REMARKS ON KAZUO ISHIGURO'S STYLE IN 'THE REMAINS OF THE DAY'

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Abstract. *The aim of the present contribution was to analyze a number of aspects concerning the interplay of Japaneseness and Britishness with an author who clearly asserted he was not allured by the relatively new tenets of postmodern writing. Examining the style used by the characters, especially by the central protagonist of the novel, Stevens, we tried to sketch the quite remarkable stance he assumed: Stevens may well appear as a real 'English samurai', totally devoted to the idea of sheer professional duty; paradoxically, he by and large becomes part and parcel of the larger history of the epoch, even (or maybe also) in spite of himself. Stevens's private tragedy mainly stems from the process of "fusing" himself into his official / professional character, while dabbling in the would-be decisive hours of human history. If parody and unreliability are some of the key features of the writer's narrative tools, all the other signs of postmodern writing are flatly disproved by the mere fact that the protagonist's personal style itself is both distant and unreliable (hence, subversive), and in addition self-scrutinizing, self-conscious and discreet. We also tried to underline some stylistic instances of parody-style writing, mainly arising from Stevens's extended exercise of "good usage" in the English language. These stylistic (and equally narrative) devices enabled the British-Japanese author to achieve, for his character, the profoundly human, soul-uplifting quality of the manner of behaving typical of an Englishman.*

Keywords: *Ishiguro, style, Britishness.*

Since the author, Kazuo Ishiguro, can be said to be equally British and Japanese, his work itself is but naturally pervaded by a (predominantly stylistic) sense of both *Britishness* and *Japaneseness*. The following modest remarks represent an attempt at shifting the weight of analysis from the prevalently narrative angle of observation into the (rather unassuming, yet so pertinent) domain of stylistic scrutiny, which has indeed so much to do with the very *fabric*, or the 'flesh-and-blood' quality of the main character.

The novel is really a continuation of (or a sequel to) an easily noticeable and recognizable idea recurrent in (modern) English literature – in fact, a thematic trend that could be likened to a "red thread" in English culture, spirituality and literature: pragmatism, no-nonsense, businesslike efficiency, intertwined with responsibility and (often maniac) respect for one's duty – a *red thread* which is recurrent from Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* and *Great Expectations*, Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* to Pierre Boule's *The Bridge over the River Kwai* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. (In Dickens's *Great Expectations*, one can be reminded of the character of Wemmick, who must look after his *Aged Parent*). Likewise, the novel can be read as a small odyssey of personal identity search (up to the really astounding end – where Stevens' most unlikely preoccupation with *bantering* re-emerges…), in parallel with *living up to the standards*, trying to match the cultural (and social) *paragon*.

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Stevens can be conceived of as a soldier fighting under the banner of a *higher* cause – which he does not however understand very well, unfortunately (or else, he only partly and outwardly understands – as a matter of form, or concept, or rather as a mere convention). Serving his profession is tantamount, with Stevens, to giving up his life for its sake, and being a *professional* rather than a mere *human being*.

Far from being an automaton, or a mere puppet, Stevens can also be regarded as a kind of *samurai* dedicated and duly subordinated to the idea of *high status*, in the form of genteel, even highbrow behaviour – mainly by the agency of (dainty, highly conventionalized) conversation. That could be seen as another (implicit) sign of Ishiguro's *Japaneseness*. The author being so much British and so much Japanese (cf. the "international theme" with Henry James, only in an upside-down perspective), his creature, Stevens, can be, even tacitly related to Ishiguro's own "Japaneseness", as a complex representation of an… "English samurai". Stevens actually is a *samurai-butler*… (For it is maybe only in England and Japan that such powerful and level-headed individuals can live as the butlers mentioned in the two anecdotes narrated in the novel – *v.* the fragment on p. 240 in the novel).

One of the streams of the story is that of an individual's private (and maybe humble) tragedy. Stevens goes so far in the process of "fusing" himself into his *official* / *professional* character, that he begins to lose fragments of his personality, of his stance as a 'true' human: for example, he begins to be left without a forename (see the passage in which, in near desperation, Miss Kenton asks him his *forename*, his Christian name; Stevens seems to be one of these characters who had no childhood, those people you could virtually imagine only in the "adult version"). With Stevens, the paragon of "the professional man" seems to meet the echoes of "the man of destiny" (in the book, his master, Lord Darlington, and the latter's likes): "The butler – whose only name seems to be Stevens, as nobody uses his first name – must have been born a butler. He has no personal belongings or wishes other than to serve his master. He has no childhood memories that he sees fit to mention, and he gives up life for the sake of his profession, in which he is indeed unsurpassed." (Vianu: 235).

Stevens can be considered a replica (an imperfect one – or even, as one might say, a second-rate one) of what the French founders of modern civility used to call *bien-pensants* and *bien-parlants* characters (i.e. perfect gentlemen and gentle-ladies, behaving and speaking beyond reproach), such as the protagonists in Jane Austen's literary universe. Ishiguro's novel can be seen as a comedy of manners at its best, which possesses an additional Victorian tinge; however, through his personal imperfections (mostly of a rhetorical nature, visible in the efforts he makes when building his personal *shield*, an absolute prerequisite to defend himself against completely, unconditionally sharing confidences with the reader), Stevens, the main character of the book, shows his core humanity. In order not to expose his (human, inherent and understandable) suffering and shortcomings, he shrinks into his own self (following a complicated rhetoric, and a rather complex narrative procedure). Hence a ceremonious, highbrow, if rather grotesque, and often strangely convoluted (personal and verbal) style…

The textual occurrence of the word *wheel* and its signs or related terms (e.g. *hub*, *centre*, etc.) support the metaphor of change, transformation, overturning/upturning a state of reality (compare also with the recurrent notion of *ladder*, which suggests the idea of ranking, establishing a hierarchy). Yet, the (then) present looms violently behind the scenes. The "real" – i.e. topical – history of the present (the plot is set in 1956 – the year of the international crisis of the Suez Canal) is left unmentioned, as though it did

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not simply exist (this kind of oblivion can be compared to Jane Austen's anhistoric narrative: she did not even mention the French Revolution in her books).

Stevens indulges in, and he is even proud of, being one of the chief arrangers (or engineers) of the back scenes (or else, being an essential assistant for the props that the stage of the oncoming historic events needs) – so he can ultimately very well imagine himself as a co-author of those events, possibly a "great director" of history itself … He does not (voluntarily) aspire to be a re-writer of history – and yet later life seems to be pushing him towards that frustrating, second-rate stance. (And this is something – possibly – attributable to the larger postmodern literary context of the age when the novel was written).

A tentative effort meant to find, or at least suggest some possible postmodern influences or hints (see the quotation below – from Matthews & Groes: 117) could come up with such remarks as: The author is writing "according to a model" (parodically, as it may be suspected), cf. the reverse relationship between life and reality (Oscar Wilde is often quoted to have said that it is life that somehow copies literature… in anticipation: "Literature always anticipates life. It doesn't copy it but moulds it to its purpose"). Here are some illustrations from the corpus provided by Ishiguro's text: the attitude, and the commentary, Stevens has about trying to closely follow the advice in the "famous" travel guide authored by the equally "reputed" writer ("Mrs Jane Symon's *The Wonder of England*"); the butler goes to extreme lengths, striving to give justice to that fine lady writer (*v.* the passage in the text where Stevens wants to climb the hill…, and what he finds interesting and beautiful in actual reality). He has a moment's hesitation when he feels he has to justify something that is not quite "as it should be", or "according to the book" in point of being touristically beautiful, culturally attractive and interesting, etc.

Another possible mark of postmodernism-like 'reading-and-writing reality' is the suggestion contained in the scene from the chapter titled *Day Three*, loosely comparable to the universally famous Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta scene, in Dante's *La Divina Commedia* – where love rises from sharing the reading of the same romance book… Unfortunately for Stevens, his being caught unawares reading a *polite book* generates shame and excruciating self-consciousness.

Understatement, *might-have-been*, (the necessity of) reading twice, the predominance of *evening* sensitivity…, they can all be detected in the textual figure of the *trip*. Moreover, the symbol of the *quest*, of the *maze*, etc., represents both Stevens's memories and his trip – as both of them are reunited by the likelihood of re-writing and repeating (as would-be actions, and wishful thinking).

The character does not say too much: so, from this angle too, *subjectivity* with Stevens can be equated with *unreliability*: "The novel is written in the first person: the butler speaks, but we get to know nothing for sure about anything. His eyes are distorting mirrors, and we we are offered the facade, while we have to dig deeply beyond the words uttered by Stevens in order to get to the spicy story, to emotion, to some human reaction" (Vianu: 237). Not taking the uttered message at face value helps us to read the 'literary reality' of the thing ("His whole life he has been training himself to say the right thing (...) His language has a certain correctness about it parading a certain discretion, a secrey of the mind. He was used to doing the right and expected thing, and speak the same. Stevens talks about himself, with his correct reactions and colourless language, as about the puppet of Darlington Hall, but this ridiculous impression is strongly contradicted by the latent substance of the text" (Vianu: 238).

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Moreover, we think that Stevens's perfect, almost inhuman restraint and calmness can be safely equated to a type of monumental *deviousness*.

Now, here is a quotation from Ishiguro himself about his not being *postmodern*: "Thinking further about the characteristics of potmodernism writing, I'm personally not interested in 'metafiction', in writing books about the nature of fiction. I've got nothing against such books, but for me there are more urgent questions than the nature of fiction" (quoted from Matthews & Groes: 117). Yet, as stated by the renowned Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami (Matthews & Groes: VII-VIII), Ishiguro's work represents an intricate whole, like the pinstaking, repetitively augmenting process of painting a cathedral… So, seen in retrospect, Ishiguro was the writer of his own overall writing project.

Postmodern fiction is characterized, among other specific features, by a specific kind of purely literary ironic *subversivity* – sounding historical consciousness along certain specific directions implying mitigation of modern violence, merging diegesis and ideological points, and by unreliability primarily based on elusiveness and ellipsis. This *unreliability* of the narrator, as it appears in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, could be possibly equated to an attempt at calling into question, or tentatively reassessing, the old literary convention of the confession-making writer/narrator.

Very much like Jane Austen (and most of her characters), the author (as well as his *creature*, Stevens) fosters the cult of "proper" or "appropriate" form, the pattern of (mostly verbal) behaviour, as well as the cult of formal, *lofty* conversation, a rather schematized (and rather dry, possibly also inauthentic and pompous) type and means of communication.

Stevens, half-hidden in the (relative) shadow of his gentlemanly job, admires, both enchanted and deeply impressed, the (again, relative) splendour of the *gentlemen* he attends to. This is the unerring model he seeks, and consequently uses, with respect to both social behaviour and language.

The book occasionally looks like a genuine (though, of course, implicit) course book in "refined conversation" (which tends to be decent, while saying little if anything). Therefore we believe it would not be an overstatement to say that a parodic intention can be perceived quite easily – cf. also the original subtitle of Eugène Ionesco's play *La Cantatrice Chauve*, i.e. *L'Anglais sans peine* (i.e. *Learn English Rapidly*) – however, on a different level of literary relevance and with an altogether dissimilar type of message; (anyway, Ishiguro's writing has nothing to do with the aesthetic ideas of the *absurd* literary trend).

In this context, parody serves to lower the point of view down to the "grass-roots": we are made privy to how history, "made" by the diplomats and pseudo-diplomats assembled in the salon or in the banquet hall, is seen by the man who must prepare their meals, drinks, snacks, bed, bathroom, foot bandages and plaster patches, etc. After all, these refreshments, comforts and facilities are meant for the "great men", the "select few" of human history – whom Stevens can imagine having fruitfully interacted with, although by no means having fraternized with… (In the context, let us remember that witty saying according to which the "actual truth" about the great people can only be learned from their wives, attendants or "reliable / trusty people": the "true" memoirs of a great scientist or political leader, for instance, should be those written or inspired by the personal recollections of, say, their chamber-maids, chauffeurs or butlers). Taking this metaphoric hint, one has to admit that Stevens is a worthy, reliable, most dignified Sancho Panza, or someone one could call a… Quixotic Sancho. (Actually, in the Don Quixote *vs.* Sancho Panza literary opposition, the figure of

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Stevens can mean heroically assuming a human stance, transferred into ideality – vs. sheer commonsensicality and consistent pragmatism... The latter stance is paradoxically represented, in the book, by Mrs Kenton! Such scenes of attempted "awakening to reality" are relatively abundant in the novel – as for instance the one in which the two characters squabble over the more and more apparent diminution of old Mr Stevens' professional capabilities).

Actually, the game played via the parodic vision of history has some older and famous models in the history of English literature: e.g., the battle of Waterloo as depicted in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, or the historical figures of past ages viewed and analysed by ordinary, flesh-and-blood characters, in the novel *Henry Esmond*.

It essentially depends on what *key* the reader uses when confronting the various scenes that lend themselves to a parodic interpretation (although one can change the perspective during the reading, in much the same way as one can focus the film camera to shoot scenes presenting closer or remoter objects); the reading can be comical or *elegiac* – we think the adjective is preferable here instead of the term *sentimental*.

Most criticism about *The Remains of the Day* has mainly addressed the narrative techniques Ishiguro used, while relatively little has been said with respect to the *stylistic* perspective proper, which primarily involves language and its various structures and functions. *Le style, c'est l'homme même*, as Buffon, the French classicist, claimed – and his is a universal truth, after all: to a very significant extent, human beings *are* the language they use. Now, the British (and mainly the English) have always had this special (sometimes frustrating, even painful) consciousness in relation to the language they speak, as *the* defining mark in social (i.e. human) terms (and lots of excerpts from Dickens's, George Eliot's, Thomas Hardy's, etc. novels can substantiate this remark). If we analyze the novel from this specific angle, we can rightly say that, in *The Remains of the Day*, style becomes, even implicitly, one of the major themes of the book. And indeed, the plot in G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion* was interpreted in dozens of different ways (in both literature and real life), by thousands of actors, in thousands of different circumstances. On the other hand, let us not forget that Kazuo Ishiguro was coming from the area of a different culture, and a different (native) language. With Ishiguro, culture shock must also have been *linguistic* – at an initial point, or, more probably, later in adult, hyper-conscious life! One could justly consider that Stevens is *his own* Higgins: from this point of view, we can well compare his reading "polite books", and his various "didactic" endeavours, to the pronunciation drills that Professor Higgins tortures Eliza Doolittle with, as part of his process of shaping his linguistic Galatea. (Quite paradoxically, Stevens is also *his own* Galatea).

Reverting to the notion of *style*, one has to add an admittedly truistic, and yet useful, remark – i.e. the "voice" of the character-narrator is really his *style*. And this is maybe the very reason why the film based on the novel – which was actually acclaimed as a very good piece of art (in its own right, and in its own specifically artistic manner, as an exceptional cinematic interpretation of a literary piece) – cannot possibly (and naturally) render the stylistic specificity of the main character's speech, otherwise than very fragmentarily and rather randomly. Quite paradoxically again, Stevens *is* an undeniably engaging character, primarily through his deep humanity (which he seems so eagerly careful to conceal, by keeping a typically English *stiff upper lip*); a humanity that can be said to be rather sparingly or indirectly externalized (and rendered by the implicit author), in spite of the fact that his speech, his language style is predominantly dry, rather terse, and obsolete (at least at first glance). Yet, if we look at things more deeply, we may after all draw the conclusion that the humanity of the character's

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linguistic style comes from that very personal, and at the same time unmistakeably British, self-consciousness and wariness of verbal contact and addressing (in conversation, verbal style, etc.).

Stevens's "literary style" can be seen, incidentally, as an extended exercise of "good usage" in the English language, the dominant characteristic features of which are: downtoning, restraint, mitigating, circumlocution, explicitation, periphrastic – and occasional paraphrastic – structures. One could easily imagine it in terms of phonetics: the character's pronunciation (definitely very close to a classical inter-war RP variant), is really part and parcel of the substance of the novel. Speaking of actual pronunciation (which should necessarily be (hyper-)correct, using elevated, formal, logic, elegant if not downright bookish intonation), the experience of the audio-book and that of the film starring Anthony Hopkins are quite relevant in outlining the main character – though of course each listener may have his/her own satisfactory or disappointing personal impressions. (Too bad for those who saw the movie first! Or maybe, as the writer implied in an interview, was the film a welcome supplement to further exposing the intrinsic humanity of the main character?)… Here is what Ishiguro has to say about cinema vs literature): "A film has to be related to the book, like a cousin. Film is a very practical form and there are many considerations in play as to, say, who should play Stevens. (…) What I'm saying is that decisions in the film world are often made according to things like that. You're not necessarily looking for the person who would be the perfect embodiment of the author's vision. Anthony Hopkins did a superb job. He was different to the Stevens I had in my head, he created another version, another kind of Stevens, to the point where I imagined Stevens being like him" (Quoted from Matthews, & Groes: 123).

We could conclude – for the time being – with a (far from) final remark: by primarily using the valencies of style, the profoundly human, pathetic quality of the manner of behaving typical of an Englishman could be expressed with such incredible artistry by a typical Japanese.

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