Kazuo Ishiguro's *Nocturnes* of these days

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Abstract: *Some musicologists consider that the notion of narrative brought into interpretative relationship with instrumental music is 'neither heroic nor scandalously naïve' on the grounds that it invites an experimental exploratory approach to the performances of music-critical thought. In my essay on Kazuo Ishiguro's* Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall *(2009), I shall reverse the paradigm music and the narrative effect and construct an argument meant to prove that the effect of music in the five narratives by Ishiguro is due to how the writer manages, through a subtle concatenation of character, slant/path, and discourse, to instantiate a multi-movement "plot archetype" similar to that in a nocturne. The under-current movement in Ishiguro's Nocturnes eludes resolution and definitive thought just as musical nocturnes' tranquility evokes a range of lyrical expressions depending on both the performance/performer and the listener. Such movement then allows into being the frisson of modern civilization and its avatars, of ideological crisscrossing, which may undercut the brightest of intention.*

Keywords: *music, effect of narrative, narrative, effect of music, narration, contrapuntal textual policies.*

Introduction: On Music and Narrative

I remember when I was watching Leonard Bernstein's inspiring music lessons in the 70s, I was fascinated about how convincingly and forcefully such a talented complete musician as Bernstein can make musical phonology and semantics meet the logical ear. I wasn't then familiar with the emergent explorations of musicologists concerning the relationship between classical instrumental music and narrative. I was just taking Bernstein's exercise in deciphering a narrative meaning in instrumental music as an extraordinary didactic gift to make music story tell/narrate the self.

Fred Maus' recent analysis of the relationship between classical instrumental music – that which lacks an explicit literary program originating with the composer – and narrative, spells out for me a long research tradition wherein musicologists compete to show either that instrumental music is nothing than "engagingly patterned sound" or "narrowly emotion-based accounts" that have often dominated

philosophical discussions of music (2008: 466). After mentioning some claims against the analogies between music and narrative (such as, musical form typically involves extensive repetitions of events; music lacks past tense; music has no subject and predicate), Maus declares for refining an account in response to those arguments rather than abandoning the line of inquiry. He then looks for ways whereby music through specific devices manages to meaningfully relate to listeners. For instance, according to Maus, the fact that music does not have the option of past tense may be indicative of how musical plot by necessity occurs in the present time of the listener's perception. On the other hand, the sequence of musical events in a composition invites comparison to the unfolding of a narrative plot, with the help of concrete material sound which by necessity again differs from the role of concrete material words and sentences in literary narrative. On the same line of thinking, the fact that music cannot use a subject-predicate structure to tell a story by naming objects, describing characters, or actions does not prevent listeners from hearing actions whose agency, albeit indeterminate, may suggest, as Maus tells us, that there is a correspondence between musical events and the listeners' imagined intentions (2008: 468). In order to make us understand the nature and appeal of narrative analogies, Maus turns to three exploratory essays, which, he considers, make a more constructive, even optimistic use of ideas about narrative.

Since my musical knowledge limits to the fascination of listening to and recognizing good music, not always being able to retrieve sources, I shall follow in the steps of Maus' demonstration so that I can first understand the effect-of-narrative instrumental music carries along, and then, try to reverse the paradigm, and sense the effect-of-music Ishiguro's narratives (*Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall,* 2009) produce.

From Guck's essay (1994), Maus first turns to, I retain that the music theorist's description of a note in the slow movement of Mozart's Symphony No. 40 as an "immigrant pitch" is nothing but the representation of her own experience of hearing the score combined with careful description of musical detail based on technical analysis and other resources. In Maus's words, "[i]n communication about music, individual listeners explain their experiences to others, and construction of a narrative can be an *ad hoc* device to help with this communication" (2008: 470).

McClary's essay (1986), Maus next refers to, purports and manages to show that Mozart's concerto 453, through the dramatic confrontation between the solo part of the piano and the orchestra, deals with social issues in a tense complex way. Besides the specialist demonstration, as in Guck's case, I retain the idea that sound technical knowledge of music can generate a confident and convincing account of the hearing of a composition, which the listener/addressee can also experience or at least try to imagine as a new hearing.

In the case of Newcomb's essay (1987), which gives an interpretation of Schumann's Second Symphony, the interest rests on reviving historically appropriate interpretative tools so as to do justice to a musical piece which seems to have fallen from favour with twentieth century audience. The music critic, by engaging documents of reception history, inquires into the meaning of the composition and asks his readers to test his interpretative account in their own experiences. Newcomb's reiteration of an older idea that Schumann's Second Symphony as a whole instantiates a similar multimovement "plot archetype" – i.e. "a standard series of mental states" – to Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies ("a psychological evolution, such as suffering followed by healing and redemption," p. 472) may prove functional in my own reading of Ishiguro's *Nocturnes.*

Maus' poetics of musical description concludes with admitting that individualized personal involvement is central to musical meaning and provides content to musical narratives. Nevertheless, the critic raises a question which remains open for specialist and novice alike: "Why, nonetheless, do intelligent, careful attempts at general theory about music and narrative seem comparatively bland and unmusical?" – a feeling, I confess, I also experienced while reading the three demonstrations in question. But this couldn't prevent me from resonating with Hector Berlioz's vivid description of a particular passage leading to the recapitulation in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony; however, the passage, despite its impetus, doesn't create an effect of musicality similar in force to the effect of narrative it attempts to achieve:

> Listen to the gasps in the orchestra, to the chords in the dialogue between winds and strings that come and go, sounding ever weaker, like the painful breaths of a dying man. Then their place is taken by a phrase full of violence, as if the orchestra were revived by a flash of anger. Note this trembling mass as it hesitates for a moment, then dashes headlong,

> splitting into two fiery unisons like two streams of lava, and then say whether this impassioned style is not beyond and above any instrumental music ever written.
>
> (Berlioz 1994: 19-20, quoted in Maus, 2008: 477)

Maus also makes an interesting point when he says that it depends on each particular performance whether the story/narrative keeps the same, changes a little or changes radically. In his mind, it is better to ponder different performances rather than interpreting a stable musical work, as it is recommendable that musicologists study the poetics of texts about music, "noticing the tricks of literary construction that create images of music and subjectivity, rather than evaluating such texts as purely representational devices" (2008: 480).

On a different line of thinking, Peter Rabinowitz in the essay "They Shoot Tigers, Don't They?: Path and Counterpoint in *The Long Goodbye*" purports to find literary analogues to music by arguing that narrative prose can engage in contrapuntal games too. According to the critic, narrative is fundamentally contrapuntal because it is founded on the duality of story and discourse, but it also depends on the order of reception/perception or experience, such as states of mind and processes of reflection of characters and readers alike. The critic's main claim is that by adding a third term "path" (and experience) to the binary distinction story/discourse, we can then consider a narratology that includes not only "actants" but also "passants" – those (especially including those beyond the narrator and his or her chosen focalizers) on whom impressions are registered (2008: 184). Including "path" as a third term, Rabinowitz tells us, means to favour a kind of refocalization, a rethinking of a narrative in terms of how it's experienced from positions other than those focalized by the narrator. In the subsequent analysis of Chandler's detective novel *The Long Goodbye,* the critic demonstrates how attending to path the intended meaning is more readily and acutely made conspicuous.

In my subsequent discussion of Ishiguro's *Nocturnes,* I am going to take Maus' advice and ponder on those tricks of literary construction that create images of music or what I call the effect of music which somehow resembles the effect of narrative or subjectivity Maus' above mentioned examples were concerned with. I am also going to make use of Rabinowitz's notion of path as contrapuntal technique on both the thematic and the mimetic level in order to prove the difficulty of the medium to reconstruct not only the passants'

paths, but the actants' paths too, hence the effect of non resolution, dilemmatic stance Ishiguro's *Nocturnes* manage to evoke.

Listening to Kazuo Ishiguro's *Nocturnes*

In *The Oxford Companion to Music,* a 'nocturne' (<L *nocturnus* – *nox,* night) is described as a pensive musical composition which is inspired by or evocative of the night, or, meant to be performed at night, much like a serenade. In the 18th century, when the term first appeared, it indicated an ensemble piece in several movements played one time for an evening party; either written for solo piano or for paired horns with strings, the nocturne, in the 19th century, features a Romantic cantabile melody evocative of an equally harmonious natural background. Although nocturnes are mainly thought to convey lyrical and tranquil moods, they have also acquired the capacity to evoke more intensive feelings, either gloomy or joyous, as the composers meant them to be.

Kazuo Ishiguro's first collection of short stories, titled *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009), can figure as a good example of how narrative can create an effect of music which can be compared to how a musical piece can create an effect of narrative or subjectivity.

The subsequent claims I advance and intend to substantiate are: firstly, Ishiguro's stories manage, through a subtle concatenation of character, slant/path, and discourse, to instantiate a multi-movement "plot archetype" similar to that in a nocturne; and, secondly, the multi-movement "plot archetype" allows into being an under-current movement which inconclusively but poignantly describes the ideological crisscrossing of modern civilization from East to West, or West to East.

First of all, each story features characters that are either fictional musicians/singers (Tony Gardner and Jan from *Crooner*; Tilo, Sonja and the narrator from *Malvern Hills*; Steve from *Nocturne*; Tibor and friends from *Cellists*) or music lovers in the old style (Ray from *Come Rain or Come Sunshine*). They are all narrated by male narrators, in the first person, which may lend their narration the suspicion of unreliability. According to the latest norms narrative theorists have established for describing the concept of unreliability (see Phelan and Martin's taxonomy (1999) in Nünning, 2008: 94), Ishiguro's unreliable narrators perform rather as deliberate underreporters and/or

misevaluators, and/or misreaders. They thus risk their trustworthiness (sound judgment) for the sake of factual reliability, which they strive to minutely (re)construct. Their fallibility can also be taken as a measure for the readers' own presuppositional literary and cultural framework according to which they judge the textual world. Thus, the narrator's, the implied/inferred author's, and the reader's doubtful notions of objectivity and truth, normal psychological behavior, linguistic norm, and moral/ ethical standards are at play and in question when performing the narration and the reading of an evaluative account of a lived experience, such as Ishiguro's stories propose.

For instance, Jan, the Polish café musician from *Crooner*, while narrating his experience of having accompanied Tony Gardner, a fading American singer, while he serenades his wife from a gondola, in Venice, is more concerned with the process of understanding how the story/narrative which he tells has been affecting him. Accustomed to playing with a crew in the open for making a living, Janeck, as the friends call him, transfers the public surveillance, any artist is subject to, onto himself, trying to see beyond that which is said, done, or expected.

The opening paragraph describing the place (Piazza San Marco, Venice) and time (spring arrival) also sets the mood of lyric melancholy the whole narrative means to suggest: "There was quite a breeze that morning, and our brand-new marquee was flapping all around us, but we were all feeling a little bit brighter and fresher, and I guess it showed in our music" (*Crooner*, p. 3). The uneasiness of an up-side down feeling starts to insinuate undercutting the luminous description, when the narrator introduces himself as "one of the 'gypsies', as the other musicians call us, one of the guys who move around the piazza, helping out whichever of the three cafe orchestras needs us" (*Crooner*, p. 3); or, when Venice and implicitly Venetians, are presented as obsessed with tradition, the past, roots, and origin, a feeling which breeds ambivalence in terms of social status as long as it exacerbates xenophobic attitudes:

> There's also, of course, the small matter of my not being Italian, never mind Venetian. It's the same for that big Czech guy with the alto sax. We're well liked, we're needed by the other musicians, but we don't quite fit the official bill. Just play and keep your mouth shut, that's what the cafe managers always say. That way the tourists won't know you're not

> Italian. Wear your suit, sunglasses, keep the hair combed back, no one will know the difference, just don't start talking. (*Crooner,* p. 4).

The tourists are accepted and courted, while foreign performers, from Eastern Europe in particular, though "well liked" and "needed," are played down upon whenever occasion arises. The chord of "unfitness" is taken up, even more forcefully, when the narrator spells out his dislike of Vittorio, the gondolier hired by the American singer (Tony Gardner) to take them to the palazzo for serenading his soon ex-wife (Lindy Gardner): "To my face, Vittorio's always friendly, but I know – I knew back then – he goes around saying all kinds of foul things, all of it rubbish, about people like me, people he calls 'the foreigners from the new countries'" (*Crooner,* p. 13).

The first narrative of the cycle develops the plot archetype of a psychological evolution of acculturation – both as cultural change and cultural absorption –, taking the following standard series of mental states: observation of new cultural patterns, disavowal and acknowledgement of these patterns, and nostalgic recapitulation of differences, which brings into question one's old cultural patterns as moral and ethical values. To this purpose, the writer contrapuntally develops several apparently separate stories in a harmonious texture whose melody-dominated homophony is ensured by the narrator's memory of his mother. It is the narrator's heart-felt love for his mother that prompts the excitement of wishing to meet Tony Gardner in the first place: "For her sake, for the sake of her memory, I had to go and say something to him, never mind if the other musicians laughed and said I was acting like a bellboy" (*Crooner,* p.6). Tony Gardner then becomes the narrator's badge of identity as he personifies his mother's repository of both strength and lost illusions. Although Jan "knew deep down that things wouldn't be as straightforward as he [Gardner] was making out" (p.12), he accepts the proposal of accompanying Gardner while serenading his wife:

> My guitar was out of the case by this time, so I played a few bars of the song. 'Take it up,' he said. 'Up to E-flat. That's how I did it on the album.' So I played the chords in that key, and after maybe a whole verse had gone by, Mr Gardner began to sing, very softly, under his breath, like he could only half remember the words. But his voice resonated well in that quiet canal. In fact, it sounded really beautiful. And for a moment it was like I was a boy again, back in that apartment, lying on the carpet

> while my mother sat on the sofa, exhausted, or maybe heartbroken, while Tony Gardner's album spun in the corner of the room (*Crooner,* p. 14).

Jan's memory of his mother intertwining with previous privations in the communist days ("cramped" apartment; listening to American music as a liberating gesture; black-market records) seems to act as a developer for understanding and mostly questioning new cultural bahaviours. For instance, when approaching Tony Gardner, a pensive onlooker of the piazza spectacle, Jan is classified and evaluated by his then absent interlocutor:

> 'So you come from one of those communist countries. That must have been tough.' 'That's all in the past.' I did a cheerful shrug. 'We're a free country now. A democracy.' 'That's good to hear. And that was your crew playing for us just now. Sit down. You want some coffee?' I told him I didn't want to impose, but there was now something gently insistent about Mr Gardner. 'No, no, sit down. Your mother liked my records, you were saying' (*Crooner,* p.7).

When Jan calls Gardner "the legendary Tony Gardner' (p.15), while bringing up the issue of these days' public appeal for being near a star, he is considered uninitiated by the cultural standards of western civilization:

> 'My friend, you come from a communist country. That's why you don't realise how these things work.' 'Mr Gardner,' I said, 'my country isn't communist any more. We're free people now.' 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to denigrate your nation. You're a brave people. I hope you win peace and prosperity. But what I intended to say to you, friend, what I meant was that coming from where you do, quite naturally, there are many things you don't understand yet. Just like there'd be many things I wouldn't understand in your country.' (*Crooner,* p. 16).

However, when Gardner, a man in his sixties, instructs his "colleague" musician about how important it is for a musician to know certain peculiarities of the audience (in that case in point, the audience was his wife, whom he portrays as an upstart by formation who eventually turns into a caring and loving wife), Jan finds himself in the position of counsellor:

> 'Mr Gardner, it's none of my business, I know. But I can see maybe things haven't been so good between you and Mrs Gardner lately. I want

> you to know I understand about things like that. My mother often used to get sad, maybe just the way you are now. She'd think she'd found someone, she'd be so happy and tell me this guy was going to be my new dad. The first couple of times I believed her. After that, I knew it wouldn't work out. But my mother, she never stopped believing it. And every time she felt down, maybe like you are tonight, you know what she did? She put on your records and sang along. All those long winters, in that tiny apartment of ours, she'd sit there, knees tucked up under her, glass of something in her hand, and she'd sing along softly. And sometimes, I remember this, Mr Gardner, our neighbours upstairs would bang on the ceiling, especially when you were doing those big up-tempo numbers, like "High Hopes" or "They All Laughed". I used to watch my mother carefully, but it was like she hadn't heard a thing, she'd be listening to you, nodding her head to the beat, her lips moving with the lyrics. Mr Gardner, I wanted to say to you. Your music helped my mother through those times, it must have helped millions of others. And it's only right it should help you too' (*Crooner,* pp. 23-24).

In Jan's case, the general progression of acculturation follows several movements raising a series of emotions, along with subjective stances toward those emotions. For instance, the gondola performance, similar to the broken-chord patterns and lyrical melodies based on long notes from a nocturne, creates a soothing calm night atmosphere, suggestive of extreme sadness. Let us listen to the guitarist's song which blends in as much hope, illusion, and regret as life can hold:

> And I played gently a little opening figure, no beat yet, the sort of thing that could lead into a song or just as easily fade away. I tried to make it sound like America, sad roadside bars, big long highways, and I guess I was thinking too of my mother, the way I'd come into the room and see her on the sofa gazing at her record sleeve with its picture of an American road, or maybe of the singer sitting in an American car. What I mean is, I tried to play it so my mother would have recognised it as coming from that same world, the world on her record sleeve. (*Crooner,* p. 26).

The sadness of this movement comes from Jan's juxtaposition of his mother's record sleeve world (an imaginary world of happiness and dignity), his own representation of America, and the American way as the narrated events were hinting at. The note of jubilation the narrator-protagonist introduces: 'We did it, Mr Gardner!'[…] 'We did it. We got her by the heart' (p. 28), falls short when he learns that the

couple's separation is needed for making possible Mr. Gardner's comeback into the showbiz. As "a comeback's no easy game," Mr. Gardner tells Jan, "[y]ou have to be prepared to make a lot of changes, some of them hard ones. You change the way you are. You even change some things you love' (p. 30).

The Polish guitarist's process of acculturation turns out to be also a process of illumination by way of pondering over the avatars of Western civilizations. The dramatic accumulation of tension towards the end of the story introduces the last movement of an ever more acute sadness due to an existential dilemma: knowing when and how to "get out". Jan's mother hasn't had a chance.

> 'I still don't get it, Mr Gardner. This place you and Mrs Gardner come from can't be so different from everywhere else. That's why, Mr Gardner, that's why these songs you've been singing all these years, they make sense for people everywhere. Even where I used to live. And what do all these songs say? If two people fall out of love and they have to part, then that's sad. But if they go on loving each other, they should stay together for ever. That's what these songs are saying.' 'I understand what you're saying, friend. And it might sound hard to you, I know. But that's the way it is. And listen, this is about Lindy too. It's best for her we do this now. […]. She needs to get out now, while she has time. Time to find love again, make another marriage. She needs to get out before it's too late.' I don't know what I would have said to that, but then he caught me by surprise, saying: 'Your mother. I guess she never got out.' I thought about it, then said quietly: 'No, Mr Gardner. She never got out. She didn't live long enough to see the changes in our country.' (*Crooner,* pp. 31-32).

By countrapuntally juxtaposing the two women's vocations and destinies, the writer rings a new chord of utter dejection which tends to engulf the whole meaning of the story. Though sympathetic to others' problems as Mr. Gardner was ("'That's too bad. I'm sure she was a fine woman. If what you say is true, and my music helped make her happy, that means a lot to me. Too bad she didn't get out'", p. 31), he sounds pathetical when he says: "'I don't want that to happen to my Lindy. No, sir. Not to my Lindy. I want my Lindy to get out' (p. 31).

The concluding lines of the story enrich the sad, melancholic tone of the whole piece by adding that touch of ironic non resolution which was subsidiary to the whole score from the very beginning: "Because Mr Gardner had seemed a pretty decent guy, and whichever way you look at it, comeback or no comeback, he'll always be one of the

greats" (p. 34). Though unreliable as he was, due to oversimplification of things, Jan's potential of decency and commonsense seems to remain intact.

Paradoxically and ironically, Jan is a beautiful naïf who, *due to* being short of experience, will replay the score of those events by listening to his inner thoughts, feelings, while the other (Mr. Gardner), *because of* being too experienced, will make a "comeback" at the cost of his feelings.

The other four stories are only contrapuntal deviations from the first story, thus becoming tricks of literary construction meant to create images of music and subjectivity.

For instance, the second story, *Come Rain or Come Sunshine* (the title of Ray Charles's song "where the words themselves were happy, but the interpretation was pure heartbreak," p. 38), is a comic replay on the theme of love, as either failed or unfulfilled. Ray, the narrator of the story, a pretty disillusioned EFL itinerant teacher, is invited by his old university days' friends, who, from his knowledge of previous visits, had been living happily married in London. He soon finds out from Charles, his life-long friend, that things had been going wrong for some years between Emily and him. Emily is a lover of up-tempo music like the narrator and, apparently of up-tempo life too, unlike the narrator. She, Charles says, wants the ever best of him: "I was doing all right. I am doing all right. Perfectly okay. But she thought I was destined for ... God knows, president of the fucking world, God knows! I'm just an ordinary bloke who's doing all right. But she doesn't see that. That's at the heart of it, at the heart of everything that's gone wrong.' (*Come Rain or Come Sunshine,* p. 50)

The narrator, although reluctantly, accepts to enter Charles' game, meant to teach her "perspective," which, in Charles' acceptation, means setting lower goals as a different viewpoint: "'Perspective, she needs perspective. And I kept saying to myself, look, I'm doing okay. Look at loads of other people, people we know. Look at Ray. Look what a pig's arse he's making of his life. She needs perspective.' 'So you decided to invite me for a visit. To be Mr Perspective'" (pp. 50-51). The comical parts – a perfect match to Charles' perverse scheming – are a reminder of Gardner's up-tempo/vivid description of Lindy's "little hot-dog diner," which had been "her Harvard, her Yale" wherein she learned "all the tricks, when it came to marrying a star" (*Crooner,* p. 20).

The following quote is a good example of a literary trick meant to create the effect of music, Ishiguro's nocturne evokes. The lush

strings, bluesy horns of Sarah Vaughan's 'Lover Man' contrast to Emily's confessional discourse, a reminder of Charles Ray's deliberate ambiguity from the song which provides the title of the story:

> 'You know, Raymond, when you're at a party, at a dance. And it's maybe a slow dance, and you're with the person you really want to be with, and the rest of the room's supposed to vanish. But somehow it doesn't. It just doesn't. You know there's no one half as nice as the guy in your arms. And yet … well, there are all these people everywhere else in the room. They don't leave you alone. They keep shouting and waving and doing daft things just to attract your attention. "Oi! How can you be satisfied with that?! You can do much better! Look over here!" It's like they're shouting things like that all the time. And so it gets hopeless, you can't just dance quietly with your guy. Do you know what I mean, Raymond?'[…]. I wish they'd just lay off, all these gatecrashers. I wish they'd just lay off and let us get on with it.' (*Come Rain or Come Sunshine,* pp. 84-85).

As subjective as Raymond was (there are enough hints about the narrator's attraction towards Emily), he, like Jan in the previous story, like Charles Ray (the two protagonists' intended alibis) knows and understands more that he says. His unreliable stance, conflating both the "picaro" and the "clown" types (Riggan's terms, 1981, quoted in Nünning, 2008: 95), contributes to creating a movement of apparent happiness evocative of the tranquil transitions from sadness to hopefulness in a nocturne.

The bucolic landscape of *Malvern Hills* reminiscent of Elgar's symphonies is a contrapuntal detour promissory of lasting safety, real authenticity and honesty. Disappointed in the shallow, inauthentic London scene, the narrator, a young aspiring musician, goes to spend the summer at Malvern Hills, his childhood place, where his sister and brother-in-law had a cafe, in the hope that he will be able to compose new songs for his return to London in the autumn. There, he meets Tilo and Sonja, a Swiss middle-aged couple of professional musicians who get enthusiastic when listening to the narrator's songs. In the narrator's case the beauty of landscape relates to his nostalgic representations from childhood, despite some bad memories too (his parents' separation): "I found myself wandering in the hills practically every day, sometimes with my guitar if I was sure it wouldn't rain. I liked in particular Table Hill and End Hill, at the north end of the range, which tend to get neglected by day-trippers. There I'd

sometimes be lost in my thoughts for hours at a time without seeing a soul. It was like I was discovering the hills for the first time, and I could almost taste the ideas for new songs welling up in my mind" (*Malvern Hills,* p. 94). Besides several harsh chords of disappointment (the deteriorated relationship between the two Swiss musicians and their son; the narrator's incompatibility with his brother-in-law which tells upon his relationship with his sister), the whole piece develops a melancholic serenity suggestive of outdoors, of air, of echo. But not for long. The following excerpt returns us (the reader and narrator alike) to just who we are: human beings for ever going against the current which sooner or later overwhelms us. This liquid modernity of our present times is gnawing at our minds and soul. There is no escape.

> So we come out here. And he says, Sonja, look at these hills, aren't they so beautiful? Aren't we fortunate to come to such a place as this for our vacation? These hills, he says, are even more wonderful than he imagined them when we listen to Elgar. He asks me, isn't this so? Perhaps I become angry again. I tell him, these hills are not so wonderful. It is not how I imagine them when I hear Elgar's music. Elgar's hills are majestic and mysterious. Here, this is just like a park. This is what I say to him, and then it is his turn to be cross. He says in that case, he will walk by himself. He says we are finished, we never agree on anything now. Yes, he says, Sonja, you and me, we are finished. And off he goes! (*Malvern Hills,* pp. 120-121).

Ishiguro's contrapuntal technique in this fragment bases on change of path on both the thematic and the mimetic level. The narrator's/reader's focus, on account of this outburst of anger between the two protagonists, turns onto their own order of experience, and consequently, reception of a range of events leading to limit situations. There is a chilling feeling of assumed guilt and responsibility hovering between the two spouses. The new path introduced in the fragment allows us to examine our own frustrations due to the impossibility of doing all things properly right. In the given situation, it's most likely (a reader who is also a parent can sense it all right) that the devouring pain ("we are finished") is caused by how things have turned out with their son, whom they love dearly, but, only managed to have well provided: their itinerant job of professional singers, which they loved too, wouldn't allow them to be there when needed. Thus, earlier that year when they went to Düsseldorf, where their son lives, he is as

absent from their concert, as they have probably been from his life. This new path reading is almost like listening to Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony*, in E-flat key – an experience, which brings one's sore points to the surface. The multi-movement plot-archetype here takes the following pattern: potential for fulfillment, suffering, followed by resignation, near stasis: "Yes, he says, Sonja, you and me, we are finished."

With the next story, *Nocturne,* the music of regret gives way to a movement of apparent happiness due to comic overtones. At the surface level, it tells the story of Steve, a talented but not exactly a "big-league" saxophonist, who decides to take plastic surgery to become noticed. In the exclusivist Beverly Hills hotel where he is recuperating, he meets Lindy Gardner, the influent ex-wife of the crooner in the first story, who was also all wrapped in bandages, and the two of them go through some extremely funny but awkward situations. For instance, upon deciding to put back an award statuette, Lindy has taken to give Steve as a token of her appreciation for his talent, they end up in a bizarre confrontation on the stage of the ball room where that year's awards giving ceremony was taking place. Lindy, caught red-handed, hides the statuette in a cooked turkey, it too proudly awaiting the public's appreciation.

The contrapuntal game, based on the duality of story and discourse, confronts two divergent viewpoints on the already familiar character Lindy Gardner. The version we figured out in the first story, and reiterated by Steve, from his knowledge of the world, is juxtaposed onto a new path Steve's narration leads us to. Here is the first version of Lindy Gardner, reiterating the image we have formed in the first story:

> here it turns out to be Lindy signing copies of her latest ghosted autobiography. And how was this all achieved? The usual way, of course. The right love affairs, the right marriages, the right divorces. All leading to the right magazine covers, the right talk shows, then stuff like that recent thing she had on the air, I don't remember its name, where she gave advice about how to dress for that first big date after your divorce, or what to do if you suspect your husband is gay, all of that. You hear people talk about her 'star quality', but the spell's easy enough to analyse. It's the sheer accumulation of TV appearances and glossy covers, of all the photos you've seen of her at premieres and parties, her arm linked to legendary people. (*Nocturne,* pp. 137-138).

This pathetic description of all the "Lindy Gardners of this world into vacuous celebrity" (p. 137) is gradually reversed by the unfolding of Lindy's fragile/romantic ego, which she has, all through, bravely and desperately bandaged out of sight. This becomes apparent when she listens to Steve's recording of his singing "The Nearness of You," which brings back sweet memories. Listen to the song which Steve plays and describes for her, so as to understand why Lindy, in a childishly candid manner, thinks of rewarding Steve with the Jazz Musician of the Year award, which she steals for him.

> Our version of "The Nearness of You" – which featured my tenor all the way through – wasn't a hundred miles from Tony Gardner territory, but I'd always been genuinely proud of it. Maybe you think you've heard this song done every way possible. Well, listen to ours. Listen, say, to that second chorus. Or to that moment as we come out of the middle eight, when the band go III-5 to VIx-9 while I rise up in intervals you'd never believe possible and then hold that sweet, very tender high B-flat. I think there are colors there, longings and regrets, you won't have come across before. (*Nocturne,* pp. 153-54).

Steve, this beautiful "clown" – not a George Clooney beauty anyway – , is no more reliable than any of the previous narrators. But, he, even more drastically, contrives to be a moralist and trickster simultaneously; and as he says in the end of the story: "Maybe, like she says, I need some perspective, and life really is much bigger than loving a person" (p. 186).

With the *Cellists*, the last short story of the cycle, we go back to the piazza San Marco, in autumn, to listen to the Godfather theme which, the musician-narrator tells us, had been played three times already. Jan, in the first story, was giving us a vivid description of the tourists' musical tastes too ("Okay, this is San Marco, they don't want the latest pop hits. But every few minutes they want something they recognize, maybe an old Julie Andrew number, or the theme from a famous movie" (*Crooner,* p. 4)). This time, the unnamed narrator, as untrustworthy as the previous co-narrators, plays his whole story in a grave E-flat key, which makes a sharp contrast with its content – rather a tale of mystery and suspense. The narration is more in the hearsay register since the narrator retells things he had learned about some seven years ago. It tells about Tibor, a Hungarian cellist, who had studied at the Royal Academy of Music in London, and spent two years in Vienna under Oleg Petrovic. That summer, he finds himself

in Venice for the Arts and Culture Festival, but he is not much in demand, as it goes for young blooming artists. Back then, Tibor meets Eloise McCormack, an American woman, who recommends herself as a virtuoso, and promises to make him blossom, so that "'[t]he person who'll hear you and realise you're not just another well-trained mediocrity. That even though you're still in your chrysalis, with just a little help, you'll emerge as a butterfly'" (*Cellists,* p. 195-196)

Tibor's 'langue de bois' styling of his excuse of not knowing the woman's name sounds awkward and farfetched: "'it's an honour to meet you. I realise this will seem unbelievable to you, but I beg you to make allowances both for my youth and for the fact that I grew up in the former Eastern bloc, behind the Iron Curtain. There are many film stars and political personalities who are household names in the West, of whom, even today, I remain ignorant. So you must forgive me that I do not know precisely who you are'" (pp. 196-197).

Tibor finally falls under the woman's commanding manner of instruction, which, he confesses to his friends, feels like: "'A garden I'd not yet entered. There it was, in the distance. There were things in the way. But for the first time, there it was. A garden I'd never seen before'" (p. 202).

When the woman makes a full breast of her offence of having pretended to be a virtuoso, she also offers an explanation: "What I meant was that I was born with a very special gift, just as you were. You and me, we have something most other cellists will never have, no matter how hard they practise. I was able to recognise it in you, the moment I first heard you in that church" (pp. 211-212).

This "yet to be unwrapped" virtuoso's natural gift, as she puts it, which meant to help the "still not entirely unwrapped" (p. 212) maestro cellist to shed those layers off, prompts a whole range of thoughts and sensations about human creativity, imagination, and learnability. Or, as Tibor tells his tutor, at a certain moment: "'You suggest verbally, then I play. That way, it's not like I copy, copy, copy. Your words open windows for me. If you played yourself, the windows would not open. I'd only copy'" (p. 208).

Ishiguro too suggests verbally. In his case, the story/discourse/path confrontation opens vast windows of consciousness through which the readers can hear the sad illuminating music of truth coming from their most inner feelings.