



# The butler in (the) passage: The liminal narrative of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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## Abstract

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*This paper considers Ishiguro's novel in the context of Victor Turner's work on pilgrimage, and seeks to interrogate the apparently fixed opposition between the structural rigidity of Stevens's position (his situation in the passage as an index of his situation as butler) at Darlington Hall and the liminal anti-structure of Stevens's journey (in passage). The article will then offer some speculation about how the novel's thematic preoccupations are underscored by liminal narrative techniques. This intimate relationship between content and form is reflected, in particular, in the structure and title of the text.*

## Opsomming

Die huiskneg in die verbygaan/gang: die liminale narratief in Kazuo Ishiguro se *The Remains of the Day*

*In hierdie artikel word Ishiguro se roman in oënskou geneem teen die agtergrond van Victor Turner se pelgrimstogteorie. Die artikel bevraagteken die oënskynlik vaste teenstelling tussen die strukturele rigiditeit van Stevens se situasie in Darlington Hall (sy posisie in die gang wat dui op sy situasie as huiskneg), en die liminale anti-struktuur van Stevens se lewensgang (in die verbygaan). Die artikel bring ook in berekening hoe die roman se tematiese inhoud onderstreep word deur liminale narratiewe tegnieke. Die intieme verhouding tussen inhoud en vorm word veral weerspieël deur die teks se struktuur en titel.*

## 1. Introduction

The consequence attached to his role as butler to Lord Darlington is a subject that preoccupies the narrator for a large part of *The Remains of the Day*, especially as regards the proper “dignity in keeping with his *position*” (Ishiguro, 1989:42, emphasis added – KS). And as if to underscore this preoccupation, Stevens’s *physical* position itself at Darlington is foregrounded, almost to the point of excess. Ishiguro goes to considerable lengths to place his butler on thresholds, beneath arches and, even more notably (“prominently” seems the wrong word, given Stevens’s ambition to be invisibly visible) along the passage of the back corridor that forms the service spine of Darlington Hall. Significantly, the trip that Stevens takes to visit Miss Kenton in the west of England is also a form of “passage” – it is a pilgrimage; a rite of passage. The country lanes that Stevens travels along are described as tunnels and conduits that vividly recall the corridors of Darlington; more specifically, they become the physical structures down which Stevens must pass as he moves toward self-knowledge, however qualified. Speaking both literally and figuratively, *The Remains of the Day* is a novel set in passage(s).

## 2. Darlington Hall

Stevens’s duties at Darlington Hall require of him a fine sense of balance between stasis and movement, “that balance between attentiveness and the illusion of absence that is essential to good waiting” (Ishiguro, 1989:72). On the one hand, when in attendance to Lord Darlington or Mr Farraday, he must be present but unobtrusive; as a consequence he customarily positions himself “in the shadows” (p. 73) “near the entrance arch” (p. 217); even when tasked with a duty outdoors, he considers the value of “conceal[ing his] ... person behind the large rhododendron bush beside the path” (p. 89). On the other hand, when he is not “waiting”, he is occupied with almost ceaseless traversing of the

... back corridor, which serves as a sort of backbone to the staff’s quarters of Darlington Hall, [and which] was always a rather cheerless affair due to the lack of daylight penetrating its considerable length. Even on a fine day, the corridor could be so dark that the effect was like walking through a tunnel (p. 78).

This “tunnel”, and Stevens’s occupation of it, has an undeniable metaphoric purchase as a reflection of Stevens’s existence at

Darlington Hall.<sup>1</sup> The “fine day” outside, and the opportunities for energy and growth that it promises seem quite unattainable while he is in service; his life, the novel attests, is indeed a “dark” and “cheerless affair”.

Whether Stevens is “waiting” or busying himself behind the scenes, a common feature to his situation is that he is often to be found somewhere in between the two activities, appropriately enough at doorways. When he hears that his father has been taken ill, he is to be found “hesitating in the doorway” (p. 93); he pauses “for a second to listen at the door” to a furtive conversation between M. Dupont and Mr Lewis (p. 94); and has a persistent “recollection of standing alone in the back corridor before the closed door of Miss Kenton’s parlour; ... not actually facing the door, but standing with [his] person half turned towards it ...” (p. 212). Along with Ishiguro’s finely-tuned depiction of the uneasy balance between Stevens’s sometimes accomplished, sometimes anxious alternation between movement and stasis, accounts of the butler’s hesitation at doorways are presented with such regularity that they acquire a figurative resonance. The doorways at Darlington Hall come to signify thresholds, or portals, over and through which Stevens is reluctant to pass because, more specifically, they represent both the threat and promise of change to Stevens’s emotional rigidity and vaunted “professionalism”.

The placement of Stevens in the passage of Darlington Hall also serves as a commentary on the position of the butler, generically speaking, as a figure of some hierarchical uncertainty. As the commonplace term “a gentleman’s gentleman” suggests, the butler is neither simply a servant, nor fully-fledged member of the family he serves. To be a butler is to be in a condition of simulacrum: he is a “gentleman”, but only inasmuch as he is defined in relation to a gentleman of property and social standing; that is, he is employed to be a gentleman – something of a contradiction in terms. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines a gentleman as a “man of superior position in society; often, a man of money and leisure”. To be employed to be thus would seem to find oneself in the rather contradictory semantic and social position of earning (hardly

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1 Cynthia Wong (2000:60) correctly observes that “the metaphor of ‘good waiting’ is particularly apt for understanding the subtle difference between what Stevens will reveal and what he will conceal through the illusion of revealing”, a remark that is in keeping with my own sense that the position (in both senses of the term) of the butler serves as a trope for the narrative technique of the novel.

generous amounts of) money in a work of service to be socially superior, moneyed and leisured, attributes the average butler surely does not – can not – enjoy. Moreover, his status is predicated upon employment and lapses the moment he is placed out of service. All of these ambivalent positional dynamics are played out in *The Remains of the Day*, where Stevens's intermittent occupation of both hall and passage, the centre and the margin, is reflected by his wavering at the thresholds that mark the limits/entrances of existential territories of the self, class and society.<sup>2</sup>

If the various doorways of Darlington Hall bestow a physical site for Stevens's ambiguous social position, they also serve with similar equivocation as indexes of both restraint and liberation. They undeniably work as barriers between the different worlds Stevens uneasily and ambiguously inhabits, but the nervousness he displays at crossing over their portals suggests that the thresholds of Darlington Hall also give access to a world that lies beyond their literal and figurative confines. They represent the possibility of egress because they can open and permit escape. In spite of his entrenched domestic position and view of life he nevertheless seems, at the same time, poised on the brink of flight. It is the opportunity of escape, of course, that Stevens will take when he sets off on his voyage into the West.

### 3. Miss Kenton

It is worth noting that it is pursuit of Miss Kenton that finally spurs him on: her letter that "set[s] off a certain chain of ideas" (p. 5) and inspires him to approach her concerning the possibility of her

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2 The complex relationship between the status of the servant in society and his or her representation in fiction has attracted some fine critical commentary. Notable examples include Bruce Robbins who, in *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* offers a rigorous discussion of how the servant's representation by an "abusive synecdoche" (Robbins, 1986:x) in nineteenth-century fiction is indicative of complex social and narrative regulation. He devotes specific attention to *The Remains of the Day* in "The Village of the Liberal Managerial Class" (Robbins, 2001a) and in "Very Busy Just Now: Globalization and Harriedness in Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*" (Robbins, 2001b). In a similar vein, Rory Drummond writes of another butler, Brooksmith, in Henry James's short story of that name, and demonstrates, amongst other things, how the butler's indeterminate social and domestic position and the intractable ambiguities of the story's narrative are mutually reflective. Finally, Michael Meyer (2002:203) convincingly defines the intersection between the problem of "dignity" in the novel and the ambivalent position of the butler in the "great house", wherein the butler "stand[s] in for the aristocracy ... taking his privileged place at the top of a humble but vigilantly ranked class".

returning to work. Her role as a catalyst for Stevens's journey is firmly established before the present-time passages of the novel. In the sections of the text that are set in Darlington Hall, she is shown to beckon him towards thresholds, and towards the light, on almost every occasion in which she is mentioned. Early in the novel, Stevens describes what is to become an important and often-recollected scene:

I can recall distinctly climbing to the second landing and seeing before me a series of orange shafts from the sunset breaking the gloom of the corridor where each bedroom door stood ajar. And as I made my way past those bedrooms, I had seen through a doorway Miss Kenton's figure, silhouetted against a window, turn and call softly: 'Mr Stevens, if you have a moment.' As I entered, Miss Kenton had turned back to the window. Down below, the shadows of the poplars were falling across the lawn. To the right of our view, the lawn sloped up a gentle embankment to where the summerhouse stood, and it was there my father's figure could be seen, pacing slowly with an air of preoccupation – indeed, as Miss Kenton puts it so well, 'as though he hoped to find some precious jewel he had dropped there'<sup>3</sup> (p. 50).

"Silhouetted" by light, bathed in an "orange glow", Miss Kenton approximates the figure of a spiritual guide (incongruous enough in the stiff, spiritually regularised discipline of Stevens's world) as she gently invites Stevens to confront the fact of his father's incipient collapse, and as a consequence, the devastating futility of his own devotion to service and position. Miss Kenton is an agent of propelling volition in the novel: she crosses thresholds with relish, offering the obdurate Stevens the dangerous example of transgression. For instance, his recollection that he was "a little taken aback when Miss Kenton opened the door and entered before [he] had bidden her to do so" (p. 52) is inspired by her persistent and unsettling habit of crossing his boundaries of propriety, rather than by a momentary lapse in correctness. She seems forever "just outside the door" (p. 103) where he catches "sight of Miss Kenton

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3 The recollection is obviously an important one, as he repeats himself in virtually identical terms a little later: "I can recall vividly the way the last of the daylight was coming through each open doorway and falling across the corridor in orange shafts. And as I walked on past those unused bedrooms, Miss Kenton's figure, a silhouette against a window within one of them, had called to me" (p. 60).

through the open doorway, signalling to [him]"<sup>4</sup> (p. 106). On one occasion (where Stevens senior has placed a statue of a Chinaman in the wrong position) she repeatedly urges Stevens to "step out here and observe for [him]self" (p. 57) – to which Stevens's rather comical response is contemplation of the decidedly undignified option of "departure via the french windows" before finally succeeding in "propelling [him]self through the doorway and several paces down the corridor before a somewhat astonished Miss Kenton could recover her wits" (p. 58). This action, unsurprisingly, startles not only Miss Kenton but Stevens himself, forcing him to round on his companion in defense and express his surprise that she has "nothing better to do than stand in corridors all day" (p. 58); it also anticipates both his departure from Darlington Hall and Miss Kenton's role in inspiring it. In her role as catalyst, Miss Kenton is both menacing – "glaring up at [him] from the foot of the stairs" (p. 215) – and inviting, as "the light shin[es] from her parlour like a beacon into the dimness of the corridor" (p. 226), or both, when "a bar of light [falls] across her face and [he can] see the angry expression on it" (pp. 78-79). Just as the doorways of the Hall signify both imprisonment and freedom, so Miss Kenton is represented as an agent of both Stevens's doom and his salvation (glaring and angry but always in the light) – appropriately enough, given the fact that Stevens's journey will place him and his firmly-held beliefs in crisis at the same time as grant him new and unexpected pleasures.<sup>5</sup>

In the sections of narrative set at Darlington Hall, then, Ishiguro presents Stevens as a figure caught between two worlds, challenged by the promise/threat of a new and unsettling experience, placed along corridors, in (the) passage, teetering on thresholds, beckoned forward by an *enlightened* companion. These sections are important because they simultaneously anticipate and are recalled during the events that take place in the present time of the novel. This

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4 See also pp. 56, 93, 108, 109 and 177.

5 It must be acknowledged, however, that Miss Kenton's motives are not always clear or unequivocal. Renata Salecl (1994:18) argues with some cause that Miss Kenton "loves [Stevens] only for what he actually is – a bureaucrat who tries by all available means to hide his desire", and Kathleen Wall (1994:40) suggests that "Miss Kenton's psychological honesty is ... suspect" and that "she frequently attributes to him feelings that might more properly belong to her". Whatever Miss Kenton's intentions, however, these do not detract from the propelling force she has during her stay at Darlington, and the concomitant magnetic draw she exerts later as Mrs Benn.

simultaneity is important: what might be called the “Hall narrative” is woven into the account of Steven’s journey westward, and precedes the journey only in a temporal sense, but not in the unfolding structure of the novel itself. One way of understanding the complex interplay between the Hall narrative and the journey narrative (the present-time sections of the text), and the relationship between experiences that Stevens has in both, is to consider the notion of liminality and pilgrimage, principally as these have been presented in the anthropological work of Victor Turner.

#### 4. Victor Turner, liminality and pilgrimage

In *Blazing the Trail: Way Marks in the Exploration of Symbols* (1972), Turner offers a detailed description of the common characteristics of pilgrimage that he has gleaned from his observations of ritual and pilgrimage in Africa, Japan and Europe. Throughout his study, he makes it clear that while his concern is with pilgrimage of a predominantly religious nature, he argues for the applicability of his observations to many secular experiences which have as their purpose the voluntary extraction of the individual from a regularised, structured existence into a cultural – or personal, or social – hiatus that is predominantly anti-structural and free from quotidian concerns. Literary examples that Turner offers include Chaucer, Dante and Bunyan (Turner, 1992:37). While Stevens’s journey is not specifically described as a pilgrimage in the sense of *The Canterbury Tales* or *Inferno*, given the applicability of Turner’s paradigm to non-religious experience and to literature, it seems not unreasonable to consider Stevens’s journey in *The Remains of the Day* within the context of that framework.

Central to Turner’s observations is his development of a theory of the *liminal*,<sup>6</sup> an “interstitial and interfacial” (Turner 1992:47) realm. Turner explains that pilgrims “undergo a separation from a relatively fixed state of life and social status, and pass ... into a liminal or threshold phase and condition for which none of the rules and few of

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6 Turner borrowed the term “liminality” from Arnold van Gennep (Turner, 1992:37), and initially (in a 1977 essay) distinguished between the liminal and the liminoid, the liminoid being a more secularised proposition (Turner, 1992:55). However, by the time he writes “Morality and Liminality” in 1980 (Turner, 1992:132-162), this distinction seems less important, and Turner refers to the liminoid as liminal on more than one occasion. Mindful of this apparent loosening of Turner’s distinction, I use the term “liminal” throughout, although I have no wish to suggest that Stevens’s pilgrimage is anything other than individual and secular.

the experiences of their previous existence have prepared them" (p. 29). "The limen of pilgrimage is ... motion", writes Turner (p. 38), along "a threshold" which can be "a very long threshold, a corridor almost. Or a tunnel which may become the pilgrim's road. 'Liminalities' are betwixt and between ... they are not this or that, here or there, one thing or another, *both* this *and* that" (p. 50). The liminal is an "often subversive" condition "representing radical critiques of ... central structures" (p. 57), characterised in large part by the operations of death and the dead, quixotic play, and anti-structural processes; it might be defined, he suggests, as a state of "the subjunctive mood" (p. 133). The liminal is an essential precondition for the desired outcome of pilgrimage: reaggregation into the community with new (self) knowledge.

## 5. Stevens's pilgrimage

That the butler's journey takes him to the shrine of Salisbury Cathedral is an early and perhaps rather obvious indication that Stevens's journey approximates what we might commonly understand to be a pilgrimage. Another indication lies in the fact that Stevens embarks upon his travels of his own volition. Turner insists that the "voluntariness" of pilgrimage is "the fulcrum of the matter" and is what gives it such "paradigmatic charm" as a subject for writers (Turner, 1992:37-38). In spite of Stevens's attempts to disguise the enterprise as an act of duty to the household in response to Farraday's suggestion that he should "get out of the house for a few days" (Ishiguro, 1989:4), the reader is not for a moment convinced, nor is Farraday (p. 14), and this much-deferred act will subversively "prompt [him] towards such surprising new perspectives on topics [he] imagined [he] had long ago thought through thoroughly" (p. 3).

Yet another, perhaps less obvious correspondence between *The Remains of the Day* and Turner's definition of pilgrimage, are the repeated descriptions of Stevens entering into, quite literally, the passages, corridors and tunnels of the English countryside which become his "pilgrim's road" (Turner, 1992:50). As he leaves Darlington Hall he recognizes that he has

... gone beyond all previous boundaries ... [with the sense] of unease mixed with exhilaration ... . I took a turning and found myself on a road curving around the edge of a hill. I could sense the steep drop to my left, though I could not see it due to the trees and thick foliage that lined the roadside. The feeling swept over me that I had truly left Darlington Hall behind, and I



must confess I did feel a slight sense of alarm – a sense aggravated by the feeling that I was perhaps not on the correct road at all, but speeding off in totally the wrong direction into a wilderness ... (Ishiguro, 1989:24).

Going “beyond all boundaries”, Stevens enters the threshold of the liminal, both literally and figuratively. The literal part of the process is made evident by the tunnel-like passage of the “trees and thick foliage” that characterise the roads he travels.<sup>7</sup> Stevens’s figurative initiation into the liminal state is indexed by his “betwixt and between” sense “of unease mixed with exhilaration” which will also become intermittently coloured with a “tranquil mood” (p. 68) rarely (if ever) noted in the Stevens of the Hall narrative.<sup>8</sup>

In an early discussion of the liminal,<sup>9</sup> Turner notes that symbols and metaphors of death (and rebirth) are typically part of pilgrimage. These are important tropes because they represent the “pains of dissolution” (Turner, 1992:30), the withdrawal from a previous life and the possibility of rebirth into a new one: “The move into liminality is ... a death-birth or a birth-death” (p. 32). It is tempting, given Turner’s description of death and gestation symbolism in pilgrimage, to compare Stevens’s leafy road passages to the birth canal: but this

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7 See, for example: “I found myself in a narrow lane, hemmed in on either side by foliage so that I could gain little idea of what was around me ... high hedges on either side of me also persisted, obscuring my vision ...” (Ishiguro, 1989:117-18); and “I found myself getting lost down narrow, twisting lanes ... At times, the foliage on either side became so thick as practically to blot out the sun altogether, and one found one’s eyes struggling to cope with the sudden contrasts of bright sunlight and deep shade” (p. 120).

8 In an interview with Cynthia Wong, Ishiguro refers to the importance of the pathway as a metaphor for the choices his characters make in his early novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989): “they are perhaps underpinned by a sense that life is a clear path, a clear road down which you can come, and you start off with principles and values and then you go there and you play out these values and you try very hard to stick them. And, of course, you make mistakes or you backed the wrong team; the challenge is all about having the right values in the first place and somehow having the strength of character to stick to them. Those assumptions started to be modified as I got older” (Wong, 2001:325). It might be argued that *The Remains of the Day* marks – enacts, even – the shift, or modification, to which Ishiguro alludes: the Stevens of the Hall narrative is assured that his life is a “clear path”, but the journey – the pilgrimage – involves not so much a clinging to the “rightness” of his earlier values, but a process of revising that simplistic and unimagative worldview.

9 The chapter entitled “Death and the Dead in the Pilgrimage Process” in *Blazing the Trail* (Turner, 1992:29-47), first published in 1975.

might be rather too blunt a formulation for a novel in which awakening and “rebirth” are only obliquely hinted at. Nevertheless, in leaving Darlington Hall, Stevens certainly is forced to relinquish his rigid adherence to duty – he becomes “‘dead’ to quotidian existence” (p. 29) and given the opportunity (at least) to “regain” a lost “innocence” (p. 32). “Pilgrimage” writes Turner, “is ... a rehearsal of the pilgrim’s own death” and might be partially described as “going to a far place to understand a familiar place better” (p. 35). In revisiting the painful circumstances of his father’s death over the six days it takes him to reach Weymouth, Stevens does, indirectly, rehearse his own death because his life is crucially predicated upon his father’s example. But does Stevens “understand a familiar place better”? Does he view Darlington Hall, its history and his own status more clearly as a consequence of his liminal journey? That is not quite as simple a matter, as I hope to show later.

Developing his argument about the significance of death and the dead in pilgrimage, Turner expands his frame of reference to note that the liminal state is also populated by “masked figures” (Turner, 1992:50).<sup>10</sup> Now, while I have no wish to make the absurd suggestion that Stevens encounters “monsters” along his route made up of “weird, even anatomically impossible configurations” (Turner, 1992: 50), I do find it interesting that he *does* encounter, at regular and important intervals, unfamiliar figures who appear apparently out of nowhere to guide him towards new geographical and existential vistas. Their duty is, to use Turner’s words, to “provoke” Stevens “into thinking hard about the elements and basic building blocks of symbolic complexes [he] had hitherto taken for granted as ‘natural’ units” (Turner, 1992:50). The first such figure appears on day one, not long after Stevens has left Darlington Hall and has “gone beyond all previous boundaries” (Ishiguro, 1989:24). Stevens stops the car to “stretch [his] legs a little” and comes upon a footpath:

Sitting on the large stone that marked this spot was a thin, white-haired man in a cloth cap, smoking his pipe. He called to me again and though I could not quite make out his words, I could see him gesturing for me to join him. For a moment, I took him for a vagrant, but then I saw he was just some local fellow enjoying the fresh air and summer sunshine, and saw no reason not to comply.

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10 In the chapter, “Variations on a Theme of Liminality” (Turner, 1992:48-65), first published in 1977.

‘Just wondering, sir,’ he said, as I approached, ‘how fit your legs were.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

The fellow gestured up the footpath. ‘You got to have a good pair of legs and a good pair of lungs to go up there. But if I was in better shape, I’d be sitting up there. There’s a nice little spot up there, a bench and everything. And you won’t get a better view in the whole of England’ (pp. 24-25).

After expressing some reluctance, Stevens does what the man urges, and is rewarded with “a most marvellous view over miles of the surrounding countryside” (p. 26). In retrospect, Stevens recognises that it is at this point that he “began for the first time to adopt a frame of mind appropriate for the journey” (p. 26). The view and the pleasure it evokes gives way to a contemplation of the “greatness” of the countryside which, in turn, inaugurates the extended meditation on “what is a ‘great’ butler” (p. 29) that will preoccupy Stevens for the rest of the trip. The “white-haired man” is not seen again: his duty as a masker (Turner, 1992:50) in Stevens’s pilgrimage has been performed.

Day two presents another encounter, this time introduced by the domestic commonplace of an unyielding hen in the road. Stevens hoots the car’s horn at the bird, which elicits the hurried intervention of the hen’s owner, a “young woman in an apron” (Ishiguro, 1989:68) who thanks him profusely for not injuring “poor Nellie” and who offers him a cup of tea to “set him on [his] way” (p. 69). The episode is remarkable for nothing so much as its simplicity, but Stevens is touched by something unusual and unfamiliar: “the simple kindness I had been thanked for, and the simple kindness I had been offered in return, caused me somehow to feel exceedingly uplifted about the whole enterprise facing me over these coming days” (p. 69). These “simple kindnesses” are especially striking for Stevens because, in his world of all-encompassing official duty and professionalism, there is little room, it would seem, for such elementary notes of humanity; moreover, any gestures towards the intimate are soured by gaucheness at best (for example, the burlesque conversation between Stevens and Mr Cardinal concerning the “facts of life” (pp. 81-85)), and politics and the depleting economies of power at worst. Ishiguro makes this point by, once again, setting Stevens off along a trail of associations. Stevens relates this “small encounter” with Nellie and the girl in the white apron and immediately segues (by way of self-defence against imagined

rebuke for treating his father “bluntly over his declining abilities” (p. 70)) into an account of the “conference of 1923” (p. 70) in which Lord Darlington’s misguided compunction to do some “kindness” for the German people goes very wrong indeed. Like the white-haired man, the “girl in the white apron” is not seen again. But she has sent Stevens along a path that holds the potential for enlightenment and self-recognition.

Another masked figure in Stevens’s pilgrimage is the batman who directs him down “narrow, twisting lanes” (p. 120) to a “local beauty spot” (p. 118) called “Mortimer’s Pond” and thereby to plumbing some of the troubled depths of his own calm surface – a painful contemplation initiated by the batman’s query as to whether Stevens had worked for Darlington, and the butler’s surprising denial.<sup>11</sup> Day three, at Moscombe, presents a Hardy-esque chorus of curious rural folk, numbering at least three masked figures among them: Mr. Taylor, who offers the stranded butler accommodation (p. 163) and whose mistaking of Stevens for a gentleman propels him along a series of half-accidental, half-deliberate obfuscation of identity; and the truculent George Andrews who destabilises Stevens’s precarious sense of the relationship between social standing, power and accountability (pp. 181-193). There is also Dr. Carlisle, who sees through his disguise of “gentleman” and re-complicates Stevens’s conception of “dignity” and the necessity of “not removing one’s clothing in public” (p. 210) which, in turn, alerts Stevens to the perils of emotional guardedness and the transgressive delights that might lie in wait for him if he were to remove the uniform(ity) of professionalism. Interaction with all three causes considerable introspection on Stevens’s part about duty, dignity, and loyalty, as well as about his dealings with Miss Kenton and the nature of his feelings towards her.

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11 His denial here is not an isolated instance. An American visitor to Darlington Hall enquires, “But tell me, Stevens, what was this Lord Darlington like? Presumably you must have worked for him.” To which Stevens responds, “I didn’t, madam, no” (Ishiguro, 1989:123), giving him a rather Judas-like aspect that is savagely turned against him in his humiliating denial of his own abilities and knowledge to the mocking enquiries of Mr. Spencer: three times Stevens intones, “I’m very sorry, sir, but I am unable to be of assistance on this matter” (p. 195-96). These denials of association with Darlington and of his own intellect are striking symptoms of Stevens’s general anxiety about his identity that gnaws at his composure and is only partly tamed by his typical responses of rationalisation and deferment.

The last masked figure that Stevens meets is the man on the bench on the pier at Weymouth. He is a retired butler who, along with Miss Kenton, it seems Stevens has been travelling towards all this time. As is the case with the other masked figures, this man presents Stevens with the *opportunity* of crossing over his personal thresholds of self-knowledge and understanding. He intones, “The evening’s the best part of the day” (p. 244), a refrain that seems at once trite and profound: depending, perhaps, on the extent to which Stevens is able to embrace its optimistic resonances.

In spite of their generally unremarkable social status (no ministers of foreign affairs here), these figures acquire in the novel a slightly other-worldly, mystical appearance; a nuance created partly by the fact that they appear unbidden and fortuitously in the most unexpected of places, and partly by Ishiguro’s metonymical sketching of their physical characteristics which gives them an iconographic demeanor: they are “a white-haired man”, a “girl in an apron”, “a man dressed in his shirt sleeves” (p. 118) and “a heavily built man, probably in his late sixties, wearing a rather tired tweed jacket, his shirt open at the neck” (p. 241). They are (even George Andrews) quite benign, leaving Stevens with “a fine feeling” (p. 26), “in very good spirits” (p. 69), “in an atmosphere of great calm” (p. 121), overcome with “relief” (p. 206) and the determination to “adopt a more positive outlook” (p. 244), in spite of the often troubling route of associations that follow in their wake. They are very different from the people he has dealt with at Darlington Hall in that his relations with them are not determined by an uneasy, preordained social hierarchy. Rather, these masked figures serve a function in Steven’s pilgrimage very similar indeed to that performed by Miss Kenton in the Hall narrative. Like her, they are agents of volition, drawing him (sometimes physically) to a site in which contemplation and revision can take place, and thereby spurring him into transgressive ways of thinking – transgressive, at least, for a man whose devotion to duty has demanded extremes of loyalty and studied aversion to any form of transgression whatsoever. Miss Kenton provided Stevens, in the Hall narrative, with a “crucial turning point” (p. 164) by literally coming into his world “uninvited”; and the masked figures of his journey function rather like deputies of her authority as *Ur-Masker*.

If the persistent presence of masked figures in the text give some clue as to the possibility of regarding *The Remains of the Day* as a liminal narrative, then it might be useful to test this proposition against what is perhaps the central thrust of Turner’s thoughts about the liminal: its status as a ludic and anti-structural condition.

Considered superficially, it would be hard to imagine *The Remains of the Day* as a novel that is concerned with play or the carnival-esque. Indeed, Stevens's acknowledged inability to "banter" would seem to preclude the possibility of playfulness altogether. But Turner's notion of play is slightly more nuanced than the term's common currency might suggest. In the first instance, play is a realm the pilgrim enters that is above all "*freedom from the forced, chronologically regulated rhythms of the factory and the office, and a chance to recuperate and enjoy the natural, biological rhythms*" (Turner, 1992:54). Stevens's journey is notably a journey of freedom from the Hall and a quiet celebration of nature and biological rhythms – so much so that the Mortimer's Pond section suggestively recalls Thoreau's Walden, and thereby, in turn, invokes the long, Romantic tradition of the deep and vital connections that inhere between nature, the self and the imagination.<sup>12</sup> Assuming a new identity, too, is a form of play, and Stevens does precisely that when he wears the clothes of a Darlington guest and does not rush to correct the mistaken impression that he is a gentleman. Similarly, he enters the realm of play in the sense of "the learning of variability",<sup>13</sup> in which unexpected roads might lead to unexpected meetings and equally unexpected discoveries. Variabilities in landscape, or of interpersonal relationships, of recollection, of mood, and of contexts are all indications of the ludic aspect of Stevens's pilgrimage.

Error, too, serves as a form of play in *The Remains of the Day*. For a man so deeply concerned with order and correctness, Stevens's life at Darlington Hall and his journey experiences are remarkably likely to go wrong. He is plagued by what he persists in calling "unfortunate misunderstandings" (p. 193), misinterpretation (he misreads the spirit and letter of Miss Kenton's communication as well as her reasons for her pained behaviour while working with him at

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12 Superficially, the comparison might seem ironic at best, invidious at worst: Stevens has none of Thoreau's free youthful verve, optimism nor bravado; on the contrary, and one would not wish to imply that Stevens plumbs the depths of his self nearly as vigorously as does Thoreau. But both respond in strikingly similar ways to the natural phenomenon of the pond, or lake, by transforming the smooth surface before them into a reflective mirror of the soul. Indeed, it might not be too much of an exaggeration that Thoreau, opting out as he does from the structural *quotidienne* in order to "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner and reduce it to its lowest terms" (Thoreau, 1966:61), presents the extreme case, and epitomizes the value of the liminal state as a means towards self-knowledge.

13 The phrase belongs to Brian Sutton-Smith, cited by Turner (1992:149).

Darlington Hall); miscommunication (his efforts at bantering are met with straight-faced bewilderment); mistaken identity (the Taylors think he is a gentleman), and misapplication of his duty (he notes that “[m]ore and more errors are appearing in [his] work” (p. 243); and he participates blindly in the anti-Semitic employment practices of his employer (pp. 145-151)). By the end of the novel, these series of errors that undercut his rigid devotion to duty leave him with the dispiriting sense of futility when he remarks, “I can’t even say I made my own mistakes. Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that?” (p. 243): in which error is compounded by lack of agency. However, perhaps this last comment also reflects a new awareness, born, ironically, of the playful quotient of anti-structural error that shows up the existential perils of a duty-bound existence that does not permit variance.

Stevens’s journey certainly would seem to be a pilgrimage characterised by figurative tropes, liminal positioning, masked figures and anti-structurality. But the significance of this definition of his journey goes further than simply providing us with a way of appreciating what Stevens undertakes. Indeed, I would go further to suggest that the narrative itself is made up of anti-structural devices that mirror its content; that is, that *The Remains of the Day* is not only a novel about a pilgrimage, but a novel that has as its driving force a liminal narrative.

## 6. Liminal narrative

Consider, for example, the status of play in the novel. I have suggested that play, for Stevens, involves a learning of variability. Ishiguro supports this sense by showing how Stevens’s language itself undergoes a teasing out of semantic play as an indicator of anti-structural, transgressive systems that slip away from the structural regularity of Stevens’s existence at Darlington Hall. As Stevens’s deliberation over the significance of terms such as “dignity”, “professionalism”, “greatness” and so on progresses, we note that these terms themselves are persistently presented within inverted commas – so repeatedly in fact, that this technique has the effect of setting these words apart, making them curious objects in their own right and, even more curiously, distancing their meaning from themselves. Turner makes this point when he notes that play in liminality “involves metacommunication and metalanguages” (Turner, 1992:151), and that in the liminoid state, “mundane axioms become problematic” (p. 58). Bracketed thus, a word like “dignity” becomes interesting as a signifier that is likely to go astray, which is

polysemic and quite possibly works against superficial assumptions of what it means. Supported by the evidence of the indignities that Stevens must endure, by the unprofessional behaviours of professionals, and the ungentlemanly acts of gentlemen, the situating of these terms within inverted commas is a playful act that simultaneously places them under erasure. Turner suggests that the liminal is characterised by “the subjunctive mood”: Stevens’s punctuation of approximation, marking the distance of simple, unproblematic copula from “as if”, suggestively enacts this mood.<sup>14</sup>

Further, the character of Stevens is presented as a figure of approximation, in spite of all his determination to be the perfect butler, to “inhabit [his] professional role and inhabit it to the utmost” (Ishiguro, 1989:42-43). In this regard we must revisit my earlier remarks about the social position of the butler. Stevens’s simulacral performance as butler/gentleman, both at Darlington Hall itself and later – more obviously – at Moscombe testifies to his condition of being different and deferred from the transcendental presence that is implied by that term “utmost”. As Michael Meyer (2002:203) suggests, at Darlington Hall he “stand[s] in for the aristocracy” among the rest of the staff and at Moscombe he adopts the costume and the manner of his employer and his class. It is one of the most redolent ironies of the novel that in spite of Stevens’s disdain for those for whom “being a butler is like playing some pantomime role: a small push, a slight stumble, and the façade will drop off to reveal the actor underneath” (Ishiguro, 1989:42), the butler’s position is predicated upon the imitation and enactment of the gentleman, thereby foregrounding his distance from complete possession of his existence as either gentleman, or “gentleman’s gentleman”, this term itself especially suggestive of infinite deferral.

As if to underscore this sense of Stevens’s fragmented and plural identity Darlington remarks, “At one point during dinner, Stevens, I

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14 Kathleen Wall, in her excellent essay on “*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to the Theories of Unreliable Narration”, points to the “verbal patterns or tics” in Stevens’s discourse as one of the “most accessible signals of Stevens’s unreliability” (Wall, 1994:23), but she does not take the deconstructive turn (as I have here) that the bracketing of terms serves as a punctuative shorthand for signficatory deferral. Using Stevens’s discourse as an example, she argues that verbal tics might be regarded as a key indicator of unreliable narration generally. In a different context, but with a similar purpose, Deborah Guth (1999:134) has shown how repetition serves the effects of “submerged narrative” in *The Remains of the Day*, “invoking similarity in order to underline difference”.



would have sworn you were at least three people" (p. 107), a suggestive hint at multiplicity that is taken up again by Mr Farraday's concern at the suggestion that his employee might be a "mock" butler (p. 124). Given the simultaneous and contradictory performance of servitude and mastery that butlering requires, Darlington's and Farraday's suspicions are ironically well founded. Both instances point, like the linguistic patterning in the novel, towards Stevens's uncertain negotiation of the problematics of presence and coherent identity. To make recourse to Turner's description once more, Stevens, even before he embarks upon his journey, is a (proto)liminary – one who is "not this or that, here or there, one thing or another, *both this and that*" (Turner, 1992:50).

If the liminal is characterised by the anti-structural, then it is fitting that *The Remains of the Day* is shaped according to a structure that is only apparently linear. Stevens's westward journey from Darlington Hall to Weymouth forms the backbone of the novel, bestowing a seductively coherent quest-like structure to the text. But the play of memory, in the form of Stevens's recollections of his past, his father, and recent cataclysmic events in history, shimmer through this quest, causing the narrative to double back upon itself and detour in a manner that significantly resists any confining sense of structure.<sup>15</sup> James M. Lang (2000:144), writing about the coexistence of public and private memory in the novel, shrewdly observes that Stevens's sense of what constitutes the "turning point" in his affairs – and the affairs of history – is often wrong, and that he is forced to realize that

... multiple discrete moments in his story could be construed as the turning point of his narrative, and he finds himself uneasy at this lack of certainty. He struggles to make sense of the courses of action both he and Darlington undertook in these events, but the slippery task of constructing causality frustrates that sense-making urge.

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15 Rocio Davis (1995-1996:57-67) has argued that Ishiguro's novel follows the same structural movement from blindness to insight as that tracked by Milton in his Sonnet XIX ("Sonnet on his Blindness"). While Davis (1995-1996:59) notes that both sonnet and novel contain a measure of overlap between the two terms of the opposition, he nevertheless regards them more generally as sequential and unidirectional. While the comparison with Milton is illuminating in terms of the shared thematics of both texts, the comparison at the level of deep structure is less so. I would argue that both the "sestet" and the "octet" (to use Davis's analogy) of *The Remains of the Day* work simultaneously, defying teleological linearity.

Indeed, the liminal state is one in which the anxious hankering after causality is suspended; fittingly, then, this concern in the novel goes to the level of deep (anti-) structure where the liminal narrative itself thwarts, almost metafictionally, an unproblematic causal sequencing of events.<sup>16</sup>

By the same token, Stevens's wavering at the threshold of the arches and doorways of Darlington might be regarded retrospectively, in the light of the journey narrative, as not so much indecisive dithering, but as a promising symptom of his candidacy for pilgrimage and the enabling condition of suspension. Hall and journey narrative are not fixed in a reductive "before and after" paradigm, but demand continual and mutual reassessment.

## 7. Remains

The palimpsestic effects of memory and the aporetic purchase of the two narratives in the structure of the novel also serve to qualify any simple understanding of pilgrimage as a teleological activity.<sup>17</sup> This complex fission of structure and anti-structure, identity and performance, unequivocality and ambiguity, blindness and insight, reaches its zenith at the end of the novel, an ending anticipated throughout by its title, which offers perhaps the most significant ludic performance of meaning in the novel. In her psychoanalytical reading of the novel, Renata Salecl (1994:15) offers one of the more original interpretations of the title when she suggests that one way to read it is to compare the "remains of the day" with Freud's "day's residues ... that acquire a new meaning in dreams because of the unconscious structure in which they get embedded". In this case, she argues, Stevens's relationship with Miss Kenton is "the residue around which his unconscious braids, the residue that forces him to confront his desire". Conversely, Bruce Robbins (2001a:439), in an essay that traces the preoccupation with harriedness in both *The Remains of the Day* and *The Unconsoled* as an attack on the vicissitudes of professionalism and cosmopolitanism, has observed:

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16 Kathleen Wall (1994:23) also discusses the unsettling effect that these "frequent analepses" have on the shape of the plot.

17 Karl E. Jirgens (1999:229) traces the palimpsestic effects of the novel as they operate through the trope of clothing in the novel, concluding that "[t]hrough the palimpsestic form of his *récit* Stevens, as Narrator Resartus, has addressed, redressed and un-dressed himself. Parodying the 'Emperor and his New Clothes', the butler has shared the moments of undignified self-discovery when he realized that he was 'naked' in public".

... [t]he mild pun on 'remains' as both 'time remaining in' and the 'corpse' of the day would seem to underline the waste of the butler's life, a life evaded and distorted by means of professional rationalization and overwork. But it also suggests, less obviously, why readers should care about such a monstrous and unrepresentative creature. After all, even those of us who have not ignored a dying father in order to serve a pro-Nazi master also have reason to ask, along with the title, what remains of the day when the hours devoted to work are over.

While I would argue that Stevens's liminal journey and occupation of the pilgrim's realm make him considerably more representative (and surely less "monstrous") than Robbins would have it, both he and Salecl capture well the waywardness of meaning in the title of the novel. And the play of ambiguity extends even further. The "remains" of the day are, at a fairly elementary and literal level, the moments of dusk that hover before nightfall, a point intoned by the retired butler whom Stevens meets on the pier; more figuratively, "remains" connotes that which is left over. That which is "left over", in turn, suggests superfluity, the dregs, unnecessary and unwanted excess: Stevens's status at Darlington and the paucity of his intimate relations would certainly seem to point towards a similar condition of futile redundancy. But the term "remains" is also suggestive of the disruptive performance of supplementarity, where, as Derrida has shown us, residue points paradoxically but inexorably to the incompleteness of that which appears on the surface to be unproblematically whole and self-present. Indeed, in at least one essay, Derrida (1982:205) uses the very word "remainder" as a synonym for supplement, which (especially in the form of writing) destabilises pure copula, or transcendental presence.

And herein lies the tantalizing ambiguity of the end of the novel. While the model of Turner's pilgrimage might lead us to expect the end of the novel to be one of tidy resolution, the novel resists this simple prediction and a trace of the liminal persists – *remains* – to subvert any such unequivocal resolution. When he admits "– why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking" (Ishiguro, 1989:239) we are presented with an acceptance of pain markedly different from the stubborn denial of pain at his father's death,<sup>18</sup> a flash of self-recognition and emotional honesty wrought

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18 I have mentioned that the desired outcome of pilgrimage, for Turner, is "reaggregation into the community". But "communitas" for Stephens is no longer simply the normative comforts of the Hayes society, but rather a more meaningful level of self-awareness and an understanding of how community – in

from his experiences during his pilgrimage. On the other hand, while Stevens's resolve to return to Darlington Hall with a fresh attempt at bantering seems to signify resilient optimism, it is also redolent with overwhelming futility – especially if one agrees with Susie O'Brien (1996:793) that the bantering at Darlington Hall is underwritten by "conceal[ed] ... relations of power" and has the sinister effect of embarrassing Stevens, thereby keeping him in his place. But these ambiguities notwithstanding, what abides is the refrain "the evening's the best part of the day" that Stevens seeks to embrace and which, by association, defines him as a survivor, a *remainder*. His supplementarity puts the lie to the complacencies of Darlington Hall and its occupants past and present. Similarly, the intimate interplay between Hall narrative and journey narrative, between passages and passage, precludes any neat conclusion or separation. The liminal state has a residue that persists rather like the haunting light on the skyline once the sun has set: there is an ambivalence, a betwixt and betweenness of the narrative itself that *remains* after the journey is over.

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this instance, in the form of a sympathetic relationship with Mrs Benn – can affect the self. For an extended treatment of the liminal and *communitas*, albeit in a rather different context, see Rory Ryan's essay, "Peculiarly Festooned with Prepositions: Aspects of Liminality in *Mrs Dalloway*" (Ryan, 2001:58-71). Suffice it to say here that Stevens's new understanding of *communitas* is not, of course, a particularly pleasant one: Ryan (2001:59) usefully makes the point that Turner's definition of "*communitas*" involves, among other things, "acceptance of pain and suffering rather than the avoidance of pain and suffering".

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### **Key concepts:**

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### **Kernbegrippe:**

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Victor Turner

