

“Spontaneous Mirth” out of “a Misplaced Respectfulness”: A Bakhtinian Reading of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*

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In the beginning of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, we meet a dignified, old-fashioned English butler serving his new American employer. The butler, Mr. Stevens, tries hard to respond appropriately to the bantering of his jocular employer, Mr. Farraday. Finally, he thinks of something funny to say and, after saying it, expects to see the right reaction from Mr. Farraday:

And I followed this with a suitably modest smile to indicate without ambiguity that I had made a witticism, since I did not wish Mr. Farraday to restrain any spontaneous mirth he felt out of a misplaced respectfulness. (17)

But Farraday does not understand Stevens, and the scene ends in mutual awkwardness. Stevens’s misplaced witticism, however, does not go entirely unnoticed; it is the reader, not Mr. Farraday, who cannot restrain his/her “spontaneous mirth” at the failed attempt by this extremely dignified and stylized butler. In fact, mis(dis)placement, highly stylized deference, misunderstanding, and laughter on the part of the reader are recurring themes throughout the text, whose main purpose is to reinterpret a supposedly authentic ideal of “Englishness.” Several critics have commented on the way Ishiguro’s novel uses these themes to reconfigure national/cultural signifiers. John Su argues that Ishiguro displaces a quintessentially English literary form centering on the grand country estate to revise and rewrite the idea of what constitutes English character; Rebecca Walkowitz points out that Ishiguro’s “indirect style,” rhetoric of misunderstanding, and idea of “treason” contest and challenge cultural allegiance; John McCombe and Susie O’Brien analyze Stevens’s shifting, displacing, and ambivalent voice in terms of

a new global order and postcolonial conditions. The purpose of this essay is to add another perspective from which to read the reconfigured “Englishness” in this novel, one that draws mainly on Bakhtinian concepts. Focusing on the “misplaced respectfulness” and “spontaneous mirth” in *The Remains of the Day*, this essay explores the particular way in which Ishiguro decenters and reconceptualizes national/cultural signifiers through the Bakhtinian ideas of “stylization,” “chronotope,” and “the carnivalesque.”

Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic bears strong relevancy to *The Remains of the Day*. According to Bakhtin, discordance between a word and its actualization in an utterance and the consequent comic effect, which this novel so insistently invokes, create a space for the inscription of new inflections and meanings. As Marie-Christine Leps points out, such Bakhtinian terms as parodic stylization, hybrid constructions, double-voiced discourse, and the carnivalesque designate this multi-layered space in various ways (272). The linguistic displacement and disturbance in discourse that these Bakhtinian terms point out can also be extended to a discourse of culture—that is, to an intersubjective practice and cultural interchange decentering the rigid and monologic signification system of national/cultural signifiers. This, in fact, is precisely what Ishiguro’s novel tries to do with the signifier of “Englishness.” Moreover, Bakhtin’s attempt to renew literature by reconceptualizing “the novel” as a genre is exactly in line with Ishiguro’s career-long search for a new type of fiction that loosens the tie between literature and national culture. Some of Ishiguro’s novels, like *The Unconsoled* or *When We were Orphans*, are more obviously daring in narrative experimentation, but even works that apparently adhere to the realist tradition find a way to transgress the norm to a certain degree. *The Remains of the Day* is no exception. While drawing on the genre of the country estate novel made famous by Jane Austen, E. M. Forster, and Henry James, Ishiguro overcomes the reverence traditionally associated with the form by mocking it, thus challenging the authority of English literary tradition. Bakhtin’s focus on the novel as a genre is especially pertinent in this regard: he argues that the discourse of the novel best exemplifies the dialogic nature of language and can thereby destabilize discursive hierarchies, “expos[ing] the

conventionality of their forms and their language” (*Dialogic Imagination* 5). Although, as Todorov points out, what Bakhtin explores here can be seen as the characteristics of discourse rather than of a particular literary genre, he clearly attempts to theorize literary language in terms of “a very specific rupture in the history of European civilization, its emergence from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semipatriarchal society, and its entrance into international and interlingual contacts and relationships” (*Dialogic Imagination* 11).¹ Therefore, a Bakhtinian reading of *The Remains of the Day* not only provides valuable insight into the particular ways in which Ishiguro decenters and reconfigures the national/cultural signifier of “Englishness,” but also encourages a more comprehensive and creative understanding of Bakhtin, modern literature, and modernity itself.

In *Remains*, Stevens’s problematic narrative seems to defy the reification and rigidity of the national/cultural signifier, “Englishness.” The Bakhtinian concept of “parodic stylization” illuminates the nature, process, and effect of the particular way in which his narrative disrupts and decenters the closed structure of “Englishness.” Bakhtin develops the idea of “stylization,” a conscious imitation or a deliberate reproduction of a certain style, to explore the dialogic relation between the said and the unsaid in discursive practice; more specifically, his deployment of this narrative device makes seemingly innocent utterances reveal their hidden ideology through the act of borrowing, imitating, and appropriating. For Bakhtin, parodic stylization is “a double-voiced discourse” in which the speaking voice inhabiting another’s discourse deliberately misbehaves by “intend[ing] a semantic direction that is directly opposed to the original one” (*Problem* 193). Language “depicts a real world of objects not by using the represented language as a productive point of view, but rather by using it as an exposé to destroy the represented language” (*Dialogic Imagination* 364). In this model of dialogue, the representing discourse dislodges the represented discourse, disrupting, relativizing, and problematizing the authority and intention of the discourse itself. This is exactly what happens in Stevens’s narrative. Stevens carefully and deliberately reproduces complete images, languages, and belief systems constituting dignified and

grand “Englishness,” but his narrative somehow leads the reader towards a conclusion that diverges totally from the narrator’s original intention.

Stevens tries rather obsessively to stylize himself after the cultural stereotype of the English gentleman, which he considers to be an essential aspect of the spirit of Englishness. He attires himself with care and his language is impeccably formal. Many people Stevens meets on his journey take him to be a gentleman of high standing. The landlady at Salisbury regards him as a “grand visitor” or “some gentleman [who is] used to such places as the Ritz or the Dorchester” due to his (borrowed) Ford and “the high quality of [his] suit” (26). At Moscombe, Stevens’s response to the villagers’ words of welcome (“it’s a privilege to have a gentleman like yourself in Moscombe, sir”) suggests that he takes such humble admiration for granted; he smiles and says gracefully, “I assure you the privilege is all mine” (183). However, when a humble servant like Stevens articulates the dignified stylization of “great” Englishness, there is an undeniable sense of displacement between the representing and the represented voice. Such highly stylized language, coming from a distinctly unheroic character, naturally takes on a mock-heroic tone throughout the novel. At one point, Stevens notes:

It is, of course, that responsibility of every butler to devote his utmost care in the devising of a staff plan. Who knows how many quarrels, false accusations, unnecessary dismissals, how many promising careers cut short can be attributed to a butler’s slovenliness at the stage of drawing up the staff plan? (5)

The full comedy of the construction depends on the reader’s recognition of the incongruity between his heroic language and its unheroic subject. The alien voice of Stevens the butler penetrates into this grandiose literary stylization and, “once having made its home in the other’s discourse, clashes hostilely with its primordial host and forces him to serve directly opposing aims” (*Problems* 193). Another example of how Stevens’s obsessive attempt to glorify the national ethos leads the reader to the opposite conclusion is when Stevens claims that “we English have an important advantage over foreigners in [emotional restraint] and it is

for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman” (43). Here, despite his original intention of celebrating the superiority of the English over other nationalities, he seems to propose the “butler” as a representative of England, thus somehow characterizing England as an “empire of butlers.” Indeed, this admirer’s imitation and appropriation of dignified national rhetoric produce rather an embarrassing image of “Englishness.”

Beneath Stevens’s highly stylized narrative lies a deep anxiety about the existence of the other. His obsessive preoccupation with producing a dignified self-image befitting the national ethos of dignity reaches even to the level of ritualization. But such obsessiveness ends up drawing our attention to what he so laboriously tries to repress, exclude, and repudiate from this stylization. In his discussion of parodic stylization, Bakhtin shows a similarly intense engagement with the alterity. To him, every language practice is an implicit dialogue between the different social dialects, styles of thought, and ideologies encrypted in all forms of speech. Dialogic discourse is a “discourse with an orientation towards another’s discourse” (*Problems* 199), and even if an utterance belongs to a single speaker, there is “a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted.” He explains:

We sense that this is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fibre to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person. (*Problems* 197)

The dialogical relation in discourse encompasses ontological, social, and cultural identity and relationship as well. Bakhtin says that every utterance, every word is directed towards the responsive understanding of the other on all levels, and the novelist’s mission is to articulate language in such a way that it accentuates the responsive character of meaning, identity, and relationship. In other words, he explores discourse as a broader picture of intersubjective practice, social reality, and transcultural exchange.²

Then, we can read Stevens's ritualized stylization in terms of the hidden dialogicality which points to "something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person." Stevens's efforts to stylize a fully cohesive self-image within his own dignified world do not work as they are supposed to; instead, as Kathleen Wall and Molly Westerman note, he remains as split and fragmented as ever.³ What Stevens tries to exclude from his calm, restrained, and grand stylization by enlisting the rhetoric of dignity in fact conditions and participates in this very stylization, and even enables it. Everything Stevens tries to define as "other"—the tiger that a legendary English butler killed with such unruffled poise in his father's favorite anecdote; India, where this dignified episode took place; the "wilderness" outside Darlington Hall (24); the "unseemly demonstrativeness" of Africa and America; and his love for Miss Kenton—all of these are objects to be tamed, civilized, and ultimately excluded from his own self-contained sphere of stylization. Nevertheless, this stylization "responds and reacts with its every fiber" to their invisible presence, invoking their silenced participation in a palpable way. Stevens's very attempt to exclude certain elements paradoxically reveals the powerful threat they pose: the possibility that they might cross the boundary and enter into his stylization. At the same time, it bespeaks a deep anxiety about the imminent demise of this very stylization—an anxiety marked with "the urgency of survival" (Butler 36). In this way, Stevens's compulsive, elaborate, and ritualized assertion of a national and personal ethos exposes hidden dialogicality with the other.

We should notice, however, that the novel presents the complex processes of imitation, differentiation, exclusion, and "absent" participation in Stevens's parodic stylization as distinctly different from a simple binary structure of imitation. Bakhtin observes that a deliberate sense of reproduction always involves distance between the stylizer and the stylized, and that this distance is what makes stylization "conditional," unlike simple imitation.⁴ Stevens's imitation of his father and their ever-strained relationship aptly exemplifies the rigid, dead-end nature of imitation with no sense of distance. In this novel, Stevens holds his father up as a sort of mythic figure, the paradigmatic English butler who per-

forms his duty with great dignity and equanimity even in the most extreme situations. But the text portrays his attempt to live up to this pure and absolute image as a type of imitation that is clearly distinguished from his imitation of, for example, Lord Darlington. In the former case, Stevens does not repeat *someone else's* style, because, despite the difference in their age and status, Stevens and his father are fundamentally indistinguishable. They are identical in their utmost devotion to their obligation; they are called by the same name (Stevens explicitly asks Miss Kenton to call his father Mr. Stevens, just like himself); their private rooms are described in exactly the same way, as a prison cell (64, 165); the same words are used to describe their ubiquitous presence in Darlington hall.⁵ Such likeness, along with what Bakhtin calls “the stylizer’s enthusiasm for his model,” destroys the distance which makes stylization “conditional.” Consequently, the nature of Stevens’s imitation and his relationship to its model is fixed and unchanging: it is either rigid formality or stark bluntness.

In fact, stylization by definition implies more complex, conditional, and multifarious ways of appropriation. The meaning of “stylization” in the Bakhtinian (Russian) context is quite different from its English definition: it means the imitation of someone else’s imitation of nature. Stylization is thus a double imitation and a sort of meta-stylization—that is, a styling of someone else’s styling of reality.⁶ Bakhtin states that “what is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one’s own language as it is perceived in someone else’s language, coming to know one’s own belief system in someone else’s system.” But “otherness,” he adds, is “only contingent, external, illusory” (*Dialogic Imagination* 365) because the object that the stylizer tries to imitate is already disintegrated in this double imitation. In *Remains*, finding one’s own self through the other’s language and belief system is explored in a complex and multilayered way through a subtle distancing and othering process. The binary relationship of “primordial host” and “alien voice” in Bakhtin’s definition of parody is unstable, obscuring which is doing the parodying and which is being parodied. Stevens, as narrator, is a voice that represses everything deemed unsuitable to the pure image of English dignity, such as “demonstrative unseemliness,” his

“strange” emotion to Miss Kenton, and the uncontrollable effects of witticism. But, at the same time, he is himself a repressed and marginalized voice. Despite his illusion that he shares personally in the grandiosity and triumph of Darlington Hall, the text portrays his cheerless, dark, and austere room as a sort of “prison cell,” showing his complete alienation and even exile from the glory and grandeur that the house represents. Thus, Stevens’s stylization puts the binary of “parodying self” and “parodied other” into question, making the status of parodic stylization in this novel vague and problematic.

The portrayal of Stevens’s room as “a prison cell,” and his consequent alienation and exile from national glory, are deeply related to another important issue that is invoked through the parodic stylization in this novel: the extra-literary concern with membership and homelessness. Ishiguro’s problematic stylization, which blurs the binary of self/other, puts the rigid criterion for determining who is in and who is not into question as well. Stevens is extremely interested in the criterion which the Hayes Society, a secretive body of butlers, sets up for membership, and “criterion” and “standard” are the terms which dominate his narrative throughout the novel. But in spite of his interest, the status of his membership in “Englishness” is dubious. Stevens obviously belongs to Darlington Hall; however, at the same time, he is hopelessly excluded, segregated, exiled in a prison cell within the house. National discourse alienates marginal people like Stevens, particularly when they try to obtain entry into it. As Walkowitz argues, “national identities are invented not only to maintain a boundary from the outside but also to erect boundaries in the face of new, perhaps internal estrangement” (1054). Additionally, although Stevens imagines himself as a fixture at Darlington Hall, “locked up” in the house, in Mr. Farraday’s words, he is also presented as a person without a home. On the occasion of the international conference at Darlington Hall, young Mr. Cardinal playfully comments on the “treaties and boundaries and reparations and occupations” that the guests from all over Europe and the United States are discussing in the house:

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I wonder if it wouldn't have been better if the Almighty had created us all as—well—as sort of plants. You know, firmly embedded in the soil. Then none of this rot about wars and boundaries would have come up in the first place ... but we could still have chaps like you taking messages back and forth, bringing tea, that sort of thing. Otherwise, how would we ever get anything done? Can you imagine it, Stevens? All of us rooted in the soil? Just imagine it! (108)

Even in a young and naïve gentleman's wild imagination in which every human being is fixed firmly in his/her allotted plot of earth, Stevens is the only one who is not similarly “rooted”; instead, he moves constantly back and forth, taking messages, bringing tea, and performing services for others—floating, drifting, being homeless. Stevens's digressing and drifting narrative of travel also reflects this homelessness, as well as his attempt to compensate for displacement in his search for a home. That the subject of Stevens's first witty remark is “a pair of gypsies” is no coincidence.

The issue of membership/homelessness is relevant to Ishiguro's own ambiguous national/cultural identity as a Japanese British writer. Many critics have interpreted Ishiguro's novels in terms of the writer's Japanese heritage, attributing his technique to an “authentic” Japanese identity and reducing it to a natural, rather than cultivated, element of Ishiguro's writing.⁷ Such confident categorization of Ishiguro's writing as “Japanese” or “foreign” runs the risk of not only solidifying a structure of identity within a given nationality, but also transforming the writer, a Booker Prize winner, into a sort of exotic commodity in a global literary market.⁸ Countering Orientalist views that read his work through the lens of an essentialized Japanese voice, Ishiguro redefines the idea of “international writer” attached to himself as “homeless writer.”⁹ Therefore, Ishiguro's reason for stylizing his novel as “more English than English”¹⁰ is not to obtain membership/citizenship into the category of “English” writer, but to exile himself from the national signifier altogether. Bakhtin's idea that language is always multiple in the sense that it is always borrowed, shared, and alien as well as his/

her own, then, is especially relevant here. Bakhtin claims that novelists ought to be linguistically and ideologically homeless: “it is as if the author has no language of his own, but does possess his own style, his own organic and unitary law governing the way he plays with language and the way his own real semantic and expressive intentions are refracted within them” (*Dialogic Imagination* 311). Since the language novelists have is no language of their own, the novel begins “by presuming a verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world, a certain linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness” (*Dialogic Imagination* 367). “Homelessness” means, for Bakhtin, losing one’s “feeling for language as myth” and “absolute form of thought.” It is a “fundamental liberation” from “the hegemony of a single and unitary language” (*Dialogic Imagination* 367).

When supported by the effects of appropriation and distance, Stevens’s stylization is inseparably related to performativity. As long as he consciously stylizes himself as a “genuine old-fashioned English butler” using someone else’s discourse and someone else’s suit, he is unequivocally and deliberately playing a role. Reading this inherent performativity in Stevens’s stylization with the aid of such Bakhtinian concepts and terms as “mask,” “laughter,” and “carnival” allows us to better understand its displacing and subversive nature. In fact, one of the key terms that occur repetitively in this novel is “mock”; considering the conceptual proximity of “mocking” to playing, performing, and “disrespectful laughing,” it is not hard to make a connection between the performativity in the parodic stylization of *Remains* and the Bakhtinian space of carnival full of irresistible mirth. For Bakhtin, carnival is “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order,” and “the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions”; it is “as if words had been released from their shackles to enjoy a play period of complete freedom and establish unusual relationships among themselves. . . . Their multiple meanings and potentialities that would not manifest themselves in normal conditions are revealed” (*Rabelais and His World* 10, 423). In the scene in which Stevens is called to the drawing room in the middle of the night to answer complicated questions regarding international

policy, we see Stevens’s performativity temporarily opening up a space where social hierarchies are reversed and the binary of truth/fake put into question:

I was naturally a little surprised by this, but then quickly saw the situation for what it is; that is to say, it was clearly expected that I be baffled by the question. Indeed, in the moment or so that it took for me to perceive this and compose a suitable response, I may even have given the outward impression of struggling with the question, for I saw all the gentlemen in the room exchange mirthful smiles. (195)

He repeats the same answer, “I’m very sorry, sir ... but I am unable to be of assistance on this matter” because he knows well that this is what the gentlemen expect from him. At each iteration of Stevens’s answer, along with his deliberate impersonation of exertion and bafflement, the gentlemen’s laughter increases: at first they laugh “covertly,” then their laughter can be “barely suppressed,” and finally, it becomes “open, hearty laughter.” Throughout the novel, Stevens tries to portray Lord Darlington as a paternal figure in “whose hands civilization had been entrusted,” and the humble people like himself as children who serve such great gentlemen with a kind of filial devotion. John McCombe observes that Lord Darlington’s benevolent paternalism and the rigid hierarchies that structure Darlington and Stevens’s relationship are values common to a colonialist ideology. Susie O’Brien also notes that Stevens’s infantile dependence on Lord Darlington is a sort of ideological model “deployed by empire to mask the enforced servitude of its colonies” (789). This scene, however, displaces and subverts this paternal hierarchy and the political/social structure it might imply once and for all. Here, the snickering gentlemen look more like children enjoying a practical joke, while Stevens looks like a benevolent adult figure playing along with the children’s whim and trying to protect their illusion with a little pretense. The performativity of Stevens’s stylization clearly opens up a space in which his image is temporarily liberated from the rigid social hierarchy and all the meanings, norms, and prohibitions attached to the established order.

Bakhtin points out the importance of the mask in carnival and carnivalized literature for destabilizing fixed duality, binary opposition, and role differentiation. Likewise, the inherently performative features of this stylization do not point towards a simple binary opposition between truth and falsehood; instead, they laugh at the opposition itself. The performativity of Stevens's stylization "mocks" any effort to tell real from fake as quite pointless. Mr. Farraday becomes perturbed when he begins to doubt the authenticity of Darlington Hall and Stevens, things for which he paid an enormous amount of money, due to Mrs. Wakefield's confident assessment that everything about the house is "mock." He frets, "she seemed to think I was exaggerating the pedigree of this place. That I was making up about all these features going back centuries.... She kept asserting everything was 'mock' this and 'mock' that. She even thought you were 'mock,' Stevens" (124). Mrs. Wakesfield's assertion that Stevens is mock is at once wrong and right. Stevens cannot be called either "genuine" or "fake," not only because his whole identity is closely associated with the idea of "mocking" through his stylization and performance, but also because he himself seriously problematizes his own authenticity by pretending that he did not serve a "real" English lord in this house for thirty-five years before Mr. Farraday. The repetitive use of the word "mock" in Farraday's complaint produces the effect of an incantation, powerfully "mocking" with disrespectful laughter any serious effort to tell truth from pretense. Moreover, Steven's stylization does not function like a mask that hides his "essential," "real," and "truthful" self. On the contrary, as Renata Salecl claims, "there is nothing behind the mask" (184). As Salecl explains, the rigid stylization to which Stevens devotes himself does not frustrate his unspoken love with Miss Kenton but, in a paradoxical way, produces it (185).

Parodic stylization in *Remains* also engages with the issue of time and history. Much of the parodic effect comes from the fact that Stevens's dignified self-stylization is inadequate and misplaced in post-war English society: his highly stylized language and person is ridiculously anachronistic. Through such a misplaced historical subject, Ishiguro expresses a deep concern with the question of how to narrate time/history out-

side the national framework. Several critics have commented on the way Ishiguro deals with history through Stevens, an anachronistic, digressive, unreliable narrator who wades through his murky memories, trying to remember, manipulate, or forget them according to his needs. Cynthia Wong identifies the conflict between public and private memories as a fundamental one in Ishiguro’s work; James Lang locates historical truth in this novel somewhere between two competing accounts—public and private—of the past; McCombe offers Stevens’s narrative as an alternative to a public historical record that too often elides the voices of those subordinated by colonialism, gender, or class. Almost all of the criticism deals with Stevens’s anachronistic, misplaced, and fragmented sense of time as a corrective to the monologic, developmental, and linear sense of history represented by Lord Darlington’s anxiety over being “slow,” “outmoded,” and, ultimately, behind other European nations.

Bakhtin’s idea of “time” elaborates the meaning of the misplaced anachronism in Stevens’s stylization. He argues that “the hero’s inadequacy to his fate or his situation” is one of the basic internal themes of the novel and that “it is precisely the zone of contact with an *inconclusive present (and consequently with the future)* that creates the necessity of this incongruity of a man with himself” (*Dialogic Imagination* 37 emphasis added). He calls this “zone of contact with an inconclusive present and future” a “chronotope”—the idea of a time-space which is expressive, plastic, and relational among and within literary works.¹¹ Holquist, Morson, and Emerson advance this concept as another way to explain “dialogism,” Bakhtin’s main idea, showing that all meaning is relative in the sense that it comes about only as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying simultaneous but different time/space. Morson also points out, “once one recognizes that many different chronotopes have been and will be conceived, then the authority and inevitability of one’s own sense of time and space become problematic” (*Literature and History* 266). Stylizing narrative anachronistically opens up a space where different temporalities meet, interweave, and form a dialogic, relative, and simultaneous relationship with each other. Anachronism rearticulates history by simultaneously evoking several temporalities, entangling the linear sequence of history, deemphasizing the prominence of a particu-

lar moment as one of many historical moments, and questioning the very notion of time as a linear chronology. Ella Shohat convincingly claims that we live in “the same historical moment but under diverse modalities of subordination and hybridization,” and that “the spatiality and temporality of cultures as lived is scrambled, palimpsestic in all the worlds, with the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern coexisting and interlinked globally” (78). Still, a prevalent way to deal with cultural dislocation has basically been to adopt a Eurocentric view of development, evolution, and progression; even in academia, some worlds are seen as being “ahead,” and others as being “behind,”¹² and in this novel, we see this in Lord Darlington’s and Stevens’s obsessive anxiety over “being late.” Despite the fact that people like Stevens actually exist in this world as a historical/social/cultural reality, Stevens is still treated like an “outmoded” cultural commodity and an “antique” curiosity from the past.

In fact, the description of the anachronistically situated Stevens as a cultural commodity and an antique curiosity reveals the dialogic relationship among different temporalities. While Stevens’s discourse is rooted in the past—the tradition and inheritance of Englishness—Mr. Farraday and Mrs. Wakefield’s antiquarian attitude to Stevens and Darlington Hall is oriented in the present—profit, the marketplace, and American domination. Each timeframe has a different criterion for valuating Stevens and Darlington Hall. Stevens’s discourse values Darlington Hall as a national inheritance and ethos; Farraday’s discourse values it as a scarce, rare, thus profitable commodity. Still, the two discourses work together in dialogic relation to endow this house and what it represents with the power to survive as a viable myth. The value of time-honored Darlington Hall is set, maintained, and recycled through the simultaneous cooperation of two completely different levels of criterion belonging to two different temporalities—or “chronotopes.” Past and present are in a dialogic relationship, creating and maintaining the myth of “old, genuine England” as both a national fiction and a profitable commodity.

Another way in which *Remains* stresses the mis(dis)placement that Stevens’s stylization reveals is through the recurrent idea of “the mis-

take.” Stevens is obsessive with stylizing his own world in a perfectionist way; he is even equipped with a particular “world view” (world as a wheel at whose hub Darlington Hall and himself reside) and a certain “aesthetics” (beauty comes from “calmness,” and a “sense of restraint,” and absolutely not from “demonstrative unseemliness”). Such an obsessive effort to reproduce a perfect “English way” reveals and emphasizes, ironically, the fragility of this reproduction. He is afraid of making mistakes because one little mistake can produce a significant—even a destructive—repercussion. He repeatedly recalls the statement, “these errors may be trivial in themselves, but you must yourself realize their larger significance,” yet he does not recall exactly who said it: it could be Miss Kenton, or Lord Darlington, or himself (59, 62). The irony is that, despite his desperate attempt to avoid making mistakes and keep his own stylization impeccable, the whole course his life has taken finally turns out to be a big mistake in the end.

This novel also critiques its characters’ certainty about “making no mistake” by revealing the mistakes and slippages they continually make in spite of their firm conviction. Stevens claims that, while it is hard to define what greatness is, he simply knows it when he is in its presence because he “distinctly [feels] that rare, yet unmistakable feeling” (28). But he is wrong about Lord Darlington, the “greatest” gentleman and apparent embodiment of the very best for which an idealistic butler could hope. The residents of Moscombe also claim this instinctive and mystified sort of knowledge; they declare they can tell who is a true gentleman and who is not because “it’s plain for all to see that’s got eyes” (185). However, they are obviously wrong in their judgment that Stevens is a “true” gentleman; even an “unmistakable feeling” can be a mistake.

We can better understand the subversive dimension of “mistakes” in this novel when we read it using Bakhtinian concepts. For Bakhtin, an “error” is the “only one principle of cognitive individualization” that allows one to escape a totalitarian, monologic, and unified system. In such a closed system, every judgment works to conform to this “sealed-off” system. In this sense, “only error individualizes” (*Problems* 81). Stevens is just a parrot who imitates what he hears, or a functionary

who mechanically repeats his perfectly stylized world, but when he makes mistakes and errors, there opens a possibility for him to find his own answer, to make his own choice, to shoulder his own responsibility. Bakhtin says that language, to be used in the novel, should be “riddled with decay” or “shifted somehow from its state of internal balance and self-sufficiency” (*Dialogic Imagination* 368), because this constitutes the only chance for us to extricate ourselves from the defining conceptual hegemony exercised by the national/cultural signifier’s monologic rhetoric. Seen this way, “mistakes” in this novel take on totally different meanings. Miss Kenton, recalling how Mr. Stevens Senior walked back and forth in front of the summerhouse where he fell down with a serving tray simply to retrace and reflect on his error, describes him as a person who hopes to find “some precious jewel he had dropped there” (50). A mistake is as precious as a jewel because it is a potential opportunity for an individual to emancipate him/herself from a restricting monologic ideology and explore what Bakhtin calls “a happy surplus.” He avers that “there always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness; there always remains a need for the future, and a place for this future must be found. All existing clothes are always too tight, thus comical, on a man” (*Dialogic Imagination* 37). The realization that he has been wearing a comically tight suit, the recognition that he has made a mistake, gives Stevens a chance to explore the inexhaustibility of human possibility. At the end, Stevens bitterly admits his own failure (mistakes), but, surprisingly, the novel does not take on a tragic tone. Instead, it ends with his reflection on laughter and witticism. Bakhtin defines a monologic culture as “a sealed-off cultural universe, a universe having its own literary language ... capable of sending into the lower genres only purely reified, unintentional speech images, word-things that lack any novelistic-prose potential.” He suggests “decay” and “collapse” as the only way for the language of the novel to grow and “ripen” (*Dialogic Imagination* 368, 370). The seemingly paradoxical relationship between “failure” and “success” illuminates the double meaning of the novel’s title, “the remains of the day”; we might read the eponymous “remains” as a Bakhtinian “surplus,” an excess space in which the tired, disappointed Stevens can possibly start all over again.

Mistakes in this novel are also precious because they invoke laughter, which in turn creates uncontrollably confusing, displacing, and subversive moments. Moscombe is an important location in *Remains* because it shows the process through which a mistake in a deliberate act of stylization leads to what Bakhtin would call “carnival,” “a world of topsyturvy, heteroglot exuberance, ceaseless overrunning and excess where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled” (Stallybrass and White 247). Stevens’s arrival at the village involves several mistakes: he forgets to fill up the gas in the car, he gets stranded in the middle of the night in a strange town, and his suit suffers damage during a trudge through the bushes. He also makes a critical mistake by presenting himself as a great personage to the simple people of the village—in fact, he goes too far in this dignified self-stylization for a reason he cannot explain and loses control over the effects his wild performance has on the awed villagers. As a result of this series of “mistakes,” words and their social implications are confused, displaced, and subverted. After he introduces himself as someone engaged in the country’s foreign policy, Stevens adds, “I never held any high office, mind you. Any influence I exerted was in a strictly unofficial capacity” (187). He further attempts to mitigate the impression he initially gave by noting, “It’s a great privilege, after all, to have been given a part to play, however small, on the world’s stage” (188). Stevens might argue that he was telling the truth—he did indeed participate “unofficially” and in a “small” way—but nobody in the room takes the terms “small” and “unofficial” literally. Here, these terms undergo subversion: “small” means “big” and “unofficial” means “more official” than “official.” Also, in this festive and mirthful place, the disparately situated voices create ideological mobility through the concerted act of “looking at one social language through the eyes of others.” The languages of Stevens, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Taylor, and Dr. Carlisle mingle and intersect, producing a dynamic movement through which various ideologies, including democracy, conservatism, imperialism, and socialism, are discussed and viewed. Indeed, they create a “muddle” of enthusiastic celebration, self-contradiction, indifference, hypocrisy, disillusionment, cynicism, and comicality in a kind of “festival” of critique.

Notably, such a “heteroglot exuberance” of carnival on the level of language takes place throughout the novel. The meanings of the words are displaced and dislocated; the same terms are repeated in different contexts, revealing the slippery, uncontrollable, even self-contradictory and plural nature of language. Stevens uses the term “professionalism” many times throughout the novel to stylize himself after the image of a professional English gentleman, and also to emphasize his need to trust Lord Darlington’s “expertise.” However, when accused of “amateurism” by Mr. Lewis, an American Senator, Darlington himself critiques the term that Stevens uses so often by defining it as “serving the dictates of greed and advantage” (103). Likewise, Stevens’s use of the term “ideal” is quite self-contradictory: he describes himself as one of “a much more idealistic generation” of butlers who are concerned with the “moral status” of their employers (114), but he dismisses Harry Smith’s claim to “dignity” for all the ordinary people in England as “misguided idealism” (199). Another of Stevens’s favorite terms, “service,” resonates throughout the novel as a justification for his loyalty to the stratified hierarchy. He prides himself on providing “the best possible service to those great gentlemen in whose hands the destiny of civilization truly lies” (199); in this formulation, the term “service” becomes charged with the ambition of offering “a contribution to the course of history” (139). It is, however, undermined by the skeptical way the same term is used by Dr. Carlisle. He sardonically states, “when I first came out here, I was a committed socialist. Believed in the best services for all the people and all the rest of it” (210). Contrary to Stevens, Dr. Carlisle, a “true” gentleman, “serves” the poor village people as a young communist, turning upside-down the implied hierarchy of “gentleman” and “humble people,” but there is “[a] tone of disgust” (210) in his voice because his “best service” for the people has proved ineffectual. In this way, the meanings of words are not fixed or stable, but constantly shift and change, producing subverted and divergent perspectives and ideologies.

This “exuberant” movement of displacement and repercussion occurs on the level of characters as well. Characters in this novel mirror or reflect one other; we understand each character not in isolation but

through another—that is, through internal dialogism with other characters. Rich Americans like Farraday and the Wakefields collect, decipher, retrieve, and reconstruct the myth of the “old genuine English” tradition. But the very fact that this reconstruction involves fragmented, illegible pieces (Mrs. Wakefield cannot decipher whether the stone arch or Stevens is skillful mock even with her extensive knowledge and deep enthusiasm “for English ways” [122]) suggests that this enterprise is doomed to fail. We can see, nonetheless, that exactly the same thing happens with Stevens; to make sense of his own experience at Darlington Hall, he tries to reconstruct the whole narrative with bits of illegible, murky, and unreliable memories, with more or less the same prospect as his employer’s. Mr. Harry Smith and Stevens, despite the substantial difference in their political positions, reflect each other. Mr. Smith’s claim to democratic policy is equally as problematic as Stevens’s loyalty to Lord Darlington, and he is as blind and deluded as Stevens. Smith asserts, “we won the right to be free citizens. And it’s one of the privileges of being born English that no matter who you are, no matter if you’re rich or poor, you’re born free and you’re born so that you can express your opinion freely, and vote in your member of parliament or vote him out” (186). But this is another stereotype of Englishness that offers equality only to the citizens of the British Empire. His overt support for Great Britain’s imperial policy shows “inherent hypocrisy,” as McCombe points out, and Smith replicates and reproduces the same marginalizations and subjugations in his attempt to define his sense of citizenship by mimicking the nation’s dominant mode of representing Englishness. Stevens and the villagers in Moscombe also correspond in the way they fight someone else’s war and suffer greatly for it. Mrs. Smith points out that people in “a small, out of the way place” like Moscombe “gave more than [their] share in the war.” Stevens is also fighting—his narrative is full of such martial terms as “military style ‘pep-talk’” (77), “triumph” (77), “professional armoury” (130), and “general’s headquarter” (165) when describing what he does in Darlington Hall. His morale-boosting speech to the servants recalls Henry V’s heroic rhetoric before the battle of Agincourt: “History could well be made under this roof” (77). For this war, he gives “more

than his share” as well: he cannot be with his father when he passes away, and his heart is broken at Miss Kenton’s departure.

The sudden displacement, confusing interfusion, and unexpected correspondence among meanings, ideologies, and characters produce a mirthful place of carnival. Nonetheless, the space of carnivalesque confusion and subversion that “mistakes” generate is not presented as moral chaos. On the contrary, it opens up an arena where it becomes possible to envision ethical responsibility to each and every human being. In *Remains*, Stevens continually “procrastinates,” deferring his own responsibility to the “great” gentlemen so that he may stay in his perfectly stylized reproduction of reality. In this fragile and artificial world, he does not have to make any choice or take on any responsibility because every important decision emanates from the “hub,” where the great gentlemen of this country are situated. He might contribute in a small way with a well polished silver spoon, but what he mainly does is to relinquish his “trust” and “loyalty” to them. In this way, he evades individual choices and responsibilities forever. Hence, the collapse of this stylized world and subsequent confusion is the only way to make him face the heavy burden of making his own choices in the “wilderness” outside Darlington Hall. As Morson says about Bakhtin’s ethical sensitivity, “there is no escape from—no alibi for—choice in such condition” (175). We also need to remember that the moment of carnival does not mean a naïve, utopian fantasy of free exchange for Bakhtin. Rather, dialogical relations occur within the speakers’ ideologically saturated discursive environment, in a process of decentering from “an alien word that is already in the object” (*Dialogic Imagination* 279). Such verbal-ideological decentering “will sap the roots of a mythological feeling for language. . . . and only then will language reveal its essential human character; from behind its words, forms, styles, nationally characteristic and socially typical faces begin to emerge, the images of speaking human beings” (*Dialogic Imagination* 370). Truly, Stevens is so saturated by the national rhetoric of dignified “Englishness” that he seems to have no language of own. Still, the mis(dis)placement of his deeply saturated stylization creates a space where we can see this stylization through the eyes of the other, with all the effects of “inflection,” “refraction,”

and “accent”—where we can rethink the whole system of national signification itself, and where alienated subjects like Stevens can actually “speak.”¹³ In this sense, dialogic interaction within Stevens’s stylization, as Bialostosky says, strives not for an impossible coincidence of one and the other, but for “revealing an answerable representation of the one in the other” (790–91).

In *Remains*, what Ishiguro does to encourage a sense of responsibility is to extend the level of dialogism to the level of interaction among narrator, author, and reader. Bakhtin supports the novelist’s bold use of dialogism; he holds up Dostoevsky’s novels as excellent examples of the way the author empowers the characters to challenge authorial control. In his view, the ontological difference between a real author and the fictional character is nullified in Dostoevsky by the special representational power of language, which transforms the realities of social difference into a dialogic linguistic community. In *Remains*, the direct intention of the character (Stevens’s celebration of “dignity”) and the refracted intention of the author (Ishiguro’s decentering of “dignity”) engage in a conversation that is so subtle as to seem nonexistent. Stevens seems to recognize, even if reluctantly and intermittently, the author’s refracted intention driving him to compulsively reassert his elaborate and ritualized stylization of a national and personal ethos. He is not an entirely pathetic, naïve, and comic figure completely taken in by his own representation, nor is he a person who stylizes himself in bad faith with a full knowledge of its parodic implication. The ambiguity that Stevens invokes as a character stems from his in-between-ness—his placement in a limited, intermittent, and unconscious dialogic relationship with the author’s intention.

Ishiguro makes Stevens talk not only to the author but to the reader as well. Stevens says things like, “such great affairs will always be beyond the understanding of those such as you and I,” (199) or, “the likes of you and I will never be in a position to comprehend the great affairs of today’s world, and our best course will always be to put our trust in an employer we judge to be wise and honorable, and to devote our energies to the task of serving him to the best of our ability” (201). It is unclear exactly to whom Stevens is speaking; it could be Miss Kenton,

considering that Stevens constantly thinks about her and her letter, or it could be fellow servants such as butlers or housekeepers, who are non-existent these days, or it could be the ordinary English people whom he meets throughout the travel, or it could even be the reader reading the sentence right at this moment. No matter which of them he may be addressing, the obvious thing is that Stevens is trying to address people in different times and spaces. Here, Bakhtin's concept of "chronotope" is useful for illuminating the problematic nature of "you." Considering the fact that this somewhat vague and unexplored idea is another type of dialogism, the strange and problematic connection Steven makes across space and time using this indefinite "you" can be understood as a special kind of "dialogue" (47). Bakhtin calls the dialogue taking place in the world of the author, of the performer, and of the listeners and readers as "chronotopic," describing it as a continual "renewing" of the literary text through "the creative perception of its listeners and readers" (*Dialogic Imagination* 252, 254). Ishiguro invokes the deep, immanent, and simultaneous interconnection among Stevens, Miss Kenton, servants, ordinary English people, and readers, all of whom exist in different places and temporalities, through this vague yet direct use of "you."¹⁴ Readers suddenly become involved in this strange and highly stylized world of an old-fashioned English butler, and they are asked to see themselves in the other's eyes, language, and belief systems. In this sense, the dialogic space that the novel's parodic stylization opens up calls for a fundamental complicity and deep implication on the part of readers in the entire process of constituting, maintaining, and displacing the dignified stylization of "Englishness." We laugh at Stevens's rigidly stylized language and character, yet this laughter is directed not only at an anachronistic, deluded, and old-fashioned butler but also at ourselves—our own blindness and complicity in the monologic, "sealed-off" rhetoric and signification system of national identity. We are not outsiders any more; we are ourselves penetrating into the author's discourse as another alien voice, thus creating multiple, interpenetrating, and mutually transforming discourse—"heteroglossia" in Bakhtinian terms—in the novel. Now, the statement from Stevens quoted in the introduction of this essay ("And I followed this

with a suitably modest smile to indicate without ambiguity that I had made a witticism, since I did not wish Mr. Farraday to restrain any spontaneous mirth he felt out of a misplaced respectfulness”) can be read as directed towards readers. Ishiguro invites readers to witness the mis(dis)placement of Stevens’s anachronistic stylization, to laugh and experience the moments of carnival where all the meanings of this stylization are challenged, subverted, and mixed, and to recognize our own profound implication in the appropriation and displacement of cultural/national signifiers.

Notes

- 1 Todorov argues that, considering the contradictory claims Bakhtin makes about the genre of “novel” and the variety of texts he included in the category of “novel,” we should regard Bakhtin as exploring the characteristics of discourse rather than of a particular literary genre (90–91).
- 2 Emerson points out that Bakhtin was concerned with the issue of alterity in the broad questions of culture from the very beginning of his intellectual career (107). Godzich also argues that what Bakhtin and the so-called Bakhtin circle did was to restore “Otherness to its rightful, and most effective place,” which “modernity sought to avoid ... at all cost by elaborating a complex strategy for its containment and eventual reduction to Sameness” (7).
- 3 Wall analyzes Stevens’s unreliable narration from the poststructuralist view of subjectivity, suggesting that this novel “asks us to formulate new paradigms of unreliability for the narrator whose split subjectivity, rather than moral blindness or intellectual bias, gives rise to unreliable narration” (23). Westerman also argues that *The Remains of the Day* uses the frustrations and limitations of Stevens’s language as “a mode of representation, providing a dense account of its narrator’s split subjectivity” (169).
- 4 Bakhtin’s exact sentence is this: “On the other hand, stylization may also become imitations, should the stylizer’s enthusiasm for his model destroy the distance and weaken the deliberate sense of a reproduced style as *someone else’s* style. For precisely distance had created the *conventionality*” (*Problems* 190 emphasis added). Ogden suggests “conditionality” is a more proper translation than “conventionality” considering differing definitions of *stilizatsiia* in Russian and English. See Ogden (530, ff 49).
- 5 Mr. Stevens Senior works “with such youthful vigour that a stranger might have believed there were not one but several such figures pushing trolleys about the corridors of Darlington Hall,” while a guest who was impressed by Stevens’s service in Darlington Hall exclaims, “... at one point during dinner, Stevens, I would have sworn you were at least three people” (78, 107).

- 6 Ogden explains that the meaning of “stilizatsiia” as a double articulation, in contrast to the French and English definitions, provides a more complex and nuanced literary space. He also sees this double imitation as a form of mimicry (519-521).
- 7 King maintains that the author’s “instincts are for the nuanced, the understated, elegant but significant gesture, similar to the deft brushwork of Japanese paintings” (207). Kauffmann also describes the “Japanese qualities” in this novel as resulting from Ishiguro’s first two novels, which are set in Japan; he identifies “[t]he taciturnity, the subtle brush stroke, the aim to evoke form rather than to create it” as “Japanese” qualities (43). Even *The Remains of the Day*, set in England, is described as a “perfectly English novel that could have been written only by a Japanese” (Iyer 589).
- 8 It is true that Ishiguro’s name, which clearly indicates the author’s ethnicity, has helped to classify him as a world-famous “international” writer. O’Brien points out that “a colonial narrative of desire for an exotic other to satisfy a jaded empire’s craving for novelty” underlies the story of so-called “World Fiction,” which is in fact, in O’Brien’s formulation, just another name for English literature expanding into the global marketplace by means of American publishing (797–99).
- 9 In an interview with Kenzaburo, Ishiguro says, “My very lack of authority and lack of knowledge about Japan, I think, forced me into a position of using my imagination, and also of thinking of myself as a kind of homeless writer” (“Interview” 115).
- 10 In the interview with Vorda and Herzinger, Ishiguro explains that what he tried to do in this novel is to rework the myth of England—a mythical England which is “more English than English” (14).
- 11 Bakhtin did not develop the idea of “chronotope” into any specific or systematic definition. Sometimes it seems to mean a relativistic conception of “time/space,” setting, or even worldview in different contexts. Burton, Cave, Morson and Friedman have developed the innovative and productive potential of this term in relation with narrative.
- 12 Jameson’s controversial essay, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” also shows the same kind of Eurocentric developmental view regarding Third World Literature. When Jameson argues that nationalism is a cultural attribute of the Third World, which the West has already experienced, his basic assumption is that Third World Literature is anachronistic, “pre-modern,” and behind the West. However, nationalism is still relevant to intellectual and cultural ideas in the Western world. Shohat argues that even if nationalism seems out of style in the Western world, “it is not difficult to detect a submerged American nationalism ... through a largely unconscious national-exceptionalist lens” in the curricula of American academia (69–70).

“Spontaneous Mirth” out of “a Misplaced Respectfulness”

- 13 The “unspeakability” of minority or subaltern subjects has been powerfully addressed by Spivak in her essay “Can Subaltern Speak?” She notes that the “voice” of who speaks—on behalf of the lost, disenfranchised or otherwise silenced people—is already and always mediated epistemologically and linguistically in the multi-layered and interrelated signification system of patriarchal, national, colonial, or “Empire” forms of oppression. Bakhtin’s parodic stylization—double-voiced discourse with “inflection,” “refraction,” and “accent”—is, like Bhabha’s concept of “mimicry,” a way to “speak” in spite of this “unspeakability.”
- 14 Walkowitz points to Ishiguro’s slippery use of the pronoun in *A Pale View of Hills*. She says that the narrator “conflates a unique and subjective experience with a generic and objective fact,” and that “for Ishiguro, the realization that a speaker has fused a story about him or herself with a story about someone else revises the status of linear past and discernable narrator, as well as the status of blame, guilt, and loyalty. Readers are no longer confident of knowing a fact or a character when they see one” (1068).

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