Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 3 (52) - 2010
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

THE SUBALTERN VOICE AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Liliana HAMZEA*

Abstract: *The analysis of the relationship between professional ethics and the voiced manifestations of Kazuo Ishiguro's protagonist in the novel "The Remains of the Day" attempts to reveal issues of identity and self-knowledge. At the same time the analysis focuses on the role of the narrative voice in connection with the self-assumed lack of assertiveness and agency of the protagonist narrator.*

Keywords: *voicelessness, professional exceptionalism, subaltern identity, reflectivity, self-annihilation.*

1. Introduction

Being generally concerned with the moral side of social and political issues and their implications in human identity, Ishiguro produced very complex novels in which the protagonists struggle to find meanings or to come to terms with meanings they had eschewed. That is why the narrative method and the voicing of these protagonists are issues of paramount importance, as is the case of the 1989 Booker Prize winner *The Remains of the Day*. The simplicity of the plot and the formality of the first-person narrative might indicate a classical approach to a Victorian-like pre- and post-war story revolving around one of the famous English aristocratic houses, the property of Lord Darlington. But in good Victorian tradition of stories told by servants, Ishiguro's protagonist and narrator is the butler of the house, a witness to 40 years of history of the house with which he identifies to the point of self-dissolution and complete abandonment of any personal emotional life. Stevens' dedication to his job and his employer is unquestionable and does not falter even at moments of great pressure for him, like the death of his father at the time of an important international conference in the house. He does not question Lord Darlington's good judgment or political orientations, which in the end prove to be 'misplaced', and no mater what he feels his reply is: *His lordship has made his decision and there is nothing for you and I to debate over (Ishiguro, 1989: 148).* He sees no reason to doubt the man he works for; he trusts his judgments so much that he never gives this matter any thought.

The narrative is presented by Stevens in the form of a travel diary written in 1952, but it is just a pretext for the long flashbacks referring to the 1920s and 1930s, when the house was in full activity, and which give the main impression of a memory effort to retrieve those past events and by that to give meaning to this life experience. The main issue the protagonist focuses on is the profession of butler, which is seen as a special one and to be encountered only in England, and which he strives to bring to perfection.

* Dept. of Foreign Languages and Literatures, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

BDD-A20238 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:31 UTC)

The main issue the protagonist focuses on is the profession of butler, which is seen as a special one and to be encountered only in England, and which he strives to bring to perfection. Stevens makes a lifetime ideal of his service and his whole behaviour and inner life is constructed accordingly. What this paper intends to analyze is Stevens' voice (lessness) with respect to the professional ethics he seems to conform to so passionately and through it to investigate his subaltern identity.

It must be stated from the very beginning that the novel is not simply a postcolonial demonstration of how a subaltern position triggers a behaviour of submission and reticence and a typical servant voicelessness. In fact Lord Darlington's voice or power are rather absent in the narrative, and even when his voice is heard, it is not a haughty one, and with the exception of the episode with the Jewish maids, not really an intransigent one. Therefore it is not the master's voice that acts as a silencer in Stevens' case, because his silence in the days of his service to Lord Darlington was a self-imposed one, at least up to a certain point, and is regarded by Stevens as a matter of pride and a measure for his professionalism. What are the silencing agents in the novel then? And how can one account for the partial abandonment of silence in the end and in the act of writing a travel diary itself? What is the relationship between rhetorical assertions (through which we come to know the story) and rhetorical refusals?

Ishiguro's characters are out-of-ordinary individuals who, according to Ben Howard, "address painful, fragmented experience in detached, equanimous tones" (p. 400) therefore their analysis involves complex cultural factors, among which the author's Japanese background, which in the case of *The Remains of the Day* comes curiously close to certain stereotypes about English culture which the novel emphasizes. Another cultural factor is the style itself which becomes a carrier of the restraint and indirectness of expression that are specific forms of manifestation of the "silence" assumed by the protagonist narrator.

2. Multiple Viewpoints

Stevens' annihilation of his emotions for the sake of perfect performance of his profession was the subject of several critical investigations that attempt to elucidate some of the 'silenced' or ambiguous issues in his narrative. According to George Watson (1995), both the book and the movie based on it are "misguided" about what domestic servants once were, namely the quasi-mythological image of the "*all-but-silent and the all-but-invisible beings without minds or wills of their own*" (p. 480). Ishiguro is thus placed in a series of traditional or classical fiction makers who "*have secretly connived at maintaining the division of the classes by suppressing the lower orders into a subclass which for centuries was simply unheard" and his protagonist demonstrates that "servility can become a habit of mind that destroys the soul" (p. 480).*

In order to sustain his opposition to considering servants as easily corrupted by the political opinions of their masters, Watson brings the arguments of the long series of witty and resourceful servants in Latin literature, of the famous Sancho Panza, "who usually wins his verbal contests with his master" (p. 482), or of Sam Weller in *The Pickwick Papers*. These arguments are of course incontestable, but Stevens' image in Ishiguro's novel is far from being simply a servile butler whose mind and soul are destroyed by his devotion to the service in the house of Lord Darlington. The simple fact that the

BDD-A20238 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:31 UTC)

novel is a first-person narrative demonstrates that the issues of professional ethics that hold a central place are in a more complex way related to Stevens' inner world and his self-perception.

Stevens the narrator explains that the greatness of English butlers, largely due to "the emotional restraint which only the English race are capable of" (Ishiguro:43) is like the beauty of the English countryside itself, lacking " obvious drama or spectacle" and having a calmness and "sense of restraint" (28). His professional goal therefore is total concealment of himself under an austere professional persona which is "not shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing" (42).

A notable analysis of Stevens' total commitment to his professional aspirations and to his hopes of contributing indirectly to creating a "better world" is made by Roe Sybylla, whose point of view is supported by the Nietzschean ethical perspective about self-creation or active becoming. The critic's purpose is to investigate the reasons for the butler's aim to run the household in such an absolutely impersonal manner and therefore to be as invisible as possible, or, as he says, "*to consider what kind of rationale might underlie his continued adherence to such an absolute, inflexible and flawed rule*" (p. 316). Rejecting other critics who consider that Stevens completely lacks agency in his acceptance of limits to what he can say or do, Sybylla takes Nietzsche's position to argue for the protagonist's choice of total concealment of feelings and neglect of the body's voice:

> Further, in his negation of present bodily life in favour of an imagined future end, Stevens' behaviour corresponds to the ascetic rationality which Nietzsche expresses as a 'will to nothingness'. Nietzsche condemns this aversion to life as: 'hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material, this horror of the senses, … this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death … a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life' (*Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals,* New York: Vintage Books, 1969, p. 28 quoted in Sybylla 2004:319)

This position certainly condemns Stevens for 'trivializing' life itself in his total neglect of his bodily existence. At the end of his journey he even recognizes that, in spite of his efforts and good intentions, his life has actually lacked dignity.

A different position is expressed by Bert Cardullo (1995), who sees Stevens' loyalty to his employer as part of a chain which goes next to Lord Darlington's service to his country and then to England's (mistakenly) self-assumed mission of negotiating a peace treaty with Germany in the pre-war period. Seen in this light, Steven's trust in his master is a minor case of misplaced trust in comparison with the trust invested in the English aristocracy and the British Empire at the general level.

3. The Dimensions of Professionalism

The novel is seen as "*an interior drama*" (Howard 2001:405) or "*a tragic vision of professionalism, somewhere between the perfectionist and the nihilistic*" (Atkinson 1995:181), reflecting the dilemmas of an older Stevens who tries to make sense of his past and to reconcile himself with the choices he had made and which appear to have ruined his chances of a personal life and even have undermined his notion of dignity, his lifetime principle. The

BDD-A20238 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:31 UTC)

narrative voice dramatizes the awakening of the hero, which is presented against the background of a trip Stevens takes in order to meet a former housekeeper, Miss Kenton, but which in fact is more significantly an inner voyage of self-discovery and self-assessment achieved through numerous and long flash-backs. His understanding is obviously different now, and as he evaluates the past and his own actions, he acquires a new voice that was not heard while he was in the service of Lord Darlington. This new voice, far from being completely changed and unrestrained (restraint being probably the major feature of his former self), is at least occasionally more relaxed, direct and even simpler, like in his first impression of Miss Kenton's looks after twenty years when he confesses to the reader his pleasure in seeing her.

It seems of little importance that Stevens maintains his formality and usual distance in talking to Miss Kenton, his inner sincere voice points to a level of sensitivity that makes him a more than ordinary person and demonstrates that his feelings had never been completely inhibited, nor his reasoning leveled. In fact Stevens demonstrates throughout his confession a keen spirit of observation, a sense of detail and artistic sensitivity that in combination create an individual of notable intelligence. In spite of the frequent displays of pompousness, obvious especially in his very formal accounts of events and in his best moments of dignified professional behaviour, he often betrays a reflectivity and awareness that cannot belong to a being who it totally annihilated for the service of his master. The impeccable performance of his profession may be his life ideal and may absorb his time completely, that is he may inhabit his ethical self more than any other person in this essentially English profession, but he maintains those idiosyncrasies that define him as a person capable of great empathy inside himself and certainly one that is not devoid of feelings.

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the professional being and the inner self, and in judging Stevens' achievement or lack of it, his assertiveness or rather lack of it, his more than usual subordination versus his free thinking, we need to take into account the fact that Stevens is the master of his own narrative, he reveals what he likes and when he likes, or when his stream of thoughts takes him to those moments in the past that are both a personal history and a general one. In fact no one exists outside history, and the degree of freedom of the individuals with respect to history is a most ambiguous matter, reason for which it becomes a favourite topic for exploration in contemporary fiction.

Stevens is a complex narrator and his present time is a moment of wisdom, even clear insight, be it a late revelation helped by the remarks of outsiders at a village pub or by the historical circumstances (the postwar general attitude towards Hitler for example).

This distinction and the closer look at the awakening that reveals a growth in understanding, make Stevens a more real human being, with his weaknesses and mistakes, and dismisses any justification of his indictment as an accomplice (even in a very indirect way) to the pro-Nazi English policy of certain social categories. Even when Stevens is at the highest of his self-critical mood, we cannot but admit that there was no choice for an individual in his role, that is in an undisputable subordinate position, and that the only way for him to define dignity was with respect to his master and the performance of his job, not in any manifestation of free thinking or decision making. Such an instance is the moment when he speaks to a man sitting next to him on a pier in

BDD-A20238 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:31 UTC)

Weymouth after Miss Kenton's departure by bus:

> Lord Darlington wasn't a bad man. He wasn't a bad man at all. And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it, he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I trusted. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that? (243)

The complete emotional honesty in front of a stranger, the use of the word "misguided" in connection with his former employer are a far cry from Stevens' restraint and control, implicitly from the professional ethics that he had proudly displayed throughout his life and his narrative. Is this outburst and other similar unusual remarks a breach of his ethical behaviour, an abandonment of a lifetime principle? Or is his ideal of professional ethics incompatible with his role as a narrator, given the moral responsibility towards the reader, unless he is a completely unreliable narrator?

4. The Alternative Voice

The investigation of the relationship between the two ethical codes that Stevens has to submit to, that of an outstanding butler and that of a meticulous and self-critical narrator is therefore a matter of great relevance for a critical analysis of Ishiguro's novel. We can detect two contrary movements in the novel: one is the plot level, in which for the most part of his life Stevens is silenced by the class system and his self-assumed extreme professional ethics that verges on self-annihilation; the other is the narrative level, which gives Stevens not only a voice, but also the frame in which he can develop his self-awareness and his own voice. If towards the end of the novel he seems to lose confidence in his dignity in the former position, he certainly gains in self-confidence and sincerity in the latter quality.

Stevens' stifled voice and more significantly, suppressed consciousness, comes to the reader's attention on a few occasions. In the past it was suggested by way of contrast through contesting voices, like that of sir Reginald Cardinal, who points out that the Germans only aim is to profit from Lord Darlington's trusting heart. In the diary's present, it becomes obvious in the contrast with the villagers of Moscombe who feel that everyone should be entitled to speak their own mind. Stevens's attitude of complacency is continued even now, many years after Lord Darlington's death, he prefers to stick to his impressions and refuse any other remarks. Nevertheless his reticence is abandoned as soon as he is alone, because he is a very analytical mind and he keeps brooding over conversations and behaviour in order to know all their subtleties and possible implications. We might even say that Stevens has a very active inner voice, a sort of reflectivity that betrays almost an obsession with the past and how it can be represented.

The problem of representing reality is common to postmodernism and deals with how characters choose to depict the world, how they interpret events and how they choose to asses their own actions. This is something familiar to Stevens; after almost each event he finds a quiet place to

BDD-A20238 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:31 UTC)

examine how he behaved or what he talked about. He does this countless times during the trip to Compton. For example when he is in Salisbury at a guest house he finds it hard to sleep and, getting up early, he decides to go over Miss Kenton's letter one more time.

The way Stevens represents and interprets events is quite clear. He makes no attempt to hide the fact that he analyzes his own discussions and especially why he said one thing or the other. He shapes and represents everything in a way which is in harmony with his consciousness and his ethical principles. The first time his car breaks down he is helped by a chauffer. When asked if he knew the late Lord Darlington he answers that he didn't and chooses to avoid the subject. After his car is repaired he decides to take the chauffer's advice and visit a lovely pond nearby. The calm setting will prompt him to one of his typical moods of introspection and self-criticism and the following passage clearly indicates that his voyage is one of self-discovery, in which Stevens' voice acquires a role and audibility it had not experienced before:

> It is no doubt the quiet of these surroundings that has enabled me to ponder all the more thoroughly these thoughts that have entered my mind over this past half-hour or so. Indeed, but for the tranquility of the present setting, it is possible I would not have thought a great deal further about my behavior during my encounter with the batman. That is to say, I may not have thought further why it was that I had given the distinct impression I had never been in the employ of Lord Darlington (121).

He simply sits and thinks about how he denied Lord Darlington. The next few lines will offer his explanations and causes for why he would do this, and as usual, Stevens tries to cast a dignified figure for himself by finding a clever way to motivate what he did. Being ashamed of Lord Darlington and wishing, at the same time, not to be disloyal, he uses this moment to assure us that his reasons for denying him are more complex and have nothing to do with the fear of being associated to a man who sided with the Nazis.

The idiosyncrasies of the protagonist and of his (moral) consciousness can be revealed in connection with the idea of centrality and marginality. According to his class rank, the butler is part of the margins of society: his role is just to serve the needs of gentlemen, a sideline role which does not allow him direct participation in the events or expression of opinions. In his meditations on what it means to be a great butler Stevens also presents a theory about how society is organized according to his father's generation and how things have changed during his life: *For our generation, I believe it is accurate to say, viewed the world not as a ladder, but more as a wheel.* (115). A few lines further he expands on this idea and offers the essence of this theory:

> To us, then, the world was a wheel, revolving with these great houses at the hub, their mighty decisions emanating out to all else, rich and poor, who revolved around them. It was the aspiration of all those of us with professional ambition to work our way as close to this hub as we were each of us capable (Ishiguro, 1989: 115).

The proximity to this hub which is Darlington due to his lordship's restless activity as a diplomat, explains why

BDD-A20238 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:31 UTC)

Stevens never sees his role as inferior and why he can be proud to contribute to the fate of the world. And although he never considers himself the equal of those "*great gentlemen of the time in whose hands a nation had been entrusted" (116*) and he dissociates himself from the men at the hub of the world, being content with a more peripheral role, the butler has copied much of their way of being and speaking. In fact he works constantly at improving his vocabulary, but never gives the feeling that he is concerned with the use of those words in shaping opinions. Professional ethics requires just a formal way of speaking, a surface manifestation, but is not interested in what lies behind. When the villagers of Moscombe mistake him for a man of high rank it is not because of his character. It is due to aspects exterior to him; his posh suit which Lord Clemens gave him, the vintage Ford which Mr. Farraday lend him and his manner of speech, which he probably borrowed from his eavesdropping during the conferences, all this is not linked to his true nature. He can pretend to have a high status without actually reaching it.

Observing the limits of his status is part of the utmost performance of his professional role, and he does not mind humiliations as long as the higher principles are kept going and the gentlemen whom he serves can attend to the affairs of the state for which common people are not equipped. He makes it clear in the episode with a distinguished gentleman named Mr. Spencer, who wanted to prove to Lord Darlington that not all men in his country are fit to give advice about the affairs of state. To do this he summoned Stevens to answer a few questions on various political and economical problems which they are discussing. With great pity Stevens is forced to admit that he knows nothing of such maters and his only answer is: *'I'm sorry, sir, but I am unable to assist in this matter.'(196).* Therefore any skill or knowledge he might possess, Stevens can only use "to assist" others, he cannot think of himself as an agent or direct beneficiary. This is in fact the ultimate proof of his subaltern position, the vague realization of which comes towards the end of his voyage and of the book.

Such limitations make Stevens a dramatic figure, one that obviously missed a lot in life. In a more comic way it is obvious in his awkwardness about bantering, a skill which he constantly tries to practice in order to please his new employer Mr. Farraday. His first attempt will prove unsuccessful for the simple reason that he treats the mater too seriously. He cannot treat any professional activity informally or light spiritedly, the only tone of voice he knows is the serious one. When he stays at an inn in Somerset he tries to make a joke but the people in the reception room do not understand it. With this occasion we also get the chance to see how he plans out a joke. First he mentions that he often listens to a radio programmme which has just the amusing tone he hopes to find and learn:

> Taking my cue from this programme, I have devised a simple exercise which I try to perform at least once a day; whenever an odd moment presents itself, I attempt to formulate three witticisms based on my immediate surroundings at that moment (131).

But it is a bad idea from the start. It is far too rational and lacks any real involvement. Similarly his joke about the inn owner's wife is not really understood and he begins to see the "*hazards of uttering a witticism" (131).* Stevens imitates other people but when it comes to doing something on his own he can not.

BDD-A20238 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:31 UTC)

His limitations ultimately pertain to a limited range of experience and an inflexibility created by too long an effort in one direction only. His exclusive concentration on professional exceptionalism deprived him of any jovial side or delight in informal situations. The butler's voicelessness in his later years and for the "remains of the day" is thus not one coming from his social position or education, but from a diminishment close to extinction of those human manifestations which he regards as weaknesses or hindrances to the performance of his role.

5. Conclusion

Paradoxically, Stevens the narrator, the voice of the older man, who in this role has to adopt an assertiveness that was not proper to Stevens the butler, comes to investigate and express the voicelessness of his fictional position, and considered like this, he is not an unreliable narrator. It is precisely this voice as a narrator that redeems Stevens, for it demonstrates that he does understand the importance of human warmth and of communication with peers. He is an honest narrator, in spite of his not being honest with himself or with the person closest to him in the past. We can only agree with Rob Atkinson (216) that: *"If he has truly learned to open himself to others, as telling us his story implies, then part of the burden of correcting his misconceptions and self-deceptions become theirs. Stevens' having already told his story to us proves that, in what remains of his life, he can talk with others."* It seems that after all, Stevens has acquired a voice, and a powerful one for that.

References

1. Atkinson, Rob, *How the Butler Was Made to Do It: The Perverted Professionalism of The Remains of the Day*, in The Yale Law Journal vol.105 no. 1 (Oct. 1995) pp. 177-220.
2. Cardullo, Bert (1995). *The Servant*, in The Hudson Review vol. 47 no.4, pp 616-622.
3. Howard, Ben (2001). *The Voice of Kazuo Ishiguro*. The Sewanee Review, Vol. 109, no.3 pp.398-417.
4. Sybylla, Roe (2004). *Down to Earth with Nietzsche: the Ethical Effects of Attitudes Toward Time and Body*, in Ethical Theory and Moral Practice vol. 7 no. 3 (June 2004), pp. 309-328.
5. Wall, Kathleen (1994). *The Remains of the Day and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration*, in The Journal of Narrative Technique, Vol. 24 no.1, pp. 18-42, Eastern Michigan University.
6. Watson, George (1995). *The Silence of the Servants.* The Sewanee Review, vol. 103, no. 3 (Summer, 1995), pp.480-486. The John Hopkins University Press.

BDD-A20238 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:31 UTC)