there in the middle of the room, Father still absently holding the newspaper he'd been reading, both of them completely astounded. In the end I'd finish with some stunning finale, then at last I'd turn to them and … well, I've never been sure what happens after that. But it's a fantasy I've had since I was thirteen or fourteen. Thursday night may not turn out quite like it, but it's possible it could be pretty close. (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 76)

This speech, so unnaturally long it would break the suspension of disbelief in a realist text (law two), connects Stephan's family trauma and musical values to the high stakes of the all-important concert. The painstaking detail of such a monologue allows for a step-by-step account conveying how critical the concert is for Stephan. Through law two, the pain of broken family relationships is interwoven with the essentiality of musical excellence and presented as something foundational, and reliable, within this fictional world.

It is possible here to note the similarities between Stephan and Ryder – both pianists with family problems, both performing at the concert – and interpret Stephan's speech as Ryder displacing his familial anxieties onto figures appropriated from the world around him. For first readers in the initial period of confusion, however, it is too early to discern this. For these readers, the scene establishes the importance of family trauma, music, and the upcoming

concert in this strange dreamworld, and signals, via the dream laws, that readers should pay attention to these themes. If in no other sense than his consistent thematic messaging, Ryder is a stable and reliable narrator, granted the reliability of an honest reporter in his dedication to consistently relating the norms and values important to him in an otherwise bizarre fictional universe.

It is only through discerning thematic reliability that we can reach unreliability. By using a clearly-defined, psychoanalytically-consistent system of dream laws to build and reinforce reliable thematic meaning, norms and values are established which can in turn be subverted and undermined. This thematic repetition brings structure and coherent, stable meaning to a fictional world otherwise alien to our real one. As the next section will examine, narrative consistency, once established, can be challenged, with rhetorical strategies like irony playing a role in interrogating the reliable foundations of the text to expose what other, contradictory narrative impulses might lie underneath.

Unreliable narration in *The Unconsoled*

While some scholars are ambivalent about Ryder as an example of unreliable narration [4], there remains a strong resemblance between the principles of unreliability and the first-person narrative structure underpinning *The Unconsoled*. As with most of Ishiguro's novels, this structure favours a method in which traumatic memories from the protagonist's past distort and undermine their interpretation of narrative events. Ishiguro compares this process to a dialogue between a narrator and their inner Socrates:

> In most of his [Plato's] Socratic dialogues, what happens is, some guy is walking along the street who thinks he knows it all, and Socrates sits down with him and demolishes him. This might seem destructive, but the idea is that the nature of what is good is elusive. Sometimes people base their whole lives on a sincerely held belief that could be wrong. That's what my early books are about: people who think they know. But there is no Socrates figure. They are their own Socrates. (Ishiguro qtd in Hunnewell, 2008, no page)

It is not a stretch to perceive an inner Socrates lingering in the painful memories haunting Ryder. Traumatised by his unhappy childhood, Ryder convinces himself "the only way they [his parents] can be reconciled is if he fulfils their expectations. As a result, he ends up as this fantastic pianist. He thinks that if he gives this crucial concert, it will heal everything" (Ishiguro qtd in Hunnewell, 2008, no page). His sincerely held belief is systematically demolished as another story emerges in the pattern of tortured family relationships, often interwoven with motifs of musical excellence, embedded in the narrative dreamscape. The disconnection between Ryder's inexorable focus on his concert and his sometimes-unnerving detachment from the network of dysfunctional families surrounding him provides space for an ironic gap in his narration reminiscent of the type considered integral to unreliability.

So embedded is this gap in Ryder's narrative style that some of the signals of his unreliability can be read literally and without recourse to the dream logic. The clearest example lies in the

plot twist concluding Ryder's search for his parents, who, we are told, have come to the town to see their son perform for the first time. As the narrative progresses his concern for their welfare intensifies, at one point seeming to project himself astrally in order to witness their arrival at the local train station: "I suddenly saw my mother and my father, both small, white-haired, and bowed with age, standing outside the railway station, surrounded by luggage they could not hope to transport by themselves" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 176). Despite the multitude of tasks distracting Ryder, his attention returns again and again to his parents. We learn they have "many complicated needs" (p. 179) due to travelling such a long distance at their age, including "special seating, special facilities ... trained people nearby in case one or the other has a seizure" (p. 252). He sees them, again via astral projection, arriving at the concert hall in a horse-drawn carriage, "peering out of the carriage window, on their faces the first traces of excited anticipation" (p. 398). For Ryder, "the priority above all else... [is] to ensure that my performance was the richest, the most overwhelming of which I was capable" (p. 420). The abundance of these details frames this visit as a narrative certainty.

It therefore proves mystifying for both Ryder and the reader when Ryder's parents are inexplicably absent from the concert hall. Failing to find them after thoroughly searching the premises, Ryder confronts Miss Stratmann, one of the organisers of his visit, and demands to know where his parents are. Her response is illuminating:

> Mr Ryder, I've been meaning to speak to you about this for some time. We were all of us very pleased when you informed us some months ago of your parents' intention to visit our city. Everyone was truly delighted. But I must remind you, Mr Ryder, it was from you and you alone that we heard of their plans to visit us. Now for the past three days, and today in particular, I have been doing all I can to ascertain their whereabouts. I have repeatedly telephoned the airport, the railway station, the bus companies, every hotel in this city, and I have found no sign of them. No one has heard from them, no one has seen them. Now, Mr Ryder, I have to ask *you*. Are you certain they are coming to this town? (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 511)

Here we are given a textbook example of what Robert Vogt (2015) calls alterated-unreliable narration. In this kind of unreliability, "a manipulative distribution of narrative information" causes readers to "construct a false image of the fictional world", leading to a plot twist which "springs an absolute surprise on the reader who is not aware that he might get duped about the facts and events in the fictional world" (Vogt, 2015, p. 133). In this revelation, all previous details provided by Ryder about his parents' visit are retroactively exposed as indicators of unreliability hidden in plain sight. By contrast, Miss Stratmann's speech is read as reliable because the information we are being offered – that Ryder's parents were never coming to the concert – is consistent with the theme of parental neglect and broken familial relationships developed over the preceding five hundred pages. The reader does not need to refer to the dream laws to decode the ironic account of events being presented here, or to interpret it as the triumph of Ryder's inner Socrates over sincerely held, but self-deceptive beliefs.

This does not mean the dream laws play no part at all in executing such a pivotal narrative moment. In particular, the red herrings of Ryder "seeing" his parents arriving at the train station via law one (psychic abilities), play an instrumental role in setting the reader up to be surprised. We might therefore conclude that, while the Socratic basis of Ryder's unreliability is sometimes as straightforward to interpret as it might have been in a realist context, there remains a more complex relationship at work between his unreliability and the dream laws. The next section will examine this relationship in more detail, analysing how the ironic gap between inner Socrates and fallacious beliefs is interpretable in scenes in which unreliability and dream logic both have a strong presence.

Dream laws and unreliable narration in *The Unconsoled*

To briefly reiterate some of the ideas from the previous two sections, I have so far proposed that a series of dream laws exist in *The Unconsoled* which, through repetition and consistency, build a form of reliability in the central themes of the fictional world, particularly family trauma and the importance of musical values. I have also proposed, in essence, that this dreamworld consists of a series of projections by the first-person narrator, whose discourse is heavily influenced by continual self-deceptive attempts to avoid traumatic memories, resulting in a highly unreliable account of events. Having provided close readings of *The Unconsoled* demonstrating dream logic and unreliability at work in the same narrative text, it seems fair to claim they can work under the same roof. Now it must be considered how they work together.

For they do work together. Far from demonstrating the kind of incompatibility that contemporary narratology might suggest, unreliability in *The Unconsoled* does not work despite dream logic – it works with and because of it. As the narrative progresses and the strangeness of the dream laws wears off for the reader, they come to regard these laws as something stable and fixed, and therefore become increasingly adept at perceiving the ironic meanings they signify and contain. Far from being mutually exclusive with dream laws, the underlying Socratic narrative structure proves remarkably capable of absorbing them into its own logic and harnessing them as cues for unreliability.

One of the sequences that best demonstrates this process occurs halfway through the novel when Boris and Ryder, inexplicably encountering their old family apartment, discover it actually resembles "the back part of the parlour" of Ryder's own childhood home, a place we are told represented "the hope that a fresh, happier chapter was unfolding" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 214). This passing remark, demonstrating law four (places from Ryder's childhood magically transplanted across space and time), proves crucial to interpreting the scene. Only with this hint does it make sense when Ryder exhibits considerable agitation upon encountering a neighbour who regales them about the apartment's former occupants "shouting late at night" (p. 215) and how the husband was "cruel when he was drunk" (p. 216). Evidently, the scene is to some extent about Ryder's own childhood, although Ryder himself refuses to admit it, even attempting to pass off his distress as concern for Boris: "Don't you have any sense? The boy! He can hear ..." (p. 215). Despite Ryder's neglect of Boris on other occasions, such an

explanation might nevertheless have been convincing, were it not for law four signifying an alternative explanation in the gaps and inconsistencies of Ryder's account.

This union of dream laws and unreliability continues into the scene immediately following, once Ryder, able to bear the neighbour no longer, makes the decision to flee the scene with Boris: "That's it! I warned you! Now I'm going!" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 216). When the two eventually stop to catch their breath, Ryder, unprompted by any obvious cue, delivers the following speech:

> Boris, I know you must be wondering. I mean, why it is we can't just settle down and live quietly, the three of us... I have to keep going on these trips because, you see, you can never tell when it's going to come along. I mean the very special one, the very important trip, the one that's very very important, not just for me but for everyone, everyone in the whole world... You see, it would be so easy just to miss it. To say one time, no, I won't go, I'll just rest. Then only later I'll discover that was the one, the very, very important one. And you see, once you miss it, there's no going back, it would be too late. It won't matter how hard I travel afterwards, it won't matter, it would be too late, and all these years I've spent would have been for nothing... So you see, Boris, that's why. That's why I've got to carry on for the moment, keep travelling all the time... It'll come soon, the very important one, then it will all be done. (Ishiguro, 2013, pp. 217–218)

While it may still be too early in the novel for some readers to catch that Ryder is referring to the concert he believes will heal his family trauma, it is difficult to miss the hyperbole around the "very very important" trip for "everyone in the whole world" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 217). Not only does the dubiousness of these claims suggest Ryder is not being entirely truthful, his abnormally long monologue, incongruous to the situation at hand and delivered apropos of nothing (law two), makes them even less convincing. Here, the law magnifies these textual cues of unreliability and, consequently, the reader's suspicion that we are not being given an accurate version of events.

One further scene completes this crucial episode. Boris, after displaying no visible reaction to Ryder's speech, runs off to play by acting out a karate sequence. Ryder, reading his mind, realises Boris is "enacting in his imagination the latest version of a fantasy he had been playing through over and over during the past weeks" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 218). An extended karate fight-scene follows in which Boris and his grandfather are forced to defend the family apartment against multiple waves of street thugs "dressed in torn leathers, army jackets, cruel belts, holding metal bars or bicycle chains" (p. 220). A speech from Boris, addressing the thugs during a brief détente, makes sense of this development:

> These attacks of yours, your continual terrorising of our apartment, has meant that my mother is crying all the time. She's always tense and irritable... It also means Papa has to go away for long periods, sometimes abroad, which Mother doesn't like. This is all the result of your terrorising the apartment... What it could come to sooner or later is that Papa won't come back home at all. (pp. 220–221)

There are three steps to the displacement happening here. Firstly, Ryder avoids admitting his guilt into his own consciousness, instead projecting it onto another, appropriated human being (Boris); he then takes the additional step of containing that guilt within Boris's imagination, thereby enacting an extra barrier between painful emotions and reality; finally, within Boris's imagination, he constructs a ridiculously childish play-acting fantasy within which to frame these emotions. These three degrees of separation in place, he can finally bring himself to examine his guilt at the damage he is causing his family from his son's perspective.

These distancing attempts are not enough to obscure the reality. The hints of Sophie "crying all the time" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 220), Ryder "going away for long periods, sometimes abroad", and the possibility that soon he "won't come back home at all" (p. 221) provide plentiful evidence for the story Ryder is attempting *not* to tell. The monologue Boris delivers to the thugs (law two again) employs many phrases – "your continual terrorising" (p. 220), "this is all the result of" (p. 221) etc., – not used by Boris elsewhere in the novel, most of which lie outside the lexicon of a boy young enough to be enacting karate fantasies. Additionally, the conceit of a small boy and an old man taking down a hardened street gang with elaborate martial arts initially scans as ludicrous (law seven – random absurdism) before the clues in Boris's speech reveal the hidden, ironic meaning; the abrupt switch in tone from ridiculous to serious enhances the emotional impact of the revelation. Most significant is law one (psychic abilities), which is largely responsible for the displacement which creates this gap. Here, dream laws do not simply magnify or signify the gap between surface and ironic meanings but play an integral role in the textual operations which create it.

It therefore seems if a reader can register a set of consistent dream laws as stable, this stability can be used to imply ironic double meanings in the gaps and inconsistencies of narratives in a variety of ways. That Ryder's childhood apartment has somehow been transplanted from England to the continent is easily assimilated by the reader as reliable – it happens all the time in this fictional world – leaving them free to devote closer attention to the explicit connection made with Ryder's childhood home. The stability of these laws can also be used to enhance other markers of unreliability – as when Ryder's overly long speech about "the very special one" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 217) magnifies the hyperbolic remarks it contains – or to perform the textual operations involved in creating a gap between surface and ironic meanings, as with Ryder's displacement of guilt into Boris's karate fantasy. It also seems that a level of *thematic* reliability can be as sufficient as *factual* reliability as a means of inferring *un*reliability. In other words, the pattern of factually slippery themes and motifs which comprise the overarching treatment of family trauma and musical values in *The Unconsoled* is potentially as sufficient as Wayne Booth's more realistic narrator as a mask behind which unreliability can lurk. The evidence would suggest unreliable narration is equally as adept at harnessing dream laws as mechanisms for inferring and exposing ironic silences as it is the laws governing realist fiction.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by returning once again to Booth's original definition of unreliable narration. Earlier, I proposed that Booth only appeared to view unreliable narration as a viable

narrative strategy within a narrow range of the broader spectrum he perceived between realism and impersonal narration. In response, I have aimed to demonstrate unreliability can function much closer to the latter end of this scale than Booth thought possible. My reading of *The Unconsoled* suggests that rather than disrupting the lines of communication between author and reader, the ambiguities of non-realist modes like dream logic can build meaning stable enough to imply the kind of ironic gaps and distances necessary for narrative unreliability.

To briefly recapitulate this process, a fictional universe does not need to be realist in order to be governed by stable, coherent laws. The dreamworld of *The Unconsoled* presents the reader with a series of psychoanalytically-consistent dream laws which build, over time, a streak of consistent and therefore stable thematic meaning. If the constantly shifting dream landscape around Ryder is not traditionally reliable, there nonetheless remains a degree of honest reporting in the way the landscape returns continually to motifs of broken families and musical excellence. As my reading of *The Unconsoled* asserts, over time these themes of broken families and musical excellence prove as effective as a more factual level of stability in creating, implying and magnifying gaps and inconsistencies in Ryder's story. A reader able to ascertain and accept the laws of this universe will perceive an ironic distance in Ryder's narration not dissimilar to the kind in Benjy Compson's narration in *The Sound and the Fury*.

As a site for examining the relationship between unreliability and dream logic, *The Unconsoled* is something of a special case owing to its unique pairing of surrealistic dream prose with Socratic structural underpinnings. Future research will be needed to examine how some of the theories proposed here might work within narrators that do not lend themselves to an ironic gap as easily as Ryder and his inner Socrates. Some of the terms employed in this paper may also benefit from further study, particularly the categories of factual and thematic reliability, a potentially innovative distinction which space constraints have prevented me from interrogating further. These are only two possible lines of inquiry in future work examining how unreliability works within dream logic, which remains an underexplored yet potentially fruitful new avenue of narratological scholarship.

Notes

[1] Scholars have frequently situated Ishiguro's writing within postmodernism, a trend noted by Ishiguro himself (Matthews, 2009, p. 117).

[2] For further work on this topic, see A. Harris Fairbanks (2013), Gary Adelman (2001), and Natalie Reitano (2007).

[3] For an alternative reading of the eight or nine laws governing Ryder's dreamworld, see A. Harris Fairbanks (2013), who offers a slightly different set of laws in service of an argument that the novel exemplifies "oneiric realism", a category he explicitly distinguishes from narrative unreliability (p. 612).

[4] Some scholars disagree with the category of unreliable narration in regard to *The Unconsoled*, believing that the dream logic complicates the narrative structure too much it to be a useful category. For such accounts, see Elke D'hoker (2008), A. Harris Fairbanks (2013), and Zuzana Fonioková (2015).

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