THE RECOVERY OF THE PAST IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S "THE REMAINS OF THE DAY"[1]

Abstract: *The paper explores the way in which the hero of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, the butler Stevens, tries to make sense of his past during a travel that is more one in time than one in space. It will show that, though he does visit the West Country and goes through and describes several places, what he most frequently refers to is the place where he has lived most of his life as a butler, Darlington Hall, and what appear to be its most glorious days. We will also notice that, having explored the past, he seems to look forward confidently to the future, but that might prove to be equally disappointing if we take into account the fact that he might not have learnt from his past mistakes as much as he thinks.*

Keywords: *past, memory, perfect butler.*

I. Introduction. General Characteristics of Kazuo Ishiguro's Novels

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, on 8 November 1954. He came to Britain in 1960 when his father began research at the National Institute of Oceanography, and was educated at a grammar school for boys in Surrey and then at the University of Kent, where he studied English and Philosophy. After graduating, he studied Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, being a member of the postgraduate course run by Malcolm Bradbury. There he met Angela Carter, who became an early mentor. He has been writing full-time since 1982.

In the 1980's, when Ishiguro started publishing his works, Britain was experiencing a shift in the way it perceived itself. It was no longer the centre of a huge empire. Consequently, the smallest details of English society were no longer of interest to people in the far corners of the world. Therefore, the English writers realized that they could no longer deal only with English realities, but had to concentrate on matters of international interest, on what was happening in the wide world. Ishiguro considers himself a writer of international novels, i.e. of novels that contain a vision of life that is of importance to people of varied backgrounds around the world, regardless of whether they are set across continents or only in one small locality. According to his own testimony, he no longer writes just for English readers. He no longer uses puns, because they cannot be translated, and he is careful with the way in which he portrays his characters. In addition to that, he is careful with the themes he chooses, since burning issues in one's country in one's time may not be interesting for other people.

> Ishiguro's narratives centre on memories and their potential to digress and distort, to forget and to silence the past, and above all to haunt the present. The protagonists of his fiction seek to overcome loss (the personal loss of family members and lovers; the losses resulting from war) by making sense of the past through acts of remembrance. His first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* are typical in this sense. (Procter, 2002)

They are set in the period after the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima respectively, but they are not historical novels, since they do not describe the two events at their centre. Instead, they investigate the way in which these traumatic events affected people.

The Remains of the Day marks a departure in the author's work, since its action is not set in Japan, but in England. Still, it is consistent with his writing style in that the

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book is a first person narrative told by a person who faces past self-deception and regret: the butler Stevens. As Brian W. Shaffer remarks, in all five novels published by Kazuo Ishiguro up to 2000, "the narrative moves back and forth seamlessly across events spanning decades of the protagonist's life to form a vast web of personal and historical traumas." No matter where the action of these novels takes place, "it is always the central character's quietly anguished interior landscape upon which the novel's most compelling drama is enacted." (Shaffer, 2006: 158)

II. Space and Time in *The Remains of the Day*

The action of the novel begins in July 1956 at Darlington Hall. Lord Darlington himself died three years before the present events. The place, so elegant in his glorious days, was bought by Mr. Farraday, an American businessman. The house is now only a pale shadow of what it used to be, with only four members of the staff that can barely do the job done in the past by around twenty. Mr. Farraday is also only a pale shadow of what Stevens considers to be an appropriate master. Lord Darlington was the perfect lord, in his butler's opinion, serious and reserved. In contrast, Mr. Farraday is too familiar and makes too many jokes, which Stevens does not understand and to which he cannot reply. But this new master intends to leave the place for a while, and so he encourages his butler to take some time off and to go on a trip. Stevens intends to use this opportunity to go to the West Country. There, he plans to visit Miss Kenton, the former housekeeper, in order to convince her to resume her job at Darlington Hall. He had received a letter from her and she appeared willing to do it.

The travel west by motor car is also a journey in the past, as during the travel Stevens' memories unfold in the form of a diary/ travelogue.

II.1. The Travel in Space

In space, Stevens travels from Darlington Hall to Salisbury, then to Mortimer's Pond, Dorset; Taunton, Somerset; Moscombe, Devon; Little Compton, Cornwall, where Miss Kenton lives. The diary ends at Weymouth, in the 6th evening of the travel. This physical trip is a voyage out of the house and out of Stevens' mental routine and psychological paralysis, "an act of self-liberation following a life of self-imprisonment" (Shaffer, 2006: 171). Until it, his life had been restricted to Darlington Hall. He had seen only the neighbourhood of the estate, but he does not complain about this, as he considers that he had seen the best of England by meeting the most important personalities of the country. On the other hand, he had "visited" the country by looking at the photographs and by consulting the information in the 7-volume book *The Wonder of England* written by Jane Symons, herself a guest at Darlington Hall once, in the 1930's. Though he keeps reminding himself that this journey represents a rare opportunity for him to enjoy the beauties of the land, and that he should be attentive to and present us what he sees, he keeps being distracted by memories. Thus, even though we are offered several descriptions of landscape and of the places that he sees – mostly towns/ villages and interiors (the various rooms that he inhabits) – every time they are connected to his memories of the past and of Darlington Hall. Therefore, we can say that even though he visits several places, the space to which he most frequently refers is the one that marked his past (and present for that matter), Darlington Hall.

He offers us many details, feelings, thoughts and opinions triggered by what he sees. For example, his considerations about the fact that even though other countries

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may have spectacular views, only the English landscape possesses that unique quality that is best referred to as "greatness", as it is calm and sober, not needing to "show off" its beauty, bring him to the notion of "great" butler, to which he dedicates much attention.

II.2. The Travel in Time. The Recovery of the Past

In time, Stevens takes us back to the past days of his favourite master. He had served Lord Darlington for 35 years and he is proud of that. He respects the lord and has a high opinion on him. That is why he does not like other people to speak nonsense about him. The bad things that are said about this great employer are not true, considers Stevens, recalling however, how a lot of important people, like Ribbentrop, then the German ambassador in England, came unofficially to Darlington Hall in Lord Darlington's days, and how a lot of important matters were discussed in his house, from which we are mentioned a conference on the Versailles treaty taking place in March 1923, that had as a purpose the revision of its harsher provisions against Germany. Going back through these memories, Stevens finally understands that his beloved master was either a Nazi sympathiser whom he himself helped to entertain the Nazi leaders or a naïve politician used by the Nazi for their political interests. Either way, Lord Darlington was not the admirable man who contributed to maintaining better understanding between nations and peace in Europe.

This is not his only disillusion. The memories of Lord Darlington's days include a great love that went by not unnoticed, but ignored. Though at the beginning Stevens and Miss Kenton had conflicts because both were proud, gradually they get closer and closer to each other. However, they avoid discussing personal matters. When Miss Kenton draws Stevens' attention that his father is over-working, he does not take it into consideration. When she enters his room and, seeing him reading a book, wants to start a conversation about it, he does not answer and prefers her to leave his room where she came uninvited, "invading" his private moments. Even their meetings over cups of cocoa, that take place every evening in her parlour, are concentrated on professional matters. Miss Kenton is dissatisfied with this. When they quarrel over the firing of two Jewish maids, requested by Lord Darlington and opposed by Miss Kenton, she reproaches to him that he is always pretending. He himself did not agree with the procedure either, but he had done his duty as always, without saying a word of protest. Too much politeness and dignity lead to artificial behaviour and failure of communication, thinks Miss Kenton. And, despite her protests, the evening meetings are brought to an end by Stevens, because they have a quarrel regarding her "boy-friend". She announces him later that she will marry this man, in such a way as if to provoke a reaction from his part, but the reaction does not come. So she gets married and leaves Darlington Hall.

A great butler, in Stevens' opinion, has to be dignified in keeping with his position, i.e. he has to be able not to abandon the professional being that he inhabits. That is why only Englishmen could be great butlers, the continentals being unable to hide their feelings. The perfect butler has to be able to keep up appearances and do his duty regardless of what happens around him. When old Mr. Stevens (a former butler himself, now too old for this and serving under his son) dies during the conference on the Versailles treaty, his son keeps on doing his job and serving the guests, without showing any sign of grief. When Miss Kenton's aunt and only relative dies, not only that he does not comfort her, but he even reproaches her with the behaviour of some of

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her new subordinates, considering that a discussion on professional matters can do her good. This is something Miss Kenton cannot agree with.

Stevens himself understands during this travel the gravity of the sacrifices he has made in the name of duty. His father is dead, his love is married to someone else, his beloved master was not perfect at all. He has sacrificed everything for nothing. The former Miss Kenton (now Mrs. Benn) will not come to Darlington Hall, even if she too seems to want to recover the past. Stevens did not even mention the possibility, because, though during their conversation she alluded that sometimes she wished she had married Stevens, she seemed to be happy as she was. In a discussion with another butler met on the way, Stevens confesses that he had given his best to Lord Darlington and now he does not have a great deal more left to give. Now it is time for him to rest. Considering that the evening is the most enjoyable part of the day, Stevens decides not to look back but to try to make the best of what remains of his day (i.e. life). Consequently, he intends to improve his skill in bantering, especially because in bantering lies the key to human warmth.

Englishness, characterized by calmness, a sense of restraint, discretion, distinction and especially dignity, appears in this novel as an old-fashioned concept, no longer functioning. For Mr. Farraday, the idea of Englishness incarnated in Stevens is exotic and archaic and so it turns out to be for Stevens himself in the end. In modern times, the old values are inadequate. Ishiguro also offers a solution to this: a re-adaptation of the self.

"In Ishiguro's novels narration is, at least partly, a therapeutic process. The novels are not attempts to render the past convincingly, but rather to pursue how individuals interpret and construct that past." (Procter, 2002) The writer himself confesses that he has become less interested in realism because the cinema and television do it so well. Instead of concentrating on the exterior world, he has become more and more interested in what is happening inside his characters' head.

> When I write a novel perhaps some part of me wants to offer in a book an experience that you can't get easily sitting in front of a cinema screen or a television screen. For that reason, one of the strengths of novels, I think, over camera-based storytelling is that you are able to get right inside people's heads. You're able to explore people's inner worlds much more thoroughly and with much more subtlety. That's not to say there aren't many great filmmakers who really get you into somebody's head. But the form is different. It's a third person exterior form. (interview with Linda Richards, 2000).

III. Conclusion

We can conclude by stating that Stevens' travel is not so much one in space, meant to get him to know new people and new places, but rather one in time, into his own past, meant to get him to really know both himself and the people that he has already met, and the place where he has lived most of his life as a butler. We might consider that he has learnt his lesson, but, as Geta Dumitriu notices in the afterword of the Romanian translation of the novel, his desire to take up bantering only speaks of his availability of adapting without thinking to the demands of another master. The past was recovered, but the future might prove to be equally disappointing.

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