Remembrance of Things Past: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and the Landscape of Nostalgia

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Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* examines the precarious balance between public and private memories and how memory is tinted with self-deception, guilt, pride, and nostalgia. The novel is structured as the first-person narrative of Stevens, the elderly butler of Darlington Hall near Oxford, who undertakes a six-day excursion into the English West Country—a journey that takes him through Salisbury, Dorset, Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall and finally ends in Weymouth. While a first-person narrative generally creates an impression of authentic utterance, Ishiguro's novel subverts this idea and shows how a first-person narrative can reveal as well as conceal things. Born in Nagasaki, Ishiguro deftly uses the premise of post-war dilemmas as the launching ground of the novel. He explained his interest in first-person narrators in an interview where he stated: "things like memory, how one uses memory for one's own purposes, one's own ends, those things interest me deeply."[1] Ishiguro's novel is as much about unreliability as it is about the conflict "between the public and the private personae, between professional and human duty, between the facade of duty and the expression of emotion."[2] This paper will explore the crossover between and gradual dismantling of two significant arenas in the novel—the landscape of memory within which Stevens's self-deceptive narrative unfolds, and the landscape of mythical England against which the complex political turmoil of the inter-war period is juxtaposed.

The frame story is set in 1956. Stevens is the ageing butler of an English stately home, once the residence of Lord Darlington, now

the property of a rich American. Encouraged by his new employer Mr. Farraday, Stevens takes a short holiday in the West Country. His private motive is to make contact with Miss Kenton, the former housekeeper at Darlington Hall during its great days between the Wars, when Lord Darlington hosted unofficial gatherings of high-ranking politicians to discuss the political crisis in Europe. Stevens embarks on the journey with the ostensibly professional purpose of bringing back Miss Kenton. However, the journey lays bare the undercurrent of his repressed desires, and as he travels, he recalls the past.

Stevens's self-deception operates in situations involving three characters to whom he is closely related: his father, Miss Kenton, and Lord Darlington. The narrative of Stevens's memory trip acts as an exposure of the repressed values that unravel at the end of the novel, on the sixth day of his journey. As the story progresses, he reveals to the implied reader and to himself more and more details that destabilize his previous positions. At the end there are two strains which work simultaneously and almost antithetically within Stevens's mind: the need to "redress" his culpability in the scheme of things and the wish to "reject remorse"[3] and make do with the 'remains of the day.'

One of the prominent features of the narration of self-deceiving characters exemplified by *The Remains of the Day* is their vacillation between elusiveness and authenticity. On the one hand, Stevens acknowledges that his recollections may not be entirely accurate: "It is possible this is a case of hindsight colouring my memory";[4] or "it is hard for me now to recall precisely what I overheard."[5] On the other hand, he is reluctant to acknowledge any details that can undermine his stated version of events. For example, Stevens's affection for Miss Kenton remains in the background until the last chapter. The word 'professional' becomes an important trope in the narrative. Stevens's actions throughout the novel—his omissions, misrepresentations, and evasions—point towards the fact that his self-

imposed garb of professional diligence severely obstructed his ability to exercise his free will, and that he curtailed his life to fit into the template of a perfect butler. Thus, the word 'professional' becomes "either a disguise for other, more emotional motives or a defense for his strangely unemotional behaviour."[6] While he explicitly justifies his visit to Miss Kenton as motivated by professional reasons and interprets certain statements in her letter as evidence of her desire to return to her former position, it becomes increasingly evident that he is also driven by personal motives, and that his interpretation of her letter is a projection of his unarticulated hopes. There is also a certain defensive tone in Stevens's discourse. His frequent use of phrases such as "let me make perfectly clear" and "I feel I should explain" signals his attempt to validate his actions and defend the values that have shaped him, but they simultaneously betray his growing uncertainty about those actions and values. Thus, the discourse of Stevens, according to Kathleen Wall, indicates "something of the preoccupations that have urged Stevens to undergo this narration, and consequently reveal many of the biases inherent in his interpretation of events."[7]

Stevens's unreliability is also seen in the conflict between the scenes he narrates and the interpretations that he assigns to those scenes. The discrepancy between the actual events recounted in the novel and Stevens's commentary on them is due to the value Stevens places on the concept of 'dignity'—a quality which "requires him to repress any feelings that are not 'professional,' or that do not accord with his duty to his master, or that reveal a momentary lapse from perfect dignity."[8] Stevens illustrates his notion of professional dignity and prowess through anecdotes about the restraint exhibited by a butler when faced with a tiger, or about the way in which his father dealt with certain arrogant guests. However, Stevens problematizes this idea by holding on to this definition of dignity even in moments of personal crisis. The restraint his father exercises during the visit of the general whose incompetence is responsible for the death of Stevens's brother indicates "a denial of personal feelings so extreme

as to be disturbing—especially as a model for conducting one's life."[9] Yet Stevens sees this as an exemplary demonstration of dignity and professionalism, and his comments highlight a fundamental conflict between the public and the private man: "The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: . . . he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. It is, as I say, a matter of 'dignity.' "[10]

During his days of driving, Stevens's mind travels into the past, indulging his recollections of the glory days of Darlington Hall in the 1930s when Lord Darlington hosted many highly important foreign visitors on secret political missions. By adopting dignity as his primary value and by abandoning this facade only when he is entirely alone, Stevens proceeds on a path of self-abnegation that precludes any emotional or personal response to moments of crisis. His preconceived idea of dignity hinders his ability to express or analyse his feelings immediately following the death of his father. He avoids dealing with this emotionally difficult situation under the pretext of urgent professional duties. The fact that he grieves is only implied through the passing comments of Young Mr Cardinal and Lord Darlington, and Stevens dismisses his visible distress as "the strains of a hard day."[11] This displacement of personal commentary onto other characters who make note of Stevens's emotions is repeatedly observed in the narrative. According to Wall, "Stevens in some way acknowledges his grief precisely through the reports of others, largely because such reports will not violate his sense of dignity or decorum or will not tear the fabric that he has erected between his private and professional selves."[12] Likewise, after Miss Kenton receives the news of her aunt's death, Stevens notes his failure to offer her his condolences despite his evident concern for her.

Rather, he reprimands Miss Kenton on her failure to execute her professional duties.

While the transitory nature of memory allows omissions, its persistence is seen through the vivid recollection of crucial incidents. For Stevens, the most significant incident is the pivotal conference held at Darlington Hall in 1923. When Lord Darlington asserts his belief that the Treaty of Versailles is overly harsh on Germany and destructive to peace in England, he expresses a personal opinion about a public event. However, the solution that he offers later in the novel is ironic because it proposes the creation of a dangerously hierarchical system of power: "Germany and Italy have set their houses in order by acting.... Look at Germany and Italy, Stevens. See what strong leadership can do if it's allowed to act."[13] This situation, when placed against the backdrop of the Second World War, exposes Lord Darlington's collusion with the Nazi regime, and Stevens's failure to challenge these views makes him complicit in this scheme. The major objective of the 1923 conference is to convince the French delegate, Monsieur Dupont, to speak in favour of relaxations in the Treaty of Versailles during the official conference to be held later that year. The public and the private histories also come together as Stevens experiences this important juncture of national history while his father is on his deathbed. Lilian R. Furst draws attention to Stevens's disproportionate remembrance of "two problems that occur simultaneously on that evening: the blisters on the feet of M. Dupont... and the death of his father."[14] Stevens puts his obligations as a butler over any personal feelings he may have and recalls that evening with "a large sense of triumph" because of his ability to execute his professional duties perfectly in the midst of a grave personal crisis.[15] Seeing the night in the light of his success as a butler and through the lens of his notion of professional dignity allows Stevens to avoid any sense of guilt over his neglect of his father. His pride in his professional success also veils his moral complicity

in the events unfolding in the political arena. The narration again proves unreliable because Stevens fails to admit certain feelings.

There are two things which dilute the effects of Stevens's behaviour. One is his documented ignorance of world affairs and hence of the implications of Lord Darlington's dealings with the Nazis. The other more dominant and immediate one is his unswerving loyalty to his master, which he sees as a prerequisite of his employment. Even when Stevens is told that "the Nazis are manoeuvring [Lord Darlington] like a pawn," he adheres to his standard response: "It is not my place to be curious about such matters."[16] A butler's duty, he reiterates, "is to provide good service. It is not to meddle in the great affairs of the nation."[17] Even when Lord Darlington orders the dismissal of the two Jewish housemaids, Stevens's conduct is geared towards his fixed notion of how a great butler should behave. His decision to cling to his chosen role prompts Miss Kenton to ask, "Why, Mr Stevens, why, why, why do you have to *pretend*?"[18] Steven's compliance effectively becomes a tacit endorsement of Lord Darlington's orders as well as a symptom of his complicity and consequent moral degeneration.

Stevens's unwavering loyalty to Lord Darlington is challenged by his public denial of his association with his former employer during the trip. In the episode at Mortimer's Pond, Dorset, Stevens conceals his previous association with Lord Darlington. Later, he justifies his stance, which further reinforces the oscillation in his constructed narrative. As David Lodge puts it, "The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter. . . . The narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel is not an evil man, but his life has been based on the suppression and evasion of the truth, about himself and about others. His narrative is a kind of confession, but it is riddled with devious self-justification and special pleading, and only at the very end does he arrive at an understanding of himself—too late to profit by it."[19] The psychology

of Stevens's unreliability is complicated, as highlighted by Ishiguro: "He ends up saying the sorts of things he does because somewhere deep down he knows which things he has to avoid."[20]

The novel is anchored in the year 1956, which marks the decisive decline of British power. Ishiguro juxtaposes the days of imperial glory with its decline through Stevens's narrative. At the advent of his journey, Stevens's definition of dignity is presented as a corollary of his time, as he associates it with a complete lack of emotional demonstration. He further draws a parallel between the dignity of the perfect butler and the greatness of the English landscape, with its corresponding lack of excessive or "unseemly demonstrativeness."[21] For Stevens, Lord Darlington's position and demeanour epitomize the idea of greatness. His association with Darlington Hall marks his association with the greatness of England. Stevens views the world not as a hierarchical ladder but as a wheel, with the great houses of England forming the hub of the wheel. Thus, he perceives his unquestioned loyalty to Lord Darlington and his professional excellence as his personal contribution towards the building of the nation. The baggage of such an idea prevents Stevens from identifying the larger resonances of Lord Darlington's actions. As Stevens undertakes his journey at the dawn of the empire's decline, the residues of the past still actively work in the associations he makes. Mr. Farraday's propensity towards banter seems to be a burden for Stevens, and this illustrates his fixed adherence to "an antiquated mode of conduct as well as of speech."[22] Stevens' rootedness in the idea of being a perfect butler hinders his ability to recognize changes in the political climate.

Ishiguro brings in the idea of the old country house in his post-war fiction to subvert what he calls the "nostalgia industry."[23] The country house represents the glory of the past and a sense of historical continuity, which had little resonance in the fragmented aftermath of the Second World War. The only fixture of the country

house is the butler, Stevens, who is unable to let go of a past that has lost its anchorage. He stands as a remnant of a bygone era. In Ishiguro's words, "there is an enormous nostalgia industry going on with coffee table books, television programs, and even some tour agencies who are trying to recapture this kind of old England. The mythical landscape of this sort of England, to a large degree, is harmless nostalgia for a time that didn't exist."[24] The intersection of past memories and present changes in the political milieu provides Stevens with a space that illuminates the "diachronic quality of history."[25] He looks at his present through the shades of the past, and this creates a conflict between his former life of unwavering allegiance to an illusory idea and his gradual movement towards self-realization in the present. In differentiating between mourning and melancholia, Freud defined melancholic identification as a process of becoming the object of loss to compensate for the loss.[26] Stevens's trajectory exemplifies this melancholic identification. His allegiance to the past glory of the British empire and to Lord Darlington as the embodiment of British ideals forces him to reconstruct the past. As a remnant of the past, Stevens emulates and upholds those values as a yardstick and stunts his life to fit into the mould of his fabricated narrative. Even when he is in the employ of Mr. Farraday, he harps on the absence of the necessary functions of dignity in this new regime, because dignity is inextricably linked to Lord Darlington in Stevens's mind.

Stevens's loyalty to Lord Darlington and his activities as a butler in Darlington Hall are based on a form of misinterpretation. As the narrative progresses, it is increasingly evident that Lord Darlington is morally compromised, but Stevens chooses to overlook this. Furst notes that "it is not only time that is scrambled in [Stevens's] set of memories but also levels of significance."[27] When he elaborates on the meeting between Lord Halifax and Herr Ribbentrop that is facilitated by Lord Darlington at Darlington Hall, he glosses

over the seriousness of its political ramifications, choosing instead to focus on the remembered lustre of the perfectly polished silver. His relationship with Miss Kenton is premised on a similar ground of misrepresentation. His misreading of Miss Kenton's letter as an expression of her desire to return to Darlington Hall is in reality his own way to seek anchorage in a past which is absent. Throughout his recollection, he establishes their relationship in terms of professional co-existence. His framing of relationships within set boundaries is a result of his concocted definition of dignity. His final meeting with Miss Kenton punctures this narrative too.

The crucial episodes in Stevens' life are sandwiched between his effort to justify them and his nostalgic yearning for a past which he relentlessly pursues as a driving force for his present and future actions. Ishiguro depicts Stevens's interaction with Harry Smith in the last leg of his journey as a deliberate challenge to Stevens's lofty idea of dignity. While Stevens's notion of dignity involves self-erasure and submission to authority, Harry Smith defines dignity in terms of freedom, equality, and democracy:

> "That's what we fought Hitler for, after all. If Hitler had had things his way, we'd just be slaves now. The whole world would be a few masters and millions upon millions of slaves. And I don't need to remind anyone here, there's no dignity to be had in being a slave."[28]

This statement upends the fundamental premises that have dictated Stevens's life. When his journey finally culminates in his meeting with Miss Kenton (now properly referred to as Mrs. Benn), the latter's remark that "there's no turning back the clock"[29] leaves Stevens with the realization that there is no redressal for his past actions and mistakes that robbed him of the opportunity to be the driving force of his own life. It also becomes clear that the unmistakable

nostalgia for Darlington Hall that Stevens reads in Miss Kenton's letter is actually a self-fabricated narrative.

In an attempt at self-justification, Stevens unconsciously distorts the narrative of his life. Wall notes, "Ishiguro does not suggest that there is something inherently wrong with 'dignity' or 'professionalism'; rather, he suggests that at some point . . . Stevens's absolute adoption of those values forced him to deny parts of himself or parts of his experience, thus shaping his life in ways he now regrets."[30] The final pages that describe Stevens's encounter with the man at the pier bring the narrative together as Stevens arrives at the long-awaited moment of self-realization. He reflects that while Lord Darlington at least "had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes," Stevens lacks the agency to make the same claim for himself.[31] His reflection on the old man's statement that "The evening's the best part of the day" makes him realize that he has to make do with what remains of the day.[32] Ishiguro stated in an interview, "In some political and moral ways, most of us are butlers. By that I mean, even in democratic countries, we find ourselves oddly far removed from the real power . . . So I was attracted to this figure who wanted to be so good at being a butler, everything was about serving his employer. But he thought it was beyond him to question how his contribution is being used."[33] Stevens's journey symbolizes a return of all the things that have been repressed throughout his life. Kathleen Wall, in examining the theories of the unreliable narrator implicit in *The Remains of the Day*, places the word 'truth' in quotation marks and maintains that "Ishiguro foregrounds the problem of 'truth,' perhaps challenging us never to figure out 'what really happened.'"[34] Ishiguro's novel is premised on the tenuousness of memory and how tracing back the past reveals more than it soothes by laying bare one's culpability in the course of events.

NOTES

1 Gregory Mason and Kazuo Ishiguro, "An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro," *Contemporary Literature* 30, no. 3 (1989): 347, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1208408.
2 Kathleen Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," Journal of Narrative Technique 24, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 18, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30225397.
3 Amit Marcus, "Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*: The Discourse of Self-Deception," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 4, no. 1 (January 2006): 136, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/244587/pdf.
4 Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (1988; New York: Vintage, 1993), 87.
5 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 95.
6 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 24.
7 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 24.
8 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 25.
9 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 25.
10 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 42-43.
11 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day,* 105.
12 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 25.
13 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 198.
14 Lilian R. Furst, "Memory's Fragile Power in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* and W. G. Sebald's "Max Ferber," *Contemporary Literature* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 540, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27563769.
15 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 110.
16 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 222.
17 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 199.
18 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day,* 154.
19 David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction: Illustrated from Classic and Modern* Texts (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993), 155.
20 Graham Swift and Kazuo Ishiguro, "Kazuo Ishiguro by Graham Swift: Interview," BOMB *Magazine* 29, October 1, 1989, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/kazuo-ishiguro/.
21 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 29.
22 Furst, "Memory's Fragile Power," 542.
23 Allan Vorda, Kim Herzinger, and Kazuo Ishiguro, "An Interview with Kazuo

Ishiguro," *Mississippi Review* 20, no. 1/2 (1991), 139, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20134516.

24 Vorda et. al., "An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro," 139.

25 David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," *Geographical Review* 65, no. 1 (January 1975): 11, https://www.jstor.org/stable/213831.

26 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14), ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953).

27 Furst, "Memory's Fragile Power," 539.

28 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 186.

29 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 239.

30 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 38.

31 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 243.

32 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 244.

33 TIFF Originals, "Kazuo Ishiguro on *The Remains of the Day* | Books on Film | TIFF 2017," YouTube Video, 53:59, October 5, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1P6c3yomp0.

34 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 30.

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