

**Tim Christensen**

## **Kazuo Ishiguro and Orphanhood**

In *When We Were Orphans*, detective Christopher Banks discovers that the problem of recovering the truth about his past is in fact a problem of memory and that the problem of memory involves a reiterative confrontation with a trauma – the disappearance of his parents – that has structured his adult life. Banks’s problem of recovering his family’s past is, moreover, simultaneously a problem of recovering a national past, for he believes that his parents’ disappearance is somehow related to his not being properly English, or “not English enough.” Banks therefore believes that if he can ascertain the elusive truth regarding the mysterious disappearance of his parents when he was a child, he will simultaneously restore English authority to pre-World War II Shanghai. Because Banks views nationality as both the cause of and the solution to an Oedipal trauma, the ideal of attaining a true or genuine national identity becomes, within the novel, identical to the wish to “restore” oneself to an idyllic state of childhood contentment, an imaginary state of pre-Oedipal, prelapsarian plenitude. Banks’s development as a character, however, also suggests the possibility of moving beyond a state of eternal return to a traumatic past, beyond a fixation on an Oedipal fantasy. Banks’s eventual acceptance of his orphaned state signals the possibility of an escape from the symbolic parent/nation authority and the possibility of a far more fluid and syncretic understanding of the self as the basis of future relationships. Orphanhood becomes a trope for a post-national identity.

Throughout the novel *When We Were Orphans*, renowned detective Christopher Banks obsessively pursues “evil,” an idea that assumes metaphysical dimensions from the very beginning of his story. “My intention,” he states, when explaining his choice of profession, “was to combat evil – in particular, evil of the insidious, furtive kind” (22).<sup>1</sup> His job, he reiterates a few pages later, is that of “rooting out evil in its most devious forms, often just when it is about to go unchecked” (31). For Banks, the profession of detective, understood as the practice of “rooting out evil” (31), requires an unrelenting scrutiny of the most minute details of the physical world because evil is invariably invisible, veiled, or masked; it is a thing of which “your ordinary decent

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1. All parenthesised references are to this edition: Kazuo Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* (New York: Vintage International, 2000).

citizen" (45) comprising "the public at large" (31) is unaware, and from which such decent folk must therefore be protected. Evil seems to have a will of its own, an "insidious, furtive" (22), and "devious" (31) will characterized by an ingenious knack for remaining hidden, or deceptively appearing to be part of the ordinary texture of life. Evil is therefore figured as a monster or "serpent" (144) that, "lurking around the corner," threatens to emerge from its hiding place and devour the forces of "civilization" (45). Alternately, evil is understood as a disease or "fungus" (45) that will silently and secretly infect the body politic, and from which society must be "cleansed" (31). The heavy concentration of metaphors of disease and monstrosity; of hygiene; of veiling and masking; of mask-like and frequently racialized faces and bodies; the Biblical references to serpents and temptation; the search for an evil that is assumed to be not only hiding but ingeniously devious all signal that we are in the territory of the classic detective novel.<sup>2</sup> Following the logic of this worldview, Banks, as one of the "few on our side every bit as clever as they are," must protect the metropolitan centre against mysterious and powerful forces that threaten "to put civilization to the torch" by policing the peripheries of the empire (45). Shanghai, where Banks's primary confrontation with "evil" takes place, is also the location of a "disease" that threatens to "spread its poison" to the "heart" of European "civilization" (144–47).

Ishiguro dramatically abandons what Brian Finney has termed "the mainstream fictional realism" of the classic detective novel, however, when Banks returns to his childhood home of Shanghai in order to resolve the twenty-six year old case of his missing mother and father.<sup>3</sup> At this juncture in the story, the novel takes on a markedly different, decidedly surrealistic feel. From this point on, a distinct tension develops between the awareness of the protagonist and narrator, Christopher Banks, and the overall narrative structure of the novel, which is built around Banks's unreliable memories of certain traumatic incidents from his past. This contrast between the level of narration – which is driven by Banks's attempts to construct a linear, continuist narrative of his past – and the larger narrative structure – which is distinguished by the radically discontinuous, performative subtext of Banks's attempts to recover his lost past – has the effect of highlighting the imaginary framework of the

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2. References to Sherlock Holmes unambiguously emphasize that this is the literary terrain of the story. Moreover, Banks's mission of policing evil at the margins of the British Empire calls to mind Holmes's cases in *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of Four*, in which Holmes must solve crimes committed by Mormon polygamists in Utah and savage rebels in India, respectively, in order to restore order and protect the citizenry of London.

3. Brian Finney, "Figuring the Real: Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*," *Jouvert* 7.1 (2002) <<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v7is1/ishigu.htm>>.

“realist” symbolic order of classic detective fiction. The emphasis on this discrepancy increases as the story progresses, and provides Ishiguro with a vehicle to challenge traditional notions of national and personal identity founded upon a metaphysics of self-presence. By the end of the story Banks is able to envision alternatives, based upon the figure of orphanhood, to such traditional ideals of identity.

Within the dream-like world that Christopher Banks enters when, as an adult, he returns to his childhood home of the international settlement in Shanghai, he fantastically assumes, as does almost everyone he meets in the British community in Shanghai, that uncovering the secret of his parents’ kidnapping twenty-six years earlier will somehow re-establish British imperial authority. He is officially greeted, upon arrival, by Mr. Grayson of “the Shanghai Municipal Council,” who insists that plans for “the welcoming ceremony” for Banks’s “parents after their years of captivity” must be carried forward immediately (169). When Grayson explains that “to organize something on the scale we’re talking of [is] . . . no simple matter,” we realize that the entire British population of Shanghai eagerly awaits the resolution to the mysterious disappearance of Banks’s parents (169). We cannot help but be struck, at this point, with the question of why a twenty-six year old kidnapping of a minor British official and his wife should so vitally concern a community teetering on the brink of war. Ishiguro, however, refuses to articulate any clear answer to this question; instead, over the course of Banks’s conversation with his greeting party, these expressions of seemingly excessive concern become vaguely associated with the case of Banks’s parents as links in a metonymic chain. Such an association occurs, for instance, when another member of Banks’s greeting party, Mr. MacDonald, repeatedly drops dark hints that “we don’t have a great deal of time left” to resolve the case (166). Why, we might ask, should MacDonald, “a senior intelligence man,” be assigned to this case, and irritably impress the urgency of its resolution on Banks (166)? It would seem that the resolution to the case is in some way associated with preventing the outbreak of war, although this connection is never stated. Another such association occurs when, in the midst of Banks’s conversation with MacDonald and Grayson, an anonymous “grey-haired lady” expresses concern that “the Japanese will . . . attack the International Settlement” (169). She appears to qualify this concern, however, when she then informs Banks that “news of your impending arrival . . . was the first good news we’d had here in months” (170). While there is no explicit connection made between these two statements, the fact that one follows immediately on the heels of the other creates the implication that Banks’s presence somehow assuages her fear of Japanese attack. Why should Banks’s arrival ease her fear of a Japanese attack? Again, we are given no real explanation of the community’s concern

with the case of Banks's parents; the text provides only vague expressions of a general expectation that Banks's restoration of his own family will in some way also secure British authority in Shanghai against Japanese invasion.

The vague yet persistent suggestion throughout this scene that the resolution of Banks's personal crisis will somehow also resolve a crisis of British imperial authority might strike the reader as strange, but Ishiguro is merely foregrounding a problem of what he has termed "emotional logic."<sup>4</sup> The character of Banks, moreover, provides Ishiguro with a vehicle to examine the equivalences between an oedipal emotional logic and the classic emotional logic of nationalism, an equivalence that has been noted by many cultural critics in recent years. Terry Eagleton, for instance, has argued that "nationalism," like the oedipal subject, "turns its gaze to a (usually fictitious) past . . . to press forward to an imagined future."<sup>5</sup> Eagleton elsewhere observes that this desire to become fully oneself through the recovery of an imagined past implies a metaphysics of self-presence that the national subject ultimately shares with the oedipal subject: the "metaphysics of nationalism," Eagleton states, in many ways mirrors the metaphysics of the "unitary" bourgeois subject, because both assume "a subject somehow intuitively present to itself."<sup>6</sup> Through the character of Banks, Ishiguro embarks on an intricate examination of the metaphysics of self-presence that, as Eagleton implies, is the source of an equivalence between personal and national identity on the level of the Lacanian imaginary. Banks believes that his parents' discontent and their later disappearance is in some way connected with his own lack of the elusive quality of Englishness; he believes that the loss of his parents is related to the fact that he, their son, is "not sufficiently English" (76). The restoration of an imagined past of idyllic familial existence, not yet riven by this lack of national being, therefore requires that Banks discover his Englishness. This discovery of his Englishness, in turn, requires the return of his mother and father; or, more particularly, the restoration of paternal authority at the level of the family. Banks apparently hopes to accomplish both by recovering his mother and father and returning them to their former residence. In the case of Banks, these two levels of subjectivity are so intertwined that they cannot be separated. It is, then, perhaps

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4. Alden Mudge, "Ishiguro Takes a Literary Approach to the Detective Novel," *First Page Bookpage* (Sept. 2000) 10 August 2007 <[http://www.bookpage.com/009bp/kazuo\\_ishiguro.html](http://www.bookpage.com/009bp/kazuo_ishiguro.html)>.

5. Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2000), p. 86.

6. Terry Eagleton, "Nationalism, Irony, and Commitment," in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990) 23–42, pp. 28–29.

unsurprising that the recovery of his parents would simultaneously seem to promise a restoration of English authority to pre-World War II Shanghai.

It is precisely this interconnectedness of familial and national identity that Ishiguro emphasizes with Banks's arrival in Shanghai. At this point in the story, it is not only Banks, but the English population in general, who assume that a restoration of paternal authority on the level of the family will simultaneously restore English national authority. The surrealistic feel of this portion of the novel certainly has something to do with Ishiguro's choice to suspend an awareness of symbolic differences between the oedipal family and the nation in order to reveal their imaginary equivalence. For Banks, both forms of identity seem to require the replacement of a lack within one's national being – the dimension of the real within one's national identity – with an imaginary plenitude of national being. Moreover, both seem to require the space of master signifier be occupied by the father, the figure of paternal authority, in order for this economy of self-presence to be achieved.

Within this context, it seems quite appropriate that the association between solving the case of his parents' disappearance and reinstating British colonial supremacy should remain both insistent and ill-defined throughout his time in Shanghai, for Banks's earliest childhood memories expose this overlap of the public and the private self as existing on an imaginary, as opposed to a symbolic or logical level. Brian Finney has described the world of the classic detective novel as "a closed world from which evil can be separated and expelled," and has argued that such an imagined existence "represents a primitive desire for a prelapsarian world of innocence."<sup>7</sup> It would seem that it is just such a world, on both a public and a personal level, that Banks hopes to establish through his activities of detection. The "evil" that he seeks to expel is, on a fantasmatic level, the lack within his own English being, and the world he hopes to attain by doing so is not only a world of ideal childhood communion, but also a world in which English colonial authority remains untroubled.

Banks's crises of identity are, in short, defined in oedipal terms, and Ishiguro exposes and ultimately defines the logic of oedipal authority through his portrayal of Bank's ethos of detection. Banks's distinctive occupation of detective, as in classic detective novels, is essentially defined in terms of specific practices of reading material surfaces. Banks scans surfaces for objects that appear to the layperson to form part of the ordinary smooth texture of reality, but that, upon closer inspection by a professional detective, reveal sinister, hidden depths of meaning that threaten to overthrow this order of reality. In looking for clues, Banks searches surfaces for

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7. Finney.

items that stand out, items that secretly form an exception to the continuity of the surface, yet which promise to re-establish a firm sense of such continuity if one can only learn their secrets. In practicing this art, one is searching for the object whose exclusion is necessary to reinstate the consistency of the surface; one is seeking the exceptional thing that seems to conceal a secret that, if known, would restore the symbolic realm to its imaginary state as a “homogeneous totality.”<sup>8</sup> The activity of detection – the search for clues – repeatedly and relentlessly reveals itself to be a search for fetishes, a search for out-of-place, incongruous things that capture the fascination of the detective by promising a restoration of order if only the mysteries that their surfaces conceal can be penetrated. Banks, in the beginning of the novel, scrutinizes crime scenes for items that command his fascination in this way. He seeks material objects that are experienced as concealing a hidden and pathological evil, which he must “root out” and destroy so that it will not “unravel” or “scatter” the natural order of things (144). Banks searches for such objects, believing that their hidden meanings must be fully revealed if the smooth texture of reality is to be restored.

We might therefore state that “clues” function as fetishes, or material objects containing two sets of meanings that are irreducibly at odds with one another – one set of meanings insidiously making the offending object appear smoothly continuous with the surface to everyone except the specialist in detection, while another, concealed set of meanings threatens to overthrow the very order of the surface. In what might be taken as the definitive statement of detection as the search for fetishes, Banks declares that “I’ve built up *a general picture of how certain forms of evil manifest themselves*” (146) [italics added]. Evil, metaphysical, pathological, and absolute as it is, must take the form of an image – or, in Banks’s words, a picture – if he is to detect it through the obsessive scansion of surfaces.

Ishiguro reveals the method of classical detection to be an activity through which one attempts to restore an imaginary state of self-consistency to the surface by visually locating and excising that object which disturbs this ideal, or manifests “evil.” It is an activity, in other words, according to which a certain attitude of Banks toward his fantasmatic identifications – the need for an imaginary, prelapsarian plentitude – organizes his relation to material reality. Banks imagines that the restoration of such a plentitude is possible, and that it is through the activity of detection that he can reinstate it. The fact that his perceptions of reality are organized by such a desire for imaginary wholeness is emphasized in Banks’s recollection

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8. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2001), p. 127.

tions of his reaction first to his father's, and then his mother's, disappearance. In a variation of Freud's famous *fort/da* scenario, Banks obsessively play-acts the part of a detective who discovers his father (and later, plays the same game of discovery after his mother disappears). Like the child in Freud's story, it seems that Banks must reconcile himself to his parents' absence, or find a way to "compensate" himself for "the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction" that is involved in accepting this absence.<sup>9</sup> The child in Freud's story "compensated himself . . . by . . . staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach."<sup>10</sup> Banks, similarly striving to compensate himself for lost love, informs us that the need to re-unite with his parents motivated him to become a detective, and it is, of course, the case of his lost parents around which the plot of the novel is centred.

As in Freud's *fort/da* scenario, however, Banks's problem of compensation does not lend itself to such ideal resolution – one cannot simply exchange a sense of control for a loss of control, or replace the lost object with a substitute object and be done with it. The child, through the "compulsive" re-enactment of his loss, may, on one level, be attempting a compensation for his loss according to the logic of the "pleasure principle." But this logic will always be dependent upon the more fundamental "operation of tendencies *beyond* the pleasure principle."<sup>11</sup> For Freud, *fort/da* becomes a figure for "a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle," because it is "more primitive, more elementary, [and] more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides."<sup>12</sup> The desire to regain an ideal state of being imagined to exist before the primal loss is, it seems, ultimately impossible to satisfy, because it is not really such an untroubled state of being, but the "economic disturbance" of the compulsion to repeat – a "demonic force" preventing such ideal self-realization – that resides at the subjective foundations of the child; the compulsion to repeat is the economic disturbance that founds the economy of the pleasure principle, and that one therefore ultimately runs up against if one traces the peregrinations of the pleasure principle far enough.<sup>13</sup> Which is to say that the child's attempts at compensation will always be incomplete.<sup>14</sup> Banks's at-

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9. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989), p. 14.

10. Freud, *Pleasure Principle*, p. 14.

11. Freud, *Pleasure Principle*, p. 17.

12. Freud, *Pleasure Principle*, pp. 24–25.

13. Freud, *Pleasure Principle*, pp. 40–41.

14. Lacan would re-christen the problem of subjective origins identified by Freud in his analysis of the compulsion to repeat as that of "the real," which, similarly, indicates "a cer-

tempts to restore himself to an imagined childhood state are similarly doomed to incompleteness, for, significantly, the plot of the novel is driven by a similar compulsion toward repetition. As Mike Petry has noted in regard to Ishiguro's earlier novels, "[e]very decisive character, every important motif, and every major scene . . . exists, at least, twice."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in *When We Were Orphans* events almost invariably occur at least twice, and with each iteration people, words, locations, and meanings are inverted, rearranged, included and excluded, expanded and retracted. The structure of the plot therefore might be understood to proceed by way of such "economic disturbances," or displacements and slippages within Banks's memory, which profoundly disfigure any attempt to discover an untroubled truth at the origins of the subject or the nation.

Joan Copjec has noted that the narrative structure in "classical detective fiction" tends to foreground the "performative" element involved in the production of a linear narrative, because "it is the narrative of the investigation that produces the narrative of the crime."<sup>16</sup> Ishiguro emphasizes this performative element of the classic detective story by structuring the narrative of *When We Were Orphans* around "economic disturbances" (in Freud's sense of the term) in Banks's memory, each of which initiates its own linear narrative. Such disturbances act as a structuring device of both the overall narrative and the problem of memory within the novel. This structure is evident from the first scene of the story, in which Banks, in London shortly after finishing college, runs into an old friend from grammar school who challenges Banks's memory of having "blended perfectly into English school life" (7) with the "casual judgment" that Banks was "an odd bird at school" (5). This statement, which seems, to Banks, irredeemably at odds with his own memory of a seamless adaptation to life in an English public school, at the age of ten, following the disappearance of his parents, nevertheless narratively precedes his own memory of the events. The disturbance caused by this statement becomes,

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tain *gap*" that "the function of cause has always presented to any conceptual apprehension," and from which the subject is symbolically born (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [New York: Norton, 1998], p. 21). For Lacan, the very possibility of imagining "the one," or an ideal, self-identical totality, "is introduced by the experience of . . . rupture" (*Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 26).

15. Mike Petry, *Narratives of Memory and Identity: The Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 25.

16. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), p. 174.



in fact, a seemingly bottomless source of fascination for Banks, which instigates him repeatedly to return to certain events in order to find, within his memory, some definitive thing that will pin down, or lend certainty to, his subjective experience of this period in his life.

A distinct pattern is established: Banks's memory is structured by disruptions, which inaugurate a reiterative process of return to certain scenes of desire. The obsessive return to these scenes never provides the sort of conclusive resolution sought by Banks, however, for remembering and re-remembering does not lead progressively to a definitive and final subjective truth on a narrative level. Rather, Banks's memories often contradict but invariably displace those that came before. Which is to say that each repetition of a memory is, in an important sense, incommensurate with those that precede it, to the extent that it is grounded in a transformed fantasmatic core that provides its own sense of imaginary continuity. We therefore witness, in the early pages of the novel, a dialectical, performative structure of memory and personal history, for we have, on one hand, a structure of breaks, rendering each memory separate and irreducible, yet oddly interconnected with the others; and, on the other hand, an imaginary sense of the continuity of personal history that is created and re-created with each break. This imaginary continuity is the equivalent of Banks's experience of personally possessing a linear temporal history, each earlier event exercising a causal effect on the events that come later (the loss of his parents, for instance, causes his ensuing state of social withdrawal and introspection within this temporal structure). This imaginary continuity, which is the equivalent of Bank's sense of his own temporal and symbolic consistency, however, is made possible only through the simultaneous co-existence of an incommensurate temporal structure, according to which personal history exists as a series of absolute breaks with the past, each break enabling a retroactive reconstruction of the imaginary, linear temporality of the self.

The narrative structure of *When We Were Orphans* emphasizes these two co-existing but ultimately incommensurate temporalities of the self because the story is not related in linear chronological order but loosely structured around the reiterative confrontation with certain unreliable memories. With this structure, Ishiguro discovers a way to narratively enact not only the dual temporality of the self described in Freud's *fort/da* scenario – the self split between the imaginary continuities of the “pleasure principle” and the radical discontinuities of “economic disturbances” – but the dual temporality of the nation, within which “there is a split between” a “continuitist, accumulative temporality” and “the repetitious, recursive strategy of the per-

formative.”<sup>17</sup> It would, in fact, seem to be precisely the disavowal of the performative supplement involved in the production of such a “continuist, accumulative temporality” that ultimately links Banks’s crises of familial and national identity. Both the oedipal self and the nation, in *When We Were Orphans*, are built on a refusal to acknowledge the performative supplement of the imagined past. Both forms of identity are defined in terms of a search for an imaginary temporal continuity cleansed of its performative supplement – cleansed, in other words, of the dimension of the real. Both the oedipal self and the nation are built on identical economies of suppression. Banks, according to the demands of both national and familial identity, suppresses any acknowledgement of the performative supplement of his attempts to capture an imagined past throughout most of the story. He therefore experiences the uneasy remembrance and re-remembrance of his public school days as a gradual but progressive approach to the truth of his being.

Rebecca Walkowitz asserts that Ishiguro’s novels are built on a “foundation of absent narrative” that Ishiguro challenges us to read “as cultural content.”<sup>18</sup> As paradoxical as this statement may seem, it very aptly describes *When We Were Orphans*. The “foundation of absent narrative” is, in this case, the disavowed performative supplement of the linear, continuist narrative of the nation. We are challenged to read this absence in terms of “cultural content” because Ishiguro provides an intricate examination of the personal and cultural implications of such an economy of repression. And while there is, perhaps, no inherent reason that such a psychic economy should take a specifically oedipal form, this is certainly the case in *When We Were Orphans*; for, while the particular scenes of desire which Banks revisits prior to his return to Shanghai involve the disappearance of both parents, it is the indeterminacy of his memories of his father that seem specifically to demand resolution.

Prior to his journey to Shanghai, the site of his primal trauma, Banks becomes obsessed with correcting a particular recollection of an argument between his mother and an ultimately undetermined male figure. “[W]hile I am fairly sure I have remembered its essence accurately,” Banks explains, “I find myself less certain about some of the details” (71). The “details” that shift relentlessly as he visits and re-visits the scene include what his mother actually said, what the argument was about, where it took place, whether or not his “mother would ever have lost control of the situation

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17. Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 139–70, p. 145.

18. Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “Ishiguro’s Floating Worlds,” *ELH* 68.4 (2001): 1049–79, p. 1049.

to such a degree,” and, finally, with whom his mother was arguing so passionately (71). We might ask what the “accurately” remembered “essence” of the recollection is, given that every aspect of the memory other than the identity of his mother alters in widely various and even contrary ways. In fact, why does Banks imagine that the various iterations form a continuity that allows him to group them together as a single “memory”? This continuity certainly cannot be attributed to the content, which shifts dramatically from one iteration to the next. In fact, this memory becomes a particular obsession not due to any consistent image or meaning it contains, but because of an absence, because of the radical instability of the image of the male figure with whom his mother argues. This figure, initially a “health inspector” (71) becomes, in later iterations, his father, his Uncle Phillip, and, finally, becomes split into two figures, his Uncle Phillip and the Chinese warlord Wang Ku. And it is the shift in the identity of the male authority figure that organizes the shifts in meaning. This vaguely paternal figure acts as a master signifier within the memory, and, in a larger sense, performs the same role in terms of Banks’s struggles to discover the truth about his past, for it is this particular scene of desire that Banks feels he must decipher in order to discover his true past. In short, Banks feels that he must determine the actual identity of the male figure, and, if he can do so, the process of interminable displacement will come to an end and be replaced by a final truth. Banks believes, in other words, that the space occupied inconsistently by his father, from which the image of his actual father is subsequently displaced by those of other father figures, must be stabilized if he is to come to terms with his past. The instability of the images that occupy this space frustrates Banks’s desire for this final truth of the self because each subsequent image de-centres and re-signifies the meaning of the memory, and thus the meaning of the self. During one attempt to fill in the absent space of the male authority figure in this dream, Banks comments that

the truth is . . . I have become increasingly preoccupied with my memories, a preoccupation encouraged by the discovery that these memories – of my childhood, of my parents – have lately begun to blur. A number of times recently I have found myself struggling to recall something that only two or three years ago I believed was ingrained in my mind for ever. I have been obliged to accept, in other words, that with each passing year, my life in Shanghai will grow less distinct, until one day all that will remain will be a few muddled images. (70)

His trip to Shanghai is ultimately designed to assign a final and absolute image to this space, and therefore restore clarity and certainty to his memories of child-

hood. In other words, this space – which, within the oedipal configuration, is the space of the real – must be occupied by an image whose self-evident truth will put an end to the endless slippage of memory and meaning that reiteratively disrupts Banks’s sense of himself in a process equated with the state of orphanhood.

Banks, unsurprisingly, discovers no such truth of his being during his trip to Shanghai. If he initially believes he must assign a stable image to the place of the paternal signifier in order to properly claim his identity, he must come to realize that the difficulty of this requirement is its ultimate impossibility; for it is precisely an absence in the place of phallic authority that enables the oedipal configuration to exist.<sup>19</sup> In place of any such miraculous discovery, Banks undergoes repeated confrontations with places from his childhood which, I think, can most precisely be described by the term “uncanny.” Freud demonstrates, in his etymology of the German term *heimlich*, that it already contains its own negation – *unheimlich* – within it.<sup>20</sup> Uncanny, then, is a term meaning “homeliness,” “the familiar,” or “domesticity” that is, from the beginning, struck through with its own negation – “foreignness.”<sup>21</sup> It is a term containing mutually exclusive but oddly interdependent meanings caught in what J. Hillis Miller termed “a performative embrace.”<sup>22</sup> We see this uncanniness most directly referenced, perhaps, in an exchange between Banks and a Japanese colonel, who observes that “our childhood becomes like a foreign land once we have grown” (297). Banks responds appropriately to this strangely accurate assessment of his own situation, explaining that “it’s hardly a foreign land to me. In many ways, it’s where I’ve continued to live all my life” (297). That his childhood should come to be experienced not only as a place of “concealment,”<sup>23</sup> where Banks goes to confront hidden evil in the hope of discovering a revelatory truth, but that it should be figured as “a foreign land” that he nevertheless continues to occupy as home, sets the understanding of self reached by Banks while in Shanghai on the precise metaphorical

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19. Lacan would explain that the “phallus is the signifier of . . . *Aufhebung*” that “inaugurates” the oedipal configuration “by its own disappearance” (Jacques Lacan, “The Meaning of the Phallus,” in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, trans. Jacqueline Rose, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose [New York: Norton, 1985] 74–85, p. 82).

20. Following his etymological analysis of the term, Freud comments that “*Heimlich* thus becomes increasingly ambivalent . . . until it merges with its antonym *unheimlich*” (Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock [New York: Penguin, 2003], p. 134).

21. Freud, *The Uncanny*, pp. 126–30.

22. J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host,” in *De-Construction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979) 217–53, p. 241.

23. Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 129.

ground of Freud's uncanny. What Banks must discover in Shanghai, it seems, is his own uncanny difference from himself; he must realize that there is no image or idea that he can discover that will restore him to a utopian ideal of a childhood that never actually existed; he must recognize that there is no self-evident truth of the self to be discovered in the place of his own subjective origins, but a constitutive moment of difference from the self, which causes him to experience his own psychic origins, his childhood, as a "foreign land"; he must abandon the "myth that consciousness is pure and abstract, untarnished by its nebulous beginnings."<sup>24</sup> The landscape of his childhood, in short, only reiterates what we have learned from a narrative structured as a series of unstable, constantly self-displacing memories: to be himself he must, at the same time, remain different from himself. To return home, for Banks, is to discover a foreign land. And Banks's home, after all, is a home that is at the same time a foreign land. Living in the foreign section of Shanghai as a child, Banks's home is always already – definitively – also a state of exile – it is a home that is not a home, or a home that is defined by its own central absence, its meaning lying elsewhere – for Banks is English, despite being physically located in China, and England is elsewhere.

In a dialectical inversion of the meaning of "orphanhood" – a term that, like Freud's *unheimlich*, seems to always already contain its own negation – and that, like *unheimlich*, indicates a sense of at-homeness that is rooted in the experience of being a foreigner or stranger in one's own home – Banks comes to discover that orphanhood is definitively the state not only of those literally in exile from their nation, but also those who unselfconsciously embrace their nation, because the nation, like the oedipal family, is an entity that is premised on its own loss. This loss is registered in the story as the frequently desperate desire to recapture a past that never really existed. Sustained by a group of fetishized images of this imagined lost past, national identity dictates a melancholic state of mind, based, as it is, on the disavowal of a loss more fundamental than the loss of an idyllic past, a loss that cannot be acknowledged as long as one remains a nationalist / fetishist.<sup>25</sup>

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24. Christopher Lane, Introduction, in *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, ed. Christopher Lane (New York: Columbia UP, 1998) 3–37, p. 19.

25. Melancholia involves a loss that cannot be avowed, or "a setting up of the object in the ego" (Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere, ed. James Strachey [New York: Norton, 1989], p. 24). Freud contrasts melancholia to mourning, which involves a loss that can be acknowledged, and therefore can potentially lead to an acceptance of the loss. Judith Butler remarks that in the case of melancholia "there is no final breaking of the attachment. There is, rather, the incorporation of the attachment as identification,

Many critics have claimed that Ishiguro tends to define his protagonists through their tragic inability to imagine any alternatives to a national identity based upon “a powerful yearning for past glory.”<sup>26</sup> Richard Pedot, for instance, contends that Ono, the protagonist of *An Artist of the Floating World*, ultimately remains trapped in such a fetishistic ethos of nationalism because his “desire to come to terms with the past is built on the illusion that one can paint the impossible picture.” Ono’s understanding of the past therefore renders him unable to break “free of his compulsion to repeat past failures.”<sup>27</sup>

Bernard Gilbert reads Stevens from *Remains of the Day* in a similar light. Stevens, within this reading, ultimately remains attached to the rigid patriarchal ethos of British nationalism, according to which any “broken taboo leads to punishment through a refined, mandarinal ritual of cruelty.”<sup>28</sup> I believe that Banks’s fate is more hopeful, however; for while the emotional atmosphere of the story is for the most part profoundly melancholy, Banks does learn to embrace his orphaned state. We are therefore left with the impression that, unlike Ono, he is not destined to endlessly experience the loss of an imagined past. Banks is able to free himself from such a cycle through his realization that both his national and familial identities have been built upon imaginary entities designed to sustain the illusion of an absolute certainty – a certainty that is experienced as always already displaced or lost, just as Banks’s story both begins and ends with the loss of his parents. His decision, in the final section of the story, to recognize the emptiness of his imaginary lost family and embrace a new family – based on his renewed connection with his own orphaned and adopted daughter, Jennifer – remains tinged with the definitive melancholy of the story, however.

This ending is reminiscent of Stevens’s qualified embrace of banter in the final pages of *The Remains of the Day*, which represents his ability to let go of his desire

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where identification becomes a magical, a psychic form of preserving the object.” Accordingly, “the lost object continues to haunt and inhabit the ego as one of its constitutive identifications” (Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* [Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997], p. 134).

26. John S. Su, “Refiguring National Character: The Remains of the British Estate Novel,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 48.3 (2002): 552–80, p. 552.

27. Richard Pedot, “Revisions of Visions past, or ‘the Texture of Memory: Kazuo Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World*,” *Authortrek*, Kazuo Ishiguro Page, 10 August 2007 <[http://authortrek.com/kazuo\\_ishiguro\\_page.html](http://authortrek.com/kazuo_ishiguro_page.html)>.

28. Bernard Gilbert, “‘Call Me Ish’: East Meets West, a Comparison of Kazuo Ishiguro and Christopher Isherwood,” *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines* 4 (1994): 75–88, p. 78.

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for absolutes and accept the pleasure available in the unrestrained multiplication of meanings within language. Banks's acceptance of his orphanhood represents a similar qualified success, for this acceptance is accompanied by the melancholy realization that "for those like us, our fate is to face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadows of vanished parents. [Yet there] is nothing for it but to try and see through our missions to the end, as best we can, for until we do so, we will be permitted no calm" (335-36).