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The Displacement of Fear: Frail Human Bonds in "Crooner" and "Nocturne"

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ABSTRACT

This paper follows Zygmunt Bauman's observations of the frail human bonds exhausted in his theorization of "liquidity" to examine the vulnerable human connections implied in Kazuo Ishiguro's "Crooner" and "Nocturne." According to Bauman, people living in the liquid modern world cannot but experience the uncanny frailty of human bonds—the feeling of insecurity that frailty inspires and the conflicting desires that feeling prompts to tighten the bonds yet keep them loose. The human bonds only need to be loosely tied, so that they can be untied right afterwards when settings change. Connections thus become virtual relations because they are easy to enter and to exit. Immersed in the realm of liquid love, can dwellers in the liquid modern society prevent themselves from the fear of fixed connections by getting used to the virtual relations, or, project their anxieties of not being able to relate to "people in the know"? Characters in "Crooner" and "Nocturne," the habitants in the liquid society, are afraid of being left alone, so they have to find others like them to assist them in unraveling or unpacking the liquid fear and to draw from the knowledge that they are not alone in their efforts to cope with the quandaries. If tomorrow they have to live without the security of togetherness they experience today, Ishiguro's liquid strangers will still choose, with a view to a rosy picture in the realm of liquid love, to relate again without little delay.

KEY WORDS: liquid modernity, liquid fear, frail human bonds, uncanny, mixed blessings

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置換恐懼：〈低吟歌手〉與〈夜曲〉中脆弱的人際紐帶

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摘　要

本篇論文擬借用齊格蒙・包曼「液態」概念，探討石黑一雄新作〈低吟歌手〉與〈夜曲〉中脆弱的人際紐帶。根據包曼的主張，生活在液態現代社會的人們都是身處在脆弱人際紐帶所引發的詭異情境中，因為液態社會裡人際紐帶的韌度降低，但它流動的力度卻讓人更靈活地彼此維繫，更靈活的人際關係是否能讓深陷液態之愛的男男女女克服就此被綁住的「恐懼」，抑或只是用不同的方式呈現焦慮？兩個短篇故事中的主角都因害怕孤單所以要找人同行，但新的不安卻從別處湧現，這種揮之不去的液態恐懼打破了原有的秩序與體制，導致他們幾近丑角的荒謬行徑，但在荒誕的背後卻是怕被遺棄的淒涼。如果明天就必須鬆開維繫此刻人際關係的安全帶，石黑一雄筆下的液態陌生人們仍會為追求生命遠景，毫不遲疑地繼續在液態愛的國度裡，尋找下一個可與之連結的人際紐帶。

關鍵詞：液態現代性、液態恐懼、脆弱人際紐帶、詭異、憂喜參半的恩賜

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"Crooner" and "Nocturne," collected in Kazuo Ishiguro's latest work, *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009), lay bare the frailty of human bonds with resonant musical notes. Music serves as a binding force in *Nocturnes*, though the five short pieces are not reflections substantially inspired by music. They all serve to look into the liquid strangers' dealings with success and failure, fading relationships, "the conflict between what music promises and what life delivers" (Fleming), and their fear of uncertainty. Listening to the melodious but plaintive notes composed by liquid strangers to articulate their stories of fear, we also involve ourselves in experiencing the frailty of human bonds in the age of liquid modernity. This paper relies on Zygmunt Bauman's conceptualization of liquid modernity in its examination of the dangers that threaten one's place in a world of uncertainty where human relations find references to the sentiment of insecurity that dangers of uncertainty incur. The fears generated by elastic but elusive human bonds in the age of uncertainty will also be analyzed in order to understand the fear-inspired actions of liquid strangers and their anxiety to displace fear. In an attempt to discuss the vulnerability of human relations implied in "Crooner" and "Nocturne," this paper further aims to illustrate the pertinence of applying a sociological perspective to the reading of contemporary literary texts. Bauman utilizes the term "liquidity" to elucidate what we presently experience as globalization, while Ishiguro employs music as a literary trope to demonstrate the free-floating, unanchored and unannounced fears in the time of uncertainty. He also appropriates the metaphor of the nocturne, a musical composition inspired by or evocative of night, to placate the outraged citizenry and the unconsoled strangers that the chaos and the melancholy evoked by night or by the unknown would expectantly subside as the dawn comes. To prepare for disengaging before starting to connect, accordingly, becomes natural as the law of survival in the liquid modern world. A sociological approach to the liquefaction of human networks and the symbolic meaning of music in literature are mutually echoed throughout Ishiguro's stories of music and nightfall. Even though the signifier and the signified may be ruptured in the signification process, their reflexive and referential meanings experimentally open a crevice for a rhizome to bring different regimes of signs into play.

Living in an era of uncertainty, no one can escape from a constant state of anxiety about dangers that could strike unexpectedly at any moment. The

danger of uncertainty thus brings to light the risk one has to take in dealing with unpalatable and undesirable consequences, of which one's capacity to calculate the probability is very often tested or even diminished**.** The feeling of being unable to estimate probability jeopardizes one's grasp of the manageable and therefore evokes the most compelling human emotions, that is, fear. Fear is the name we give to our uncertainty in the face of danger, and the unfathomable fear of uncertainty, whether it is the fear of natural disasters, of environmental catastrophes, or of frantic terrorist attacks, radically explains Bauman's "liquid modern age," in which one's ignorance of what the threat is and one's incapacity to determine what can or cannot be done frustrate the controlling forces rampant in the modern age. As "uncertainty and anguish born of uncertainty are globalization's staple products," (Bauman, *Wasted Lives* 66), how do the liquid strangers depicted in "Crooner" and "Nocturne" calculate the risks of uncertainty? What maneuvers do they deploy to protect themselves from the most threatening and fearsome chaotic situations of distancing and engaging? Why is the need to displace fear imminent? Can fear be replaced so that the liquid strangers may eventually settle in a place in which they feel more secure and self-confident than the one from which they launched the journey to find, in words of Bauman, "people 'in the know'" (*Liquid Love* x)?

In an interview with Keith Tester, Bauman reiterates the essentiality of terming the time of uncertainty "liquid modernity." He starts with an explication as to how the word "postmodernity" hinders our understanding of the "discontinuity in continuity" (Bauman and Tester 97). Postmodernity, Bauman says, is generally accepted as the end of modernity, "leaving modernity behind, being on the other shore." But what we are encountering goes flagrantly counterclockwise. According to Bauman, we are "as modern as ever, obsessively 'modernizing' everything we can lay our hands on" (97). We have thus come to a dilemma: what seems to be the same turns out to be different, and what is supposed to continue as a whole is found to be ruptured into discontinuous segments. Although Anthony Giddens has tried to untie the knot by suggesting the term 'late modernity,' Bauman finds it difficult to adopt. He tells Tester:

> I never understood how we know that this modernity here and now is 'late,' and how we would go about proving or refuting this. Besides, the idea of "late modernity" implies the same as

> the concept of postmodernity: one cannot speak of a 'late' phase of a process unless one assumes that the process has fizzled out and that therefore you can eye the 'whole of it.'(97)

In contrast, Ulrich Beck's "second modernity" is considered a better term, but it says "nothing about the difference between the 'second' modernity and the 'first,'" and therefore, the term itself is brandished as "an empty container inviting all sorts of contents" (97). On the other hand, George Balandier's "*surmodernité*" seems more acceptable to Bauman, though the English translation does not give the term as such solidity as it has in its original French version. *To such an extent,* Bauman maintains that the term "liquid modernity" serves to cause less semantic confusion about contemporary trends under the trope of "postmodernity" because liquid modernity "points to what is continuous (melting, disembedding) and discontinuous (no solidification of the melted, no re-embedding) alike," which he finds "suitable and useful" for the time being (97-8).

Bauman has tried to make explicit the idea of "liquid modernity" in the book under the same title *Liquid Modernity* (2000). He examines some social issues which have been widely attended to in modern times in order to "find out what has been changed and what has remained unscathed because of the advent of the 'liquid' phase" (98). The concept of liquid modernity, asserts Bauman blatantly, helps "'make sense' of the changes as well as of the continuities" in a world that is prone to be free of fences, barriers, fortified borders and checkpoints (98), because what is happening at present is, he emphasizes, "a redistribution and reallocation of modernity's 'melting powers.'" The solids bond individual choices in collective projects and actions, while the liquids, one variety of fluids, undergo a continuous change in melting the patterns of communication and co-ordination between individually conducted life principles as well as the political actions of human collectivities. Likewise, while bonding signifies "the stability of solids," melting indicates the changeability of solids which denies the solids to resist liquefaction. "Melting the solids" then casts off the "'irrelevant' obligations standing in the way of rational calculation of effects" and leaves the complex network of social relations "unstuck, [. . .] bare, unprotected, unarmed and exposed," incapable of resisting the progressive untying of bonds from traditional political, ethical and cultural entanglements (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* 2). "Melting the solids" also precipitates a new order that is to be

"more solid" than the orders it replaced, because the new order renders whatever might have happened in a world emphasizing the totality of human life "irrelevant and ineffective" as long as the "relentless and continuous" reproduction of that order is concerned (2-6).

The "melting of solids" has therefore been cast in a new light. What is happening at the present time, the time of liquid modernity, is "a redistribution and reallocation of modernity's 'melting powers'" (6). "Configurations, constellations, patterns of dependency and interaction" (6) are all thrown into the melting pot in order to be subsequently recast and relocated. Liquid modernity is the phase of "breaking the mould" in the history of inherently "transgressive, boundary-breaking, all-eroding modernity" (6). Undoubtedly, Bauman continues, when a mould is broken there will always be another one to replace it. By the same token, people are released from their old cages only to be cautioned "in case they fail to relocate themselves…in the ready-made niches of the new order" (7). The task free individuals have to confront, therefore, is to utilize their new freedom to "find the appropriate niche and to settle there through conformity" by steadfastly following the rules and modes of conduct identified as "right and proper" for the location (7).

Liquid modernity is an epoch of distancing, while solid modernity **is** an era of mutual engagement and entanglement. It is its lightness of being that liquid modernity frees the individual from the cage of solidity and makes the most elusive call the shots. While the most elusive rule the patterns of communication and co-ordination between individually conducted life principles and the political actions of human collectivities, one would possibly fall prey to an endless facile escape accompanied by hopeless chase. This free floating life strategy seems appealing to the liquid modern inhabitant for its flexibility and expansiveness, but it paradoxically summons his or her fear of dangers—the danger of uncertainty and the danger of insecurity. The dangers one dreads most in a liquid modern society, Bauman points out, are of three kinds. Some put the body and the possessions in jeopardy, while others threaten "the durability and reliability of the social order on which security of livelihood (income, employment), or survival in the case of invalidity or old age, depend" (*Liquid Fear* 3). Then there are dangers that threaten one's place in the world—"a position in the social hierarchy, identity (class, gender, ethnic, religious), and more generally an immunity to social degradation and exclusion" (4). One's vulnerability to dangers in the liquid modern time

haunts one with no visible reason when the dangers one should be afraid of can be detected everywhere but are nowhere to be found for sure. Life in the liquid modern time, therefore, is anything but "fear-free," and the liquid modern setting in which it is bound to be conducted is "anything but free of dangers and threat" (8). The struggle against fears in the liquid modern setting turns out to be "a lifelong task," while fear-triggering dangers are widely believed to be "permanent, *undetachable* companions of human life" (8; emphasis original). Succinctly put, life in a liquid modern society has become a long and intense struggle against the potentially devastating impact of fears, and against the dangers that make one fearful. Even so, Bauman advises that one see the struggle as a continuous search for maneuvers and expedients allowing one to delay or postpone, even if temporarily, the imminence of dangers. Or better yet, to "shift the worry about them onto a side burner where they might, hopefully, fizzle out or stay forgotten for the duration" (8). After all, what one should delay is "*frustration*, not *gratification*" (8; emphasis original).

There is, however, a probability that one cannot obtain what one wants and procures obnoxiously something "different and utterly unpleasant," something he would rather stay clear of (10). These undesirable consequences come "unanticipated," and catch one unprepared. But it is precisely the consequences which one can predict that make one worried, and it is those same consequences that one can struggle to escape. Likewise, it is exactly the undesirable consequences of such a "pre-visible" kind that can be filed in the category of risks (10). Risks, according to Bauman, "are the dangers whose probability we *can* (or believe that we can) calculate: risks are the *calculable* dangers. Once so defined, risks are the next best thing to . . . certainty" (10; emphasis original). That "calculability," however, does not mean predictability. Bauman reminds us:

> What is being calculated is only the *probability* that things go wrong and disaster strikes. Calculations of probability say something reliable about the spread of effects of a large number of similar actions, but are almost worthless as a means of prediction when they are (rather illegitimately) used as a guide for one specific undertaking. Probability, even most earnestly calculated, offers no certainty that the dangers will or will not be avoided in *this* particular case here and now or *that* case

> there and then. But at least the very fact that we have done our computation of probabilities . . . can give us the courage to decide whether the game is or is not worth the candle, and offer a measure of reassurance, however unwarranted. Getting the probabilities right, we have done something reasonable and perhaps even helpful; now we "have reason" to consider the probability of bad luck too high to justify the risky measure, or too low to stop us taking our chances. (10-11; emphasis original)

Confronting the risks of dangers is comparatively related to living in the fog. Living in the fog, one targets and focuses precautional efforts on the discernable and imminent dangers—"dangers that *can* be anticipated and *can* have their probability computed" (11). Nevertheless, the most awesome and fearsome dangers by far are precisely those that are "*impossible*, or excruciatingly *difficult*, to anticipate: the *un*predicted, and in all likelihood *unpredictable* ones" (11; emphasis original). The most awesome and fearsome dangers of uncertainty strike blindly and indiscriminately and make everyone living in a liquid modern habitat fear dangers which they feel unprepared and defenseless to face. There are, however, other fears even more "horrifying"—the fears of being particularly singled out from the joyous crowd and "condemned to suffer *alone* while all the others go on with their revelries" (18). These fears, Bauman further exemplifies, are very much on a par with the fears of falling out of a fast accelerating vehicle or being thrown overboard, while the rest of the passengers, with their seatbelts securely fastened, find the journey ever more entertaining. These fears are "horrifying" not singly because they are dangers for which one is unprepared and defenseless against but also because they are fears of "a *personal* catastrophe," of being "left behind," of being excluded from the liquid modern scenario (18; emphasis original).

The liquid modern fears of exclusion serendipitously characterize the traits of liquid modern strangers. Exposed in the liquid modern ambience, everyone is a stranger to most of the people he or she meets, Dennis Smith indicates in his study of Zygmunt Bauman's exploration of the nature of modernity and postmodernity (161). Notwithstanding the presence of strangers described by Julia Kristeva as "strangers to ourselves" (182-83) and

of hose depicted by Sara Ahmed as "bodies out of place" (39),[1] liquid modern strangers are neither neighbors nor aliens; instead, they have features of both (Bauman, *Life in Fragments* 88). They remain close by in space as neighbors, while remaining distant and unfamiliar as aliens. One way to respond to strangers, Bauman proposes, is to treat them as "*flâneurs* or *strollers*," who roam around to enjoy human comedies. The *flâneurs* are, as Smith observes in his study of Bauman, "strangers among *strangers*" who feel "no particular moral responsibility for those providing the entertainment" (161-62; emphasis original). They have replaced and displaced modern pilgrims who stride purposefully towards a clear destination to fulfill a clearly defined mission, because the contemporary world is no longer "hospitable" to pilgrims (Bauman, *Life in Fragments* 88). In liquid modern time, we meet and interact with liquid strangers who chase new experiences in new places while reducing the risks that the new experiences bring on their way to enjoyment. They return home after each excursion, although the sense of "home" becomes obscured by the feeling of being constantly on the move. Their home sickness meets a strong challenge from the "fear of *home-boundedness*" (97; emphasis original) and the fear of "living together" (Bauman, *Liquid Love* 29) because no one knows in advance "whether living together will turn out to be a thoroughfare or a cul-de-sac" (*Liquid Love* 30). To avoid being permanently disturbed by remorse, liquid strangers must leave behind a game that is concluded, moving straight on to the next without grudges. On account of this, they avoid everything that is as "solid and durable" as "a bond of affinity" that proclaims the intention of "making the bond like that of kinship" (29). The outcome of this new ethos of intimacy or kinship is the "substitution of 'shared identity' for 'shared interests.'" (Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* 59). To find people with "shared interests," the "people 'in the know'" as Bauman calls them in *Liquid Love* (x), would most often be treated as an expedient to displace the fear of being engulfed in the feelings of insecurity and uncertainty that frail human bonds inspire.

[1] For a further elaboration of Kristeva's "strangers to ourselves" and Ahmed's "bodies out of place," please refer to my book on Ishiguro's narratives of the "homeless strangers" (Wang 20-29). As Kristeva urges us to recognize the "strangers within us," she in effect proposes that strangers function to establish and define the self. In like manner, Ahmed extends Kristeva's Freudian reading of strangers by using a Lacanian model of the mirror stage to consider how the form of bodies is not given or pre-determined. It preferably involves "a temporal and spatial process of misrecognition and projection," whereby the form of bodies becomes distinguished from the other and the stranger becomes recognized as "the body out of place" (Ahmed 39).

Human bonds in liquid modern society are bound to be dismantled and melted from established politics, ethics, and cultural bindings, Bauman maintains. This prompts the liquid strangers to re-consider what is meant by freedom and security. The need to secure a relationship gives rise to the desire to tighten the bond. Yet, the state of "being related 'for good'" is something liquid strangers are alert to. They fear that such fixation of human bonds would either threaten their freedom to relate or bring burdens and pressures that they "neither feel able nor are willing to bear" (*Liquid Love* viii). They must "tie together whatever bonds they want to use as a link to engage with the rest of the human world by their own efforts with the help of their own skills and dedication," but none of the bonds they use to connect or fill the gap are vouched for its duration in the liquid modern scenario (viii). On ground of this, the bonds simply need to be "loosely tied, so that they can be untied again, with little delay, when the settings change" (vii). This is how they dislodge themselves from the fears incurred by uncertainty: before tying the knot, loosening is already anticipated.

Bauman's sociological perspective on the frailty of human bonds in liquid modern society can be propitiously applied to the examination of the bygone jazz singer in "Crooner" and the jobbing tenor man in "Nocturne." As Ishiguro says in "Faber Podcast Special," the musicians in *Nocturnes* either plan for a comeback or fend off a comedown because their stories take place "after the fall of the Berlin Wall but before 9/11, [a] time of . . . complacency when people thought they could afford to be apolitical and ahistorical" (Miller). Tony Gardner and Steve are both dismayed at the emergency of having to terminate a long-term relationship, but they also find themselves reluctant to stay connected in a relationship before it turns stale. This fluctuation between the desire to tighten the bonds and the fear of being tied up makes people in the liquid society, and Bauman's "our contemporaries" (*Liquid Love* viii), despair at such predicament, which promises them nothing but their own wits and feelings of being easily disposed. To ward off uncertainty, and more importantly, to displace the fear of insecurity as they believe they can, they seek for "the security of togetherness" and for a "helping hand" in a moment of trouble (viii). They must launch the journey to relate with no delay. Being on the move is imminent for the liquid modern men and women to confront with the anxieties of living together and apart.

In a liquid modern society where "individualization" is valued, Bauman

believes that relationships are "mixed blessings." They oscillate between a sweet dream and a nightmare, and there is no telling when one alternates with the other. "Most of the time the two avatars cohabit—though at different levels of consciousness" (*Liquid Love* viii). Because relationships are perhaps "the most common, acute, deeply felt and troublesome incarnations of ambivalence" (viii), they have become "one of the main engines" of the current "counselling boom" (ix). Denizens of liquid modernity cannot go "unassisted" to "unpack or unravel" the fixedness and complexity of relationships, so they turn to consultants to "square the circle: to eat the cake and have it, to cream off the sweet delights of relationship while omitting its bitter and tougher bits; how to force relationship to empower without disempowering, enable without disabling, fulfilling without burdening" (ix). They simply want to taste the sweetness of a relationship that is formed of loose ties and to move on without the unfavorable bitterness of burdened fixation.

Blissfully, consultants are willing to offer a hand in a time of plight. They are confident that "the demand for their counsels will never run dry since no amount of *counselling* could ever make a circle non-circular and thus amenable to being squared" (*Liquid Love* ix). Their counsels are large in number, but the quality of the advice contained within them serves to no more than merely "raise common practice to the level of common knowledge" (ix). Yet, this is ample enough for the recipients of the advice to be grateful. They leaf through the "relationship" columns of glossy magazines and newspapers to:

> hear what they have been wishing to hear from people 'in the know,' since they were too timid or ashamed to aver it in their own name; to pry into the doings and goings on of 'others like them' and draw whatever comfort they can manage to draw from the knowledge endorsed-by-experts that they are not alone in their lonely efforts to cope with the quandary. (ix-x)

The readers therefore learn from other readers' experience recycled by the consultants that they may try "top pocket relationships"—bring out relationships when they need them and push deep down in the pocket when they do not. Relationships are also like condensed juice. They are distasteful and may do harm to health when devoured in concentration, so "relations

should be diluted when consumed" (x). They are distasteful and may do harm to the health when devoured in concentration, so "relations should be diluted when consumed" (x). In light of this, the "semi-detached couples" (SDCs) are henceforth praised as "'relationship revolutionaries who have burst the suffocating couple bubble.'" No matter whether from the experiences of the "people in the know," or "others like them," what the recipients of advice learn is that commitment, "long-term commitment" in particular, is "the trap that the endeavour 'to relate' should avoid more than any other danger." As one anonymous expert counselor informs readers, "'when committing yourself, however half-heartedly, remember that you are likely to be closing the door to other romantic possibilities which may be more satisfying and fulfilling.'" Another expert even more flagrantly suggests: "'Promises of commitment are meaningless in the longer term. . . . Like other investments, they wax and wane. . . . If you wish "to relate," keep your distance; if you want fulfillment from your togetherness, do not make or demand commitments'" (qtd. in Bauman, *Liquid Love* x). One should keep all doors open at any time in order to displace fear of the uncanny frailty of human bonds, albeit vicious cycle of fear and fear-inspired actions, as Bauman writes in *Liquid Fear*, proceed on all accounts, "losing none of [their] vigour" and "coming no nearer to [their] end" (134). The presence of such detestable fear gestated by putative threats of uncertainty ferociously encourages liquid strangers to establish a defense mechanism that may help transfer and transform the fear of concentrated closeness into a willingness to embrace contingent but trustworthy companionship when coming to the threshold of distancing and engaging.

"Crooner" recites a passé musician's fears of disengagement and entanglement. In this overture to Ishiguro's *Nocturnes*, Tony Gardner, an American jazz singer of the old days, attempts to divorce his wife Lindy so as to rekindle people's memory of the "Inimitable Tony Gardner" in the golden time of Sinatra and Dean Martin (*Nocturnes* 8, 21-22). He travels with Lindy to Venice where they spent their honeymoon twenty-seven years previously (11). More significantly, Venice is a place "so obsessed with tradition and the past" and everything here is inclined to turn "upside down" (3). Such obsession and topsy-turviness fortuitously provide a liquid modern setting for Tony to unload the burden of his commitment to Lindy. Tony plans to serenade Lindy for the last time in Venice from a gondola drifting under the

bedroom window of the palazzo in which they are staying for this special occasion. Even though they still love each other, they have to loosen the twenty-seven-year marriage tie and start at once to seek the next human bond to displace the fear of "getting to be a laughing stock," or being labeled as "just some crooner from a bygone era" (31, 16). Tony is so intimidated by the risks of renouncing a long-term relationship that he cannot face alone the "side-effects" or "collateral damage," as Bauman calls the undesirable consequences that arise as one struggles to escape when disengaging (*Liquid Fear* 10). He has to find someone "in the know" to help him subdue or at least stay forgotten for the dangers of uncertainty. Such companionship helps Tony expel the immediate danger and anxiety consequent on the ending of a relationship. What is more profound and subtle is that the help he turns to is a liquid modern stranger, a "stroller" with no distinct moral senses for those providing the beguilement of frail human bonds. The stranger's presence accentuates Tony's awkwardness in not being able to stay in a fear-free relationship in the liquid modern setting, because he is the very person subject to the embarrassment of unpacking the complexity of relationships. Going through the process of squaring the circle with a helping hand, Tony eventually comes up with a measure which can be used, however temporarily, to delay frustration.

Tony's companion is a young guitarist from a former communist country, Janeck. He plays as one of the "gypsies," moving around the piazza and helping out whichever of the main café orchestras needs him (*Nocturnes* 3). In Venice where tradition is stressed in terms of marketability, a guitarist can never be recruited as a regular member in a band, no matter how much they are "needed by the other musicians," because **a** guitar looks "too modern, the tourists won't like it" (3-4). Let alone a foreign guitarist. Not being Italian, still less Venetian, Jan simply plays a supporting role because he does not "quite fit the official bill" (4). The café manager even requires him to keep his mouth shut, so "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" (4). As a foreign guitarist in liquid modern Venice, where "strangers stay and move in close proximity to each other" (Bauman, *Liquid Love* 106), and whose "simultaneous closeness and remoteness" characterize the lives of immigrants in many European countries (Diken 127-28), Jan can do nothing but lead a vagrant life like that of a homeless gypsy, doing odd

jobs to make ends meet. In the case of "Crooner," the foreignness bestowed on the stranger Jan is bound to stay erratic and capricious and therefore labels him an undesirable alien. He is "a threatening figure," and few people can take pleasure from seeing him in modern city life (Sennett 3) even though all "[c]ity life is carried on by strangers among strangers" (Bauman, *Life in Fragments* 126). His unpredictable existence inspires the fear of strangeness and justifies the means city dwellers appropriate to exorcise the threat of unfamiliarity and chase the alien away from home. A stranger like Jan, following Bauman's logic, is the "unknown variable in all equations calculated when decisions about what to do and how to behave are pondered" (*Liquid Love* 106). Even if the stranger does not necessarily become an object of "overt aggression," nor is he openly and fiercely "resented," Jan's presence is nonetheless "discomforting" to the city residents (106). In respect of this, Vittorio the gondolier expresses amicable friendship to Jan's face, but behind his back, he says all kinds of foul things about people he calls "the foreigners from the new countries" (*Nocturnes* 13). Jan is one of the outsiders whom Bauman describes in *Society under Siege* (2002) and later *reemphasizes* in *Wasted Lives* (2004) who are very often treated as "the waste products of globalization" (*Wasted Lives* 66). They come from "far away," but sooner or later manage to settle in the neighborhood. They are feared and resented by the city residents, because they do their job "without consulting those whom its outcome is bound to affect." The citizens have therefore every reason to "feel threatened" (66). Out of such an ambiance of ambivalence, Vittorio regards people of Jan's kind as like a foreign body in the eye. Jan is mindful of Vittorio's prejudice and describes it to his audience:

> [W]e go around ripping off tourists, littering the canals, in general ruining the whole damn city. Some days, if he's in a bad mood, he'll claim we're muggers—rapists, even. I asked him once to his face if it was true he was going around saying such things, and he swore it was all a pack of lies. How could he be a racist when he had a Jewish aunt he adored like a mother? But one afternoon I was killing time between sets, leaning over a bridge in Dorsoduro, and a gondola passed underneath. There were three tourists sitting in it, and Vittorio standing over them with his oar, holding forth for the world to hear, coming out with this very same rubbish. (*Nocturnes* 17)

Paradoxically, upon observing the "grave and solemn" temperament in Tony and the "not at all romantic" caprice in his serenade scheme (13), Vittorio looks for Jan's assistance to reassure him that he is not alone in dealing with the conundrum: "'We've got a strange one here, haven't we, *amico*?'" (17; emphasis original). Having been confronting with the fears of exclusion, Jan at the moment of uncanny human frailty chooses to remain aloof because he is after all one of "the foreigners from the new countries" (13). Vittorio can, Jan says, "meet my eye all he likes, he'll get no camaraderie from me," the foreign body in the city dweller's eye (17). Bauman's exposition of the vulnerability of human relationships aptly describes what Jan the foreign guitarist experiences in liquid modern society; it also explains why Tony Gardner has to establish a loosely tied relationship with Jan to accomplish the mission impossible: to embrace fulfillment from togetherness and set aside the fear of uncertainty when melting the solids. Tony's decision to serenade Lindy "properly" in a "Venice style" (12) at nightfall is not formed out of a romantic whim. What he intends is to duly proclaim the termination of "a long-term commitment" to pave the way for a smooth comeback for himself. After the recital, Tony will seek to start a connection with a young woman who has "had her eye on" Tony for some time. This is how have-been celebrities make successful comebacks —having "young wives on their arms" (31). Tony understands that such a venturesome act would reduce no less anxiety than exposing him to the progressive untying of bonds of social relations and is apparently self-deceiving. Despondently, however, "Tony Gardner" is no longer a household name, and he is at his wit's end in the face of an impasse. He can either stay where he is and "[l]ive on past glories," or "make a lot of changes" for a comeback. Pondering on the gain and the loss involved in making a change, Tony finds the prospect of making a comeback more appealing and compelling because "[p]lenty have [benefited] from my position and [their artistic integrity is] worse [than mine]" (30). Besides, to be excluded from the world of celebrity is something he refuses out of pride in his professionalism, so he tells Jan,

> "I could make a comeback. . . . But a comeback's no easy game. You 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." (30)

Tony's recalcitrance and bittersweet melancholy are shown in his crooning, and extemporaneously, the nocturnal pensiveness delivered in this voice pertinently describes Jan's hesitation in "laying open his heart" to those who regard him as an "undesirable alien":

> [H]is voice came out just the way I remembered it—gentle, almost husky, but with a huge amount of body, like it was coming through an invisible mike. And like all the best American singers, there was that weariness in his voice, even a hint of hesitation, like he's not a man accustomed to laying open his heart this way. (27)

The nocturnal crooning also evokes Jan's memory of his mother. Tony's jazz collections were one of the rare sources of comfort to his beleaguered single mother as she went through the dismal and stringent days in communist Poland. Whenever Jan's mother felt upset, "she put on [Tony's] records and sang along." She would immerse herself in the rhythm, and "it was like she hadn't heard a thing." Remembering his mother and the traumatic past, Jan empathetically associates his mother's plight with Tony's and comforts him: "Your music helped my mother through those times . . . And it's only right it should help you too'" (24). Jan here addresses his comments not only to Tony but to himself as well. Running into Tony Gardner in the topsy-turvy Venice is a "mixed blessing" to Jan. Tony's presence summons up Jan's remote memory of a dejected past and nostalgic sentiment, while his nocturnes Jan's courage of living as a liquid stranger in liquid modern times. In like manner, Jan is the helping hand Tony needs to divorce Lindy with no burning animosities. Tony Gardner uses his vocal songs to connect with Jan, while Jan echoes with his guitar strings. They are bound together by music, with which they find each as the other like me and consequently relieve themselves of the fear of exclusion. However, in a liquid society where no connection promises to stay fast, Tony and Jan are destined to untie the bond in the wake of the night's serenades and start without further ado to relate with the next connection. As for Tony and Lindy, twenty seven years previously the "Inimitable Tony Gardner" had won her with his voice, or to be precise, with the epithet added to his name. With the lapse of time, the aged jazz master now has to use his evanescent vocal music to liberate himself from the marriage tie. His nocturnes reveal not only his high hopes for a comeback but also his hopes for Lindy to be able to "get

out" and "find love again, [then] make another marriage . . . before it's too late" (31). Upon hearing "One for My Baby," the last repertoire of the night's nocturnal recitals, Lindy concedes her … and sobs in her room (28). Although she still loves Tony as much as he does her (29), it is time to bid farewell. To "get out while she has time" *consummates* her relationship with Tony; she must "give it a go," such she avows to Steve, the saxophone player in "Nocturne" (182).

Also troubled by the entanglement of uncanny human bonds is the jobbing tenor man Steve in "Nocturne." Like Jan in "Crooner," Steve is either a second cast or a makeshift, though, according to his manager, Bradley Stevenson, he has "it" in him to be "big-league" (127). For this odd job, he shuttles among restaurants and pubs to play whatever caters to the audience's taste in order to earn some meager but decent money to support his family. He plays jazz only in his cubicle, the smallest room in his rented apartment which is sound-proofed with "foam and egg-trays and old padded envelopes" that Bradley sent from his office (127-28). Whenever he encounters setbacks, he picks up his tenor saxophone and retreats into his little music world, "taking care of personal business no one else would ever care to come across" (128, 132). Undoubtedly, Steve's talent is recognized by Bradley, who Steve thinks "isn't so big-league himself," but not having a camera face is another matter from a professional perspective. The accepted or even favored performers may not have half of Steve's technique or "a signature sound" the way Steve does, but they still make their name because they "look right" (129). Steve looks too ugly, which explains why he fails to become a big-league (129). From Bradley's professional angle, an ugly man is loved only when his ugliness is "sexy," but "You, Steve, you're . . . dull, loser ugly. The wrong kind of ugly" (129). Considering Steve's marketability, Bradley suggests that Steve get plastic surgery. When Steve relays Bradley's advice as a joke to his wife Helen, her first response is to give him a warm hug and tell him that he is "the most handsome guy in the universe" (129). Then she tries to convince Steve to believe the truth in Bradley's theory and says: "Everyone's doing it. And you, you have a *professional* reason. Guy wants to be a fancy chauffeur, he goes and buys a fancy car. It's no different with you!" (130; emphasis original). Steve at this bashful moment chooses to believe the truth in his talent. He declines to have plastic surgery not only because he is devoid of money, but also because he is too confident of his musical talents to

compromise with his insistence in the artistic values. For such reason, when he remembers the whole thing on the third day of his recovery from the surgery and relates to the absent "you" his story of fear, Steve defends:

> Okay, I've told you before, I'm no stickler for artistic integrity. I play every kind of bubble-gum for the pay. But [Bradley's] proposition was of another order, and I did have some pride left. Bradley was right about one thing: I was twice as talented as most other people in this town. But it seemed that didn't count for much these days. Because it has to do with image, marketability, being in magazines and on TV shows, about parties and who you ate lunch with. It all made me sick. I was a musician, why should I have to join in this game? Why couldn't I just play my music the best way I knew, and keep getting better, if only in my cubicle, and maybe some day, just maybe, genuine music lovers would hear me and appreciate what I was doing. What did I want with a plastic surgeon? (131)

A few days later, Helen calls straight from Seattle to inform Steve that she is moving in with Chris Prendergast, for whom she has carried a torch since high school and is now a successful businessman. Like Lindy Gardner, Helen is still sentimentally attached to her husband at the moment of untying (132, 182). But the next human bond, free of the dangers of commitment, is so enticing that the "semi-detached" wife chooses to "burst the suffocating couple bubble" with no delay (*Liquid Love* x). Fortunately, this astute Helen nurtured by Hollywood celebrity culture is not yet the nonchalant Helen of Troy who detaches herself from the past without remorse or penitence. She tells Steve that Chris has offered to cover all the expenses for Steve to get his face fixed, hoping that this "big favor" (*Nocturnes* 133) that she has asked for him would help them break their relationship "without harm and with a clear conscience" (*Liquid Love* xi). Helen's promises of commitment have been broken and become shards of memories; the musical talent about which Steve is complacent is compromised because of his loser ugliness. The jobbing tenor man is now "at [his] wit's end" (*Nocturnes* 182). What else can he do but concede to Helen's theory of how to get to the top: "Once my face was fixed, there'd be nothing holding me back, [Helen] said. I'd go right to the top, how could I fail, with the kind of talent I had?" (132). The ballad of Tony and

Lindy Gardner echoes here like a "bittersweet refrain, full of the sadness of two lovers whose bond is broken by the brute strength of market forces" (House). Steve has to make changes and untie the marriage bond for another go. He needs someone like Lindy Gardner, one of "the people 'in the know'," to pull him out of the trough.

After the operation, it is arranged for Steve to stay in the exclusive wing of a luxury hotel that charges twice as much as an expensive nursing home to recuperate, and Lindy Gardner from "Crooner," recently divorced from Tony Gardner, happens to be his next door neighbor. Connecting to Lindy, another patient like him staying in a deluxe hotel waiting for the bandages to come off, is a "mixed blessing" for Steve. When Steve is physically and psychologically distraught during post-plastic surgery convalescence (135-36), Lindy earnestly expresses her wish to relate by sending him an invitation note: "'[The nurse] tells me you're getting weary of this high life. I'm that way too. How about you come and visit? [. . .] See you at five or I'll be heartbroken'" (138). At the moment of plight, one should be grateful of having met someone who could understand and would probably help him mount to the peak with merely a few phone calls (147). But for a musician as talented as Steve, his helping hand should never be someone like Lindy Gardner: "a person with negligible talent—okay, let's face it, she's *demonstrated* she can't act, and she doesn't even pretend to have musical ability" (137; emphasis original). Her "star quality" is not accumulated by talent but by massive exposure on TV, in glossy magazines, and at celebrity parties (137). The thinking of Lindy Gardner alone is sufficient to indicate the degree of Steve's "moral descent" (138). In spite of this, to rid off the fear of uncertainty that disengaging would provoke, Steve still chooses to proceed with Lindy and "lay[s] open his heart" to her as Tony does in Venice (27). He plays for Lindy "The Nearness of You," the only song featuring his tenor saxophone throughout the album.

The day before Steve meets with Lindy, an old friend of his comes with the news that Jake Marvell, the saxophonist they worked with together years ago in San Diego, is soon receive the award "Jazz Musician of the Year" from "The Simon and Wesbury Music Awards." This sudden and irritating news changes Steve's scornful attitude toward Lindy; now he must obtain Lindy's immediate recognition. Once Lindy likes his music, she can help him win the title with all her connections and "star quality." Unfortunately, as Steve confidently settles on "The Nearness of You" with his tenor as the key tone,

Lindy first "began swaying dreamily to the slow beat," but all of a sudden:

> [S]he was standing there quite still, her back to me, head bent forward like she was concentrating. I didn't at first see this as a bad sign. It was only when she came walking back and sat down with the music still in full flow, I realized something was wrong. Because of the bandages, of course, I couldn't read her expression, but the way she let herself slump into the sofa, like a tense mannequin, didn't look good. (154)

When the song draws to its end, Lindy simply expresses some formulaic gratitude rather than praise or affirmative remarks. Baffled by Lindy's reaction, Steve decides to protect himself from the dangers of uncertainty by retreating as usual to his room in haste. Nonetheless, after a twenty-seven-year marriage is concluded and before a relationship that can send her straight up to the penthouse is established, Lindy, in the time of going between husbands, cannot accomplish her plan of squaring the circle alone. Steve is the only help she can turn to, so she confesses:

> You were mad at me [and left before the chess game finished] because you thought I didn't like your music. Well, that wasn't true. . . . What you played me, that version of "Nearness of You"? I haven't been able to get it out of my head. No, I don't mean head, I mean heart. I haven't been able to get it out of my *heart*. (157; emphasis original)

Lindy invites Steve to listen to "Nearness of You" again, and this time, Lindy chooses to displace her fear of entanglement by playing her version of "Nearness of You":

> [Your version of the song is] sublime. You're a wonderful, wonderful musician. You're a genius. . . .
> I knew it the first time. . . That's why I reacted the way I did. Pretending not to like it, pretending to be snotty? . . . I've always done it, it's something I don't ever seem to get over. I run into a person . . . who's really talented, someone who's just been blessed that way by God, and I can't help it, my first

> instinct is to do what I did with you. . . . I guess it's jealousy. . . . That's the way I am when I meet someone like you. Especially if it's *unexpected*, the way it was today and I'm not ready. I mean, there you are, one minute I'm thinking you're just one of the public, then suddenly you're . . . something else. . . . You had every right to be mad at me. (159; emphasis added)

Lindy worries that she will be "condemned to suffer *alone* while all the others go on with their revelries" (Bauman, *Liquid Fear* 18; emphasis original), so on one of her "midnight walks" she steals the "Jazz Musician of the Year" medal and presents it to Steve, hoping to ease his anxiety of being excluded by having justice prevail (*Nocturnes* 160). Steve appreciates Lindy's effort, but it would be a scandal neither of them could manage if exposed. Consequently, the man and woman, finding each other company in the realm of liquid love, have to search in darkness for a turkey, into whose cavity Lindy instantly stuffs the medal when stopped by the hotel's security guards in the catering-cum-kitchen area (165-67). The tune of "Nearness of You," subsequently, turns sentimental and pathetic:

> 'Look, all I'm saying is that the wrong people end up with the awards. . . . '
> '. . . The trouble with people like you, just because God's given you this special gift, you think that entitles you to everything. . . . You don't see there's a whole lot of other people weren't as lucky as you who work really hard for their place in the world . . .'
> 'So you don't think I work hard? . . . I sweat and heave . . . to come up with something worthwhile, something beautiful, then who is it gets the recognition? Jake Marvell! People like you!'
> 'How . . . dare you! What do I have to do with this? Am I getting an award today? Has anyone *ever* given me a goddamn award? No! . . . I had to watch all of you, all you creeps, going up there, getting the prizes, and all the parents clapping . . .'
> 'No prizes? No prizes? Look at you! Who gets to be famous? Who gets the fancy houses . . .' (166; emphasis original)

What triggers the strings of burlesque discordance is settled in the end.

Steve leaves the award on someone's room-service tray at the door, beside the remains of a stranger's dinner inside the turkey (180). Concluded here are Lindy's deviant behavior and Steve's unbending obstinacy. Now Lindy realizes that she has to reconcile herself to the uncanny frailty of human bonds so as to keep alive her fantasy world with a year-zero face and its tagged values. As a liquid stranger living in a world where people connect and separate incessantly, Lindy knows well the price she has to pay to enjoy the freedom of liquid love. It is out of this awareness that she tells Steve, one of the liquid strangers like her, in all seriousness and earnestness:

> 'Look, sweetie, listen. I hope your wife comes back. I really do. But if she doesn't, well, you've just got to start getting some *perspective*. She might be a great person, but life's so much bigger than just loving someone. You got to get out there, Steve. Someone like you, you don't belong with the public. Look at me. When these bandages come off, am I really going to look at the way I did twenty years ago? I don't know. And it's a long time since I was last between husbands. But I'm going to go out there anyway and give it a go.' (182; emphasis added)

At this crucial moment, Lindy's counseling eases Steve's fear of displacement and encourages him to anticipate a promising future. Although the road to recovery is still bumpy, and the success along with his new face uncertain, the thirty-nine-year-old Steve has managed to get "used to this life" (184). Before hanging up with Helen, Steve still says "I love you" in the routine way common between a couple. Steve has eventually come to feel more secure than when he started the journey of separating from Helen as he agrees to Lindy's advice: "Maybe, like [Lindy] says, I need some perspective, and life really is much bigger than loving a person. Maybe this really is a turning point for me, and the big league's waiting for me" (184-85). It is time for Steve to start relating again with no further delay.

The musicians in "Crooner" and "Nocturne" await the moment to displace their fears of uncertainty at nightfall. They are the denizens of liquid modern society trying or having tried to sketch perspectives for a decent life. They are also the passers-by constantly shuttling between engaging and separating because they believe they can afford to be "apolitical and ahistorical" after the fall of the Berlin Wall and before rise of terrorist attacks

such as 9/11. The musicians in *Nocturnes*, thus, evaluate success and failure in terms of whether their dreams are fulfilled, as Ishiguro tells Miller (Miller). In "Crooner," Tony Gardner's dream is accomplished, but he is so unyielding that he cannot tolerate that the sweetness of success has turned sour. He chooses to separate from Lindy in exchange for a comeback, though the result he intends seems far from its full bloom at the moment of distancing and engaging. The foreign guitarist Jan is his helping hand as well as a mixed blessing, for he assists Tony to waive the risks of renouncing a long-term marriage bond. Closely related to the situation is that of the divorcee Lindy and the jobbing tenor man Steve in "Nocturne." Steve is waiting for his big league, while Lindy for her big break to check into the penthouse of some luxurious hotel with her future celebrity husband. They both wish to connect loosely with someone in the know and try again with their new plastic faces. Whether their dreams can be realized or not, the men and women in these two stories play nocturnes to disclose their fears of exclusion their strategies to displace the fear that they feel in every gathering and parting. Zygmunt Bauman's theorization of liquid modernity and the liquidization of human relationships help conceptualize what the residents of a liquid modern society have been experiencing as liquid strangeness. Yet, Bauman seems to say little about the future of the liquid strangers. Through "Crooner" and "Nocturne," and the *nocturnes* his characters play at nightfall, Ishiguro reiterates what the French Romantic writer Victor Hugo's words in *William Shakespeare* (1864): "Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and cannot remain silent" (91). This refusal to remain silent explains why music is so enticing to Ishiguro's liquid strangers. They are drawn to music, because each theme song they choose conveys something that cannot be expressed by words. Their music begins when words end. Ishiguro not only captures in words the evanescent qualities of music and dusk, but also pictures the future for the men and women who decide to habituate themselves in the realm of liquid love and liquid modernity in which they learn to reconcile their blemished past with the irrevocable memory of the here-and-now. The wounds of separation may leave there with scars, and the marks of binding would probably turn to stains. The liquid strangers would argue against Julia Kristeva's defense that "the foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners" (192). What Kristeva intends in her particular context is to contaminate the pristine rules that the state apparatus would make for an

ordered society. Ishiguro's stories thus demonstrate in a relevant way that liquid strangers can manage to relativize foreignness in a liquid modern scenario and acknowledge that there are always already foreigners around in whichever place they stray or stay. For Tony, Jan, Steve, Helen, and Lindy, the bliss of life is perspective, and "life's [indeed] so much bigger" (*Nocturnes* 182) than staying distraught with the uncanny human bonds when all the others continue with their revelries to relate.

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