A Rhetorical Approach to Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

Roxana PATRAŞ*

Keywords: *rhetorical situation*; *invitational rhetoric*; *rhetorical circle*; *rhetorical relationship*; *distance; problematology*; *witness*

For many of us who have watched James Ivory's movie, *The Remains of the Day* is a story about unfulfilled love. Too far-fetched, and obviously too late. A strong affection that is shared by both Mr. Stevens and Miss Kenton – the former, Lord Darlington's dignified butler, the latter, a housekeeper employed at Darlington Hall – but that is rather slow at expressing itself through words or otherwise. Fascinating for both "what it says" and for "what it whispers", the novel is a patchwork of several "submerged narratives". Compared to the other "submerged" layers – to the narrative of *dignity* and *greatness* based on the butler's "public self" (Guth 2000), for instance – the hidden narrative of love presents itself as

> completely submerged, in fact [as an] absent narrative of Stevens' feelings for her [Miss Kenton] [...] characterised by a series of enigmas, gaps and dislocations: ripples on the surface of the text, as Virginia Woolf put it, to mark the place where something had sunk (Guth 2000: 132)

Yet, in spite of its absence, this precise narrative is the only one with a "story line" (Guth 2000: 131), which presumably made it more fit to filmic transposition.

However, as already demonstrated by focused research, Ishiguro's novel does not stand on the ineffable relationship between Stevens and Miss Kenton. It is Stevens' "sinful" memory – "sinful" because, in Schacter's terms (Schacter 2001; Schacter 2003), it is highly "suggestible", "biased", and "misattributing" (Furst 2007) – the one that ties the knot of Stevens' "unreliable narratives" (Wall 1994) and recollections. The fact that recently the novel has transgressed literary inquiries and provided a case study for research on ethical conduct in public service (Quill 2009), international relations (Lang, Lang 1998), politics (Soucar 1991, Gipson 1997), social psychology (Terestchenko 2007) and on historiography (Emara 2015) is enough ground to reexamine Stevens' precise situatedness.

How deep does the acquiescent Stevens internalize his "agent condition" (Terestchenko 2007: 86–87)? Is Ishiguro's butler responding only to Lord Darlington's authority or, in *Bushido code*'s fashion (Rothfork 1996), he serves a

* "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, Romania.

„Philologica Jassyensia", an XIII, nr. 2 (26), 2017, p. 217–224

BDD-A27674 © 2017 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

higher ordering principle, named *World's History*, *World's Scene*, *World's Wheel* or even *Harmony of spheres*? If the second seems pertinent, then should not the super-conformist butler be considered more of ring in the endless *chain reaction*[1], more of *a trained witness* – thus extremely responsive in terms of perception – to various situations? If so, is Ward's theory of "Butterfly Effect" (Emara 2015: 8–9) also valid for Stevens' apparently weak (re)actions?

*

Grounding on the fact that Stevens feels more than he expresses through either words or gestures and taking into consideration his effort to better his discursive skills according to his new master's tendency to "banter", my take of Ishiguro's novel departs from a supposition of Stevens' *rhetoric responsiveness*.

While the new American owner of Darlington Hall, Mr. Farraday, is definitely a "conversational" type who loves engaging himself in one-on-one discussions with matching interlocutors, Stevens is an old-fashioned communicator who has to adjust to the changes occurred in the interaction with his new master. Definitely, the laconic and retractile Lord Darlington was prone to use *a rhetoric of persuasion* – though he has never been an "innate speaker", confirms the butler (Ishiguro 2012: 113), while the outspoken Farraday favors *invitational rhetoric*, which is a style grounding on equality, immanent value of all human beings, and self-determination.

> Invitational rhetoric is an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination. Invitational rhetoric constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does. In presenting a particular perspective, the invitational rhetor does not judge or denigrate others' perspectives, even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor's own. Ideally, audience members accept the invitation offered by the rhetor by listening to and trying to understand the rhetor's perspective and then presenting their own. When this happens, rhetor and audience alike contribute to the thinking about an issue in its subtlety, richness, and complexity. Ultimately, though, the result of invitational rhetoric is not just an understanding of the issue. Because of non-hierarchical, non-judgemental, non-adversarial framework established for the interaction, an understanding of the participants themselves occurs, an understanding that engenders appreciation, value, and sense of equality (Foss, Griffin 1995: 5).

Indeed, in one of his reflections, Stevens notices that recently, encouraged by their masters, his fellow-butlers have made an obsession with eloquence: posh English accent, impeccable grammar, use of wits, general knowledge and so forth (Ishiguro 2012: 42–43). Even though quite critical on this precise point, Lord Darlington's butler is doing pretty much the same thing himself. When Miss Kenton catches him "red-handed" – that is, reading "a sentimental love story" with ladies and gentlemen who express their mutual feelings in elegant sentences, Stevens explains that he does that only for having a good command of English (Ishiguro 2012: 185–190), for training himself in the art of eloquence required at serving great

[1] Emphasizing on Stevens' repeated elaborations on "greatness" and developing Arthur O. Lovejoy's concept, scholars have also called the novel's masterplot "The Great Chain of Being". Nevertheless, I believe that, as Judson and Rodden suggested, a metaphor of energy stresses better on Stevens' *reactiveness.*

BDD-A27674 © 2017 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

and noble people. Later on, the butler admits that reading these specimens of "rhetoricized" love used to procure him a certain "satisfaction". In all likelihood, his attention seems to be able to grasp instances of oratory (either *deliberative* and *forensic* as in Lord Darlington's 1923 Conference or *epideictic* as in the gallant novels Stevens reads surreptitiously in his room) and appreciate in a higher or lesser degree various speech deliveries.

If not credited with the truth, the butler's report on the political meetings held at Darlington Hall should be appreciated at least for detailed account of ideas advanced therein and for its unfluctuating attention. In the last resort, the *quality of Stevens' attention* (proven through his quasi-ubiquity within the premises of Darlington Hall and through his attending eagerness) is what makes his witnessing an instance of *aesthetic conduct* (Schaeffer 1996: 146–152, 268–284, 342–344). As far as Stevens' aesthetic conduct is concerned, one should notice that the novel opens by indicating this expressly. The English landscape, discovered just now by the old butler, adds a few important notes to Stevens' previous definition of "greatness":

> When I stood on that high ledge this morning and viewed the land before me, I distinctly felt that rare, yet unmistakable feeling – the feeling that one is in the presence of greatness. [...] And yet what precisely is this "greatness"? [...] I would say that it is the very *lack* of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart. What is pertinent is the calmness of that beauty, its sense of restraint (Ishiguro 1989: 28).

Seemingly, "the *lack* of obvious drama and spectacle" contained in the English landscape should be associated with the conspicuous and oftentimes rhetoricized drama and spectacle the butler had witnessed in Lord Darlington's mansion. This correlation enables us to approach the scene of the 1923 Conference (debating the European situation of post-war Germany) from Ishiguro's novel as a sort of landscape, albeit one that is displaying an "unseemly demonstrative" demeanor, one that is showing off a hierarchical, judgmental, and adversarial style of rhetoric. Nevertheless, what should draw one's attention is neither the type of "Beauty" the witness applies himself to, be that hierarchical or non-hierarchical, nor the butler's "agent condition" and his blind obeisance to authoritative commands (Terestchenko 2007: 86–88), but something that Stevens himself defines as "the condition of the objective viewer" (Ishiguro 1989: 28).

Pragmatically speaking, which conditions determine a viewer's "objectivity"?

First, "the calmness" of the viewed object, "a sense of restraint" that makes it totally non-invasive – thus, if Foss and Griffin's term is kept, "invitational" – for the viewer's perception; second, the viewer's ability to perceive what distinguishes stylistically one terrain from another: while Darlington Hall's inner landscape is "persuasive", the English countryside's outer landscape is "invitational". Definitely, "the objective viewer" (read "objective witness" as well) does want to keep a *distance* between his/ her inner viewpoint and the object of his/ her attention. The higher the object's level of "problematicity", the greater the "intellectual distance" between the two partners involved in a relationship.

BDD-A27674 © 2017 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

Through rhetoric, *such distance* is constantly being negotiated:

> The rhetorical relationship inevitably confirms a contingent and circumstantial social, psychological or intellectual distance, but which is structural in terms of what it manifests through its arguments or simply through seduction. Hence our definition: rhetoric is the negotiation of the distance between subjects. This negotiation takes place through rational or emotive language […]. This distance could be reduced, increased or maintained, depending upon the case (Meyer 1996: 334).

If additions to Meyer's definitions can be accepted, "the negotiation of distance" probably addresses not only intersubjective exchanges between people involved within the rhetorical realm, but also the commerce between the two subjects and their objective instantiations. Both the speaker and the audience perceive rhetorical partners as objects of interest, by and large, as "objective" instantiations. From an audience-centered viewpoint, the success of a rhetorical delivery is an arch drawn from the unfailing perception of the witnessing "subject" to the perfect emission of the "objectified subject". From a speaker-centered viewpoint instead, the "objectified" subject is the audience while the speaker is the witnessing subject. Polarity changed, both speaker and audience are alternatively *witnesses* to the same micro-world created within a "rhetorical circle" (Consigny 1974: 184) that rounds up specific rhetorical "devices" and "rhetorical situation" (Bitzer 1968). In the frame of *a rhetorical theory of situatedness*, "rhetoric" and "situation (context)" should not be ontologically demarcated as distinct entities; they should be integrated in a problematological model.

> In practice, rhetoric cannot be easily separated from the context: it is both of the situation, but also a reflexive way to transcend it; it contributes to both structure and agency, is limiting but also potentially transformative. Therefore, it is difficult to account for it through a philosophy that relies on fixed, ontological categories when the contingency of the relationship must be reflected in the philosophy of rhetoric in context. Rhetoric is *of* a social relation but it also *makes* a social relation; the direction of influence can go either way (Turnbull 2016: 123).

In the light of traditional dissociations among *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos*, co-witnessing seems rather paradoxical. By rejecting ontological radicalism, the problematological mode enables us to define the "rhetorical circle" as a complex and *situated* communicational dynamics (Turnbull 2016) among encoder, decoder, text and reality (Gorrell 1997: 400–401). While the concept of Real refers, in Žižek's comments on Lacan's thought, to both starting point and product, to both "positive fullness" and "*the remnants*, the excess which escapes symbolization" (Žižek 2008: 191), and eventually to "sublimity", the *rhetorical Reality* should also be acknowledged as such. The inherent "sublimity" of the *rhetorical realm* indicates that

> *it cannot be approached too closely*: if we get too near it, it loses its sublime features and becomes an ordinary vulgar object - it can persist only in an interspace, in an intermediate state, viewed from a certain perspective, half-seen. If we want to see it in the light of day, it changes into an everyday object, it dissipates itself, precisely because in itself it is nothing at all [*emphasis added*] (Žižek 2008: 192).

While "wit" is, etymologically speaking, the natural capacity of all "witnesses" (Stevens included), "wit" also represents the orators' most trained capacity. Addressing

BDD-A27674 © 2017 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

a sublime object such as the *rhetorical Reality*, "wit" should be approached as domain of speaker-audience shared expertise.

Turning back to Stevens' presupposed "wit", one can legitimately ask how deep he understands the "sublime" nature of surrounding Reality, be that defined in rhetorical terms or not. Issuing reflections on the common people's cognitive limits on "fundamental matters" (Ishiguro 2012: 217), Ishiguro's character has harbored indeed not only hypotheses of "unreliability" (Wall 1994), "mauvaise foi", "alienated consciousness" (Terestchenko 2007), but also suspicions of sheer fatuousness (Quill 2009: 222). Still, drawing on Stevens' witnessing as typical for all witnesses involved in the rhetorical realm, one may further inquire how deep a witness' perception goes into such Reality. Is this sort of perception complicated by the processes of symbolical arrangement occurred ante-speech (*inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria*, *pronuntiatio*) or post-speech (*evocation*, *transcription*, *editing*, *fragmentation*, *erasure*)?

Anyway, clarifying the condition of the "objective viewer" with respect to the rhetorical "landscape" still makes one unable to puncture "the black box" of rhetoric performances. Even worse, methodological inefficiency increases when such (objective) witness addresses an obsolete text, said and then jotted down centuries earlier. What could possibly be the farthest reach of one's inquiry into a localized and historicized piece of oratory? For instance, what could 19th-century Romanian eloquence reveal about the universal (but still secret) mechanisms of rhetorical success and failure? A hermeneutic of mutual interaction between oratory and literature? A *mise en scène* of ancient tensions between aesthetic/ embellishing and epistemic/ philosophical rhetoric (Florescu 1973: 11–20), between a "theory of figures" and a "theory of conflicts" (Meyer 1996: 329)? Raw sketches of political biographies explaining the orators' personal way of doing things? Historiographical accounts? A positivist treatment of texts as discourse? Hardcore structuralist exercises? A deconstructivist sophistry? A materialist and dialectical approach to textual layers? A fanciful captivation of an uninitiated eye? Something mixing, thus destroying, all virtual ways of touching the incandescent core?

All piled-up questions represent, in fact, as many abandoned ways of conversing with an object of study that has captured my interest for a while now: 19th century Romanian oratory (Patraş 2016; Patraş, Iacob 2016). While developing a feeling that analyzing the *rhetorical realm* is indeed a "game that must be lost" (McGann 2000), Ishiguro's novel eventually provided me with a key: not only making sense of "the remains of the day", but also fully taking advantage of what has left from a day's glory, that is, from *memory*, *energy*, and *melancholy*. "The evening", acknowledges Lord Darlington's butler, "is the best part of the day". It provides one with an all-encompassing perspective and with a feeling that the order of words is also the order of worlds, moods and senses.

If "simulators" of rhetorical sites are still difficult to create[2], if neither the orator nor his/ her audience can be credited as reliable witnesses to the one and the

[2] One project is Richard Graff's *Visualising Ancient Greek Rhetoric*, http://ivlab.cs.umn.edu/project_virtclassics.php. See also, Richard Graff, Arthur R. Walzer, Janet Atwill (eds.), *The Viability of the Rhetorical Tradition*, Sunny Press, 2005.

BDD-A27674 © 2017 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

same rhetorical reality, and if interpreters (such as myself) are the farthest end of a multiple mediated "chain reaction" (Judson, Rodden 1943), then all we are left with pertains to the frail realm of senses and, eventually, to imagination. Indeed, as shown by recent research, McLuhan's concept of "sensorium" will probably be instrumented in the field of rhetoric too (Hawhee 2015) in order to bridge traditional approaches relying on Aristotle's categories with a perspective that avails of the environmental conditions of rhetoric success.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Binney Gunnison pointed at the fact that all faults of eloquence (inability to shift swiftly the point of view, artificiality of shown emotions, mechanical appeals) can be *cured* with literature, more precisely with "literature of imagination" (Gunnison 1915). In this respect, oratory that somehow has internalized literary experiences/ practices should be considered – keeping Gunnison's medical view and adding one more footnote to Gracián's *desengagño* and to Meyer's *problematology* – a sort of "vaccinated rhetoric", a sort of *undeceived* and *problematized rhetoric*.

In contrast to Ishiguro's world from *The Remains of the Day*, the 19th-century Romanian society did not reach such high level of political literacy so that practices of "dignity" and "greatness" (Chiper 2016) to be also apparent in the republic of letters. I am sure though that an undeceived and problematized study of how literature and oratory worked together within the complex ecology of 19th-century Romanian culture will eventually show how the orators' appetite for glory gradually turned into an exploration of political memory, into a transfusion of energy between the successful orator and his race and, eventually, into intoxicating diffident melancholy.

Bibliography

Bitzer 1968: Lloyd F. Bitzer, *The Rhetorical Situation*, "Philosophy and Rhetoric", 1, no. 1, p. 1–14.

Chiper 2016: Mihai Chiper, *Pe câmpul de onoare. O istorie a duelului la români*, Bucureşti, Humanitas.

Consigny 1974: Scott Consigny, *Rhetoric and Its Situations*, "Philosophy and Rhetoric", 7, no. 3, p. 175–186.

Emara 2015: Maha Abdel Moneim Emara, *Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day: A Historiographical Approach*, "English Language and Literature Studies", 5, no. 4, p. 8–20.

Florescu 1973: Vasile Florescu, *Retorica şi neoretorica*, Bucureşti, Editura Academiei RSR.

Foss, Griffin 1995: Sonja K. Foss and Cindy K. Griffin, *Beyond Persuasion: a proposal for an invitational rhetoric*, "Communication Monographs", 62, issue 1, p. 2–18.

Furst 2007: Lilian R. Furst, *Memory's Fragile Power in Kazuo Ishiguro's Remains of the Day and W,G. Sebald's 'Max Ferber'*, "Contemporary Literature", 48, no. 4, p. 530–553.

Gipson 1997: Gregory Gipson, *The Remains of The Day and Postimperialism*, http://www.postcolonialweb.org/uk/ishiguro/gg3.html.

Gorrell 1997: Donna Gorrell, *The Rhetorical Situation Again: Linked Components in a Venn Diagram*, "Philosophy and Rhetoric", 30, no. 4, p. 395–412.

Graff et alii 2005: Richard Graff, Arthur R. Walzer, Janet Atwill (eds.), *The Viability of the Rhetorical Tradition*, Sunny Press.

Gunnison 1915: Binney Gunnison, *Imagination in Oratory*, "Quarterly Journal of Speech", 1, issue 2, p. 144–153.

BDD-A27674 © 2017 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

Guth 1999: Deborah Guth, *Submerged Narratives in Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day*, "Forum for Modern Language Studies", XXXV, issue 2, p. 126–137.
Hawhee 2015: Debra Hawhee, *Rhetoric's Sensorium*, "Quaterly Journal of Speech", 101, no. 1, p. 2–17.
Ishiguro 2012: Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, translated in Romanian by Radu Paraschivescu, Iași, Polirom.
Judson, Rodden 1934: L.S. Judson and D.E. Rodden, *The Fundamentals of Speaker-Audience Relationship*, "Quaterly Journal of Speech", 20, issue 3, p. 351–364.
Lang 2000: James M. Lang, *Public Memory, Private History: Kasuo Ishiguro's Remains of the Day*, "CLIO", 29, issue 2, p. 143–165.
Lang, Lang 1998: Anthony F. Lang and James M. Lang, *Between Theory and History: The Remains of the Day in international relations classroom*, "PS: Political Science and Politics", 31, no. 2, p. 209–215.
McGann 2000: Jerome J. McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rosetti and the Game That Must Be Lost*, Yale, Yale UP.
Meyer 1996: Michel Meyer, *Rhetoric and the Theory of Argument*, "Revue Internationale de Philosophie", no. 2.
Patraș 2016: Roxana Patraș (ed.), *Oratorie politică românească (1847–1899)*, vol. 1–2, Iași, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" UP.
Patraș, Iacob 2016: Roxana Patraș and Livia Iacob (ed.), *Oratorie politică românească (1847–1899)*, vol. 3, Iași, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" UP.
Quill 2009: Lawrence Quill, *Ethical Conduct and Public Service. Loyalty Intelligently Bestowed*, "American Review of Public Administration", 39, no.3, p. 215–224.
Rothfork 1996: John Rothfork, *Zen Comedy in Postcolonial Literature: Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day*, "Mosaic. An Interdisciplinary Critic Journal", 29, no. 1, p. 79–102.
Schacter 2001: Daniel L. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*, Harcourt, Houghton Mifflin.
Schacter et alii 2003: Daniel L. Schacter et alii, *The Seven Sins of Memory. Implications for the Self*, "Annals New York Academy of Sciences", 1001, p. 226–239.
Schaeffer 1996: Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Les célibataires de l'Art. Pour une esthétique sans mythes*, Paris, Gallimard.
Soucar 1991: Beth Soucar, *Taking Responsibility: Ideological Positioning in Anthills of Savannah and The Remains of the Day*
www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/ochebe/caideol/html.
Terestchenko 2007: Michel Terestchenko, *Servility and Destructiveness in Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day*, „Partial Answers Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas", 5, issue 1, p. 77–89.
Turnbull 2017: Nick Turnbull, *Political rhetoric and its relationship to context: a new theory of the rhetorical situation, the rhetorical and the political*, "Critical Discourse Studies", 14, no. 2, p. 115–131.
Wall 1994: Kathleen Wall, *The Remains of the Day and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration*, "The Journal of Narrative Technique", 24, no. 1, p. 18–42.
Žižek 2008: Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London, Verso.

BDD-A27674 © 2017 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

Abstract

As already demonstrated by previous research, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* does not stand on an ineffable love. Since the novel has transgressed literary inquiries and provided a case study for research on ethical conduct in public service, international relations, politics, social psychology, historiography and many other social domains, Stevens' situation, and particularly his "rhetorical situation" seem designed to invite further thinking. By departing from the novel fragments narrating the course of the 1923 Conference, from the butler's objective witnessing to various speeches delivered by Lord Darlington's guests and from a rhetorical theory of situatedness, the present essay proposes a rhetorical approach to Ishiguro's novel.

BDD-A27674 © 2017 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)